

LGBT History Project of the LGBT Center of Central PA

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

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

Documents Online

Title: LGBT Oral History: Alex Reber

Date: October 4, 2017

Location: LGBT Oral History – Reber, Alex – 097

Contact:

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

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Interviewee: Alex Reber

Interviewer: Barry Loveland

Date of Interview: October 4, 2017

Location of Interview: Office of Miller, Dixon, and Drake in Harrisburg

Transcriber: Mary Libertin

Finalized by: Mary Libertin

Abstract:

Barry Loveland interviews Alex Reber, now 32, who relates fascinating stories of what it was like growing up as an only child of an Evangelical Christian family raised on a farm in Bethel, a rural town between Harrisburg and Allentown and becoming an important political LGBT activist in Central PA. His accounts at camp and high school reveal the difficulty of being gay and the interesting paths towards his independence. In Lebanon Valley College he was outed and blackballed at church, being called evil and having parents refuse to help him pay tuition. A gay couple started a foundation to help gay students complete college and Alex, a gifted child who received a scholarship, graduated a semester early. His tales about finding and working with a thriving gay community in Harrisburg are enthralling. He got an internship and became friends with Dan Miller, a leader in the gay community, in Dan's accounting firm, Miller, Dixon, Drake. He tells in detail his work over ten years with Planned Parenthood, beginning with his own experience of being treated and shamed by a physician. He discusses his romance and marriage to his husband during the exciting time when marriage became legal in Pennsylvania. It was a momentous time. He explains what it was like attending the Equality March, primaries for Obama and Clinton, and his experience at the 2016 Democratic Convention. He recounts the inside stories of the contradictions and fun of local state politics— and stories about running candidates for state office and working on committees for the Democratic Party of Pennsylvania. He is very involved at the Center, FAB, and getting LGBT people to run for office.

BL: Well, welcome. My name is Barry Loveland, and I'm here with Catherine McCormick, who is our videographer. We're here on behalf of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania History Project and today is October 4, 2017, and we're here for an oral history interview with Alex Reber. This interview is taking place at the offices of Miller, Dixon, Drake in Harrisburg. And, Alex, do we have your permission to record the interview today?

AR: Yes.

BL: OK. Thank you. And we'll have a consent form for you to read over and sign at the end of the interview. So, thank you for agreeing to do an interview with us. We appreciate your time. So, ah, what I'd like to do is start at the beginning and find out when and where you were born.

AR: Sure. I was born and raised in Berks County, so just north of Reading. I was born in a small town called Bethel, Pennsylvania, which is halfway between Harrisburg and Allentown. There's a diner called Midway Diner, with a big sign. And my family has the farm across the highway.

So my dad was a short order cook at that diner and met my mother who was a young waitress – and that’s the *very* beginning of how my life started [laughs].

BL: What year were you born?

AR: I was born in 1985. So I just turned 32. [smiles] And so, grew up and lived there—until I—I went to elementary, middle school, high school—all in the same area, lived in the same house that my dad built. It was a farming community, which was an interesting place to grow up. I remember thinking that life was great. I could run around in the woods—I was close to my grandparents’ house—I just had to do was go over the creek cornfield and over the creek. So that was really nice. And then, it was interesting, growing up ... my family went to a UCC church, and then we started attending an Evangelical Free church, and that’s when I started getting ... confused a little bit. I knew that I was not like most other boys, and I knew that I had attraction to men. And I had some struggles with that. I remember we were reading a book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which was very popular in Evangelical christianity, and the whole book is written on the premise that they break the boys and the girls up, and they talk to the boys about their attraction to girls. And I’m thinking, “I’ve got this down. I don’t have any of these struggles.” [laughs] And then at the very end of the book there’s probably like ten pages—It’s like, if you didn’t feel like anything like this applied to you but you feel like you’re interested in someone of the same sex then we have a whole ‘nother story for you [laughs]. And so I knew I was in for some sort of trouble. I was really active in the church, probably there three nights a week. I was a youth leader. And so I would counsel kids, too. At—my youth pastor had a camp. So all the kids—the pastors’ kids, cause we had five pastors—it was like a church of—like 750 people came on a Sunday, which in a township of 4,000 people that’s pretty big. So their kids—the pastors’ kids—all signed up to be in my cabin, every year. And so—um, so anyway I was figuring all this sort of stuff out, um and was ... knew that I was gay. And I remember like in my AP history class, they had these little like paragraph blurbs talking about LGBT civil rights during those time periods that we were studying in history. And I thought, “oh! so there’s other people like me and it’s not a new thing.” So that was pretty exciting for me. But really the faith thing really was a stumbling block for me. And when I started to look at colleges, I looked at Lebanon Valley College where the chaplain was also the head of the LGBT group. And I thought if there’s anywhere I can figure out this whole faith thing and being gay this might be a place I can do that. And so that’s kind of how I got there. I really didn’t express myself at all being gay. I remember anytime someone called me gay um—or—you know ... I had a higher pitched voice. I was involved in chorus, and musicals, and show choir, and so it wasn’t any shock to people—they assumed people would say things so then, of course, I was the worst person: I then said, “No, I’m not gay. Being gay is bad.” Bla-bla, bla-bla-bla. And I really was trying to convince myself of that, I think, and I remember the one time being at the Christian camp and just sitting there outside and thinking, “I’m going to be alone the rest of my life [laughing] and I’ll never be happy.” And then really thinking, “okay, it’s okay, I just need to be me and everything will be fine.” So that’s kind of like my coming out. And I didn’t come out until college. Like my first month I was in college I came out pretty quickly to my parents, but

BL: Before we get to college, maybe you can talk more about your school life, everything, uh, with that.

AR: Sure. Typical growing up, ah, spent a lot of time with my cousins who lived down the street. I was a pretty good student. I was in accelerated classes; I was in a gifted program. I, for the most part, didn't have any problems. I had a pretty good education, I feel like. But I definitely just knew that I was different. I remember there was one—my senior year we talked about things in a class called Problems of Democracy, which I thought this class was pretty much cutting edge for high school, especially where I lived. We had “Bring Your Tractor to School Day”; we had pick-up truck row, where everyone had their red Ford pickup trucks, typically with the gun rack, all parked in the front row of the school parking lot, and they, of course, they all had confederate flags ... and so that's like the kind of very white, very kind of conservative area that I grew up in. But a lot of really good people, a lot of really nice people. Um, but definitely I didn't know gay people.

The only gay person I knew was my uncle, who lived at home with my grandparents and didn't have a—what I would consider a successful, full life. He was always getting into trouble and that sort of thing. In my father's eyes, he thought he was bad ... And then he was a Jehovah Witness, too, so he never would say he was g—he would say he was gay but then he wasn't dating anyone. Although he had a boyfriend but they weren't acting on it, so it wasn't sinful. So it was very confusing for me [laughs] is that being the only gay person kind of in my life every and since he lived with my grandparents every time I went over there I saw my uncle. And he DJ'd for a while in Allentown at some of the gay bars and actually at the Neptune. And so, ah, you know, he had big DJ speakers and he'd be playing club music and when I'd be having dinner with my grandmother, club music would practically be blaring [laughs] and so my dad just hated—thought he was irresponsible and bad, and so I think he equated a lot with homosexuality being bad with my uncle—which my uncle's a nice person and would give you the—you know, now he's there taking care of my grandparents as they're aging, as many LGBT folks do. And is really good in that way. But, um, but that was my dad's perspective. And so ... yeah, you know I was the typical ... I was class president my senior year. And all those things ... and tried to do all the superlatives and be the good, perfect little boy. And I remember getting Andy Tobias's book *When the Best Little Boy in the World Grows Up* [laughs] and reading it and thinking “oh gosh and this is what ...” – and it took him a lot longer to come out. And I thought I'm going to have to do this. There was also a magazine called XY. Um, it was pretty popular and so I remember going to Borders in Harrisburg and they had a few gay magazines. They had this XY, which was for gay teens. And I remember buying a few of them, and I also remember getting the *Central Voice* that they had the free copies out at Borders. And I'd sneak back into the bathroom and read them cause I didn't want my parents to see me reading them [laughs] and then I had some of these XY things. And that's where I actually they—they had a website, and you could meet other people. I remember meeting my first boyfriend on this website and he supposedly lived the town over, but he had moved a little bit. And so we started dating for a little bit and that was my first, first boyfriend and that lasted about for a month. It wasn't very long. I was 18.

BL: Okay. 18.

AR: And so, yeah, I was basically closeted all through high school. I—there were a couple kids that came out. I remember there was a lesbian couple and they were really harassed and bullied, and their whole thing was they were going to make-out in the hall like every other couple did because they wanted to put it in everyone's face and make everyone deal with it [smiles]. And there was another guy who was gay who would always talk to me and try to be very friendly to

me and I just treated him very poorly. And luckily enough I've gotten to know him since then and have apologized and tried to make amends. But I was just mortified that by talking to him I would, you know, be cast in that lot as well. And then the one other kid came out right before he graduated. He sat—he was—I think I was like third chair tenor and he was second chair. And so we sat together in chorus all the time, for years. And when he came out people were really nasty to him, and I thought, "I don't know that want to go through this." So that kind of put me in the wrong direction, but then when I got to college I quickly realized there was a whole nother world and that everything was going to be okay.

BL: And they didn't have like a GSA in your school or anything like that?

AR: No. we didn't have a GSA. We had a Bible Club. I started the Bible Club, which was the largest club—by the time I graduated we had about fifty students [laughs]. And so we were not the most pro-gay [smiles], although we didn't really talk about that in our things; it was really about being good people. And I read *See You at the Pole* and all those sorts of fun things that good Christian kids do. And that was kind of more my experience.

BL: Okay. And then going to college. What was that like?

AR: So college was when—I was an only child—and so I was always kind of the good kid. And so college was really when I kind of came into my own, and I guess got into a little trouble I guess, not anything that was permanent or bad. I was really trying to find myself and figure this out. And figure out how Christianity works, how being gay work? How does all this come together? And all that sort of thing. And making new friends. And my roommate freshman year was someone I went to church with. And so when they found out I was gay my pastor called me into his office and said, "How dare I put myself into the realm of temptation by being a camp counselor with his kid who had been in my cabin?" And I was like, "Listen, you know, third through fifth graders were no temptation for me [laughs]. Now the youth leaders, now that's the temptation for me [laughs]. But you have no problem with the kids." And they told all the kids that I was a bad, evil person. And that if I showed up to church that they should not talk to me. That that would be bad. They told my parents that they should kick me out and the only way for me to find salvation, and the most *humane* thing they could do would be to cut me off financially and then I would never be able to go to college and then I'd have to come and repent back to the church. Well, then I made some friends at college who ... [laughs] A funny story: a guy who went to high school with my dad—and we had this little gay reception, um, with the LGBT group and I went and well this guy grew up where I grew up said, "Oh, did you know, are you related to Roger Reber?" And I said, "Well, yes." He said, "I worked with your dad at the diner." And so here he had married into money and this whole situation. And my dad, when I came out, said he knew a gay person and he assumed that he got AIDS and died [smiles]. Well, no that didn't happen [laughs]. He went to med school and married [laughs] into a very prominent family in Philadelphia, to a very nice, wonderful man. And so they decided they were going to start a scholarship for gay kids and they endowed it [laughs]. So, basically, I went home to my parents and said, "you can cut me off but there's enough money that I will be able to attend school and it won't be a problem." And so ... and the college degree, --that they had other gay kids that their parents had cut them off. And they would help them do the emancipated minor thing, and get the scholarships and all that sort of thing and they said we'll figure it out if that happens—

you know, because I remember meeting with a counselor and thinking, “well if I cut off what am I going to do? I can’t not get an education. I can’t go home to that toxic environment.” So, my parents and I, we kind of had a truce where we just didn’t just talk about it. So they didn’t kick me out, but they didn’t—we just didn’t talk about it. Um, they knew I was gay. When it came up, they knew. But so they never met boyfriends. They never engaged [gestures] in that part of my life. Um, but yeah, I became very active in LGBT stuff. I was the president of our Gay Straight Alliance at Lebanon Valley College. Um, I remember we had—our first big thing that I was involved with was a petition drive cause they had the marriage amendment, and that was back in 2004, we thought if they don’t pass this gay marriage amendment we won’t be able to get married. And we were looking at Massachusetts and exciting things that were happening there and different places across the country with Gavin Newsom in California ... so I thought, “we’re going to fight this!” And I went around and we collected 500 petition signatures and we met with our – I demanded a meeting with our state representative for the college, Maureen Gingrich. And we went into her office and met with her, and she said we were right, and that gay people deserve rights, and all this sort of thing. And I felt very good about this. And she wanted to come to—Common Roads was doing a play at our college and she was going to come to that and she hung up a flier for it in her office—and then she voted for it [laughs]. And so voted—so she went and she did all of that so that “we were the future” and that she had gay family members that she loved, and then did the wrong thing. And that really got me interested more in politics because I thought ... I was always politically interested but I thought, [gestures] “okay if you had the right arguments, and you show up and you give the right arguments, well, you win!” Well, that was not the case [laughs], as I found out with LGBT civil rights, and that’s something that became a bigger part of my life in college.

We also got a meeting with our State Senator Chip Brightbill, who was the majority leader in the senate at that time, and so I contacted him about setting up a meeting, and I look back now and I really would like to talk to him, and I was just thinking maybe I should call him and see why he did this. But he said, “Get 12 of you and we’ll have a meeting,” and he took us out to the Lebanon Country Club to a private room and paid for dinner for all of us, and it was like very bizarre looking at that now and interacting with politicians, like why did he do something like that! [gestures] He ended up losing his re-election in the primary soon after that. But we had organized, like we tried to find the most perfect LGBT people and long-term, committed couples, and good diversity. And we had this meeting and we felt really good about it, and then, of course, he voted the wrong way too [laughs]. But I, I do think, why did he expend that kind of money and effort to meet with us? Um, so that was kind of interesting to me, in that intersection of politics.

But with Freedom Rings at Lebanon Valley, we tried to think about the “triangle,” is what I called it. So that one part’s social cause there’s some people that mostly want to socialize, and then one part advocacy, and then the other part education, with really being out and let the whole student body know that we were gay. And there was a big movement at that time called “Gay? Fine by Me.” And they had these t-shirts, and I raised some money, and we got like 250 t-shirts. And we thought, “Will we ever get this many people to wear these t-shirts at our college?” We only had 1600 kids. And I remember we sat out at six o’clock for breakfast, and by 7:15 they were all gone [laughs]. And there were these kids that were angry that they were like, “We like gay people and I want a shirt.” We’re like, “we’re so sorry. We’re out.” So people started taking undershirts like writing with black sharpie markers “Gay? Fine by Me” and making their own shirts because they wanted to show their support. And I mean it was really a cool experience for

me, coming from my church background, and I remember like the whole football team basically got shirts. And it was just a really kind of powerful thing and I was on student government and I was in the business program. I was an accounting student so there was a lot of athletic students involved, so there were a lot of LGBT people involved who were in the music program or in other areas in the humanities and all my business friends said like, “You’re one of us. We’ve got to support you.” So that was really special to me.

And so that was a really cool and exciting time. There was a lot of fun stuff happening in the civil rights movement at that time as we saw marriage kind of coming to different pockets and different countries. And we felt like it was really *coming*. Um, and then in 2004 George Bush was reelected; we were really involved with the Kerry campaign [gestures] and that didn’t work out for us, but, um, I remember coming to Harrisburg for a rally for John Kerry. That’s one of the first times I came to Harrisburg. And I thought, okay this’ll be interesting ... well there were all these people with rainbow flags around me that lived in Harrisburg [gestures]. And I thought this is a place that is accepting and welcoming. And I thought well I can maybe see living in Harrisburg because it seems like they have a pretty big gay community. And I grew up on a farm, in a small town, and the idea of going to a big city was somewhat frightening to me. My father said, “well why don’t you go to San Francisco? or L.A.? or New York? If you want to be this way?” And I thought well I want to be close to my family. My family’s important to me. And I thought maybe Harrisburg was a good option and that kind of came on radar then.

BL: Okay. Good. And when did you graduate from Lebanon Valley?

AR: I graduated in December of 2006. So I graduated a little early. Um, I’d had some AP credits that transferred, so that was nice. And the ... two summers before I graduated I interned for an investment firm. So I had laid asphalt with my dad, doing construction. And my dad wanted me to go to college and *not* take over the family business, like he did. And so, I thought, “okay I want to get into investments.” And I had read *Forbes* since I was a kid, and watched CNBC. And my dad really liked the stock market. And I was interested in that and I thought I was going into investing. And so I got this great job with an alumni at the college who owned this nice investment firm for high net worth individuals in the Reading area. And that summer I remember meeting some other gay people in Reading, but really realizing almost all the gay people that lived in Reading, if they did anything, they were going to Philadelphia. And I thought well, what’s the point? I mean want a vibrant gay community to be a part of. I knew there was one in Allentown, but I didn’t really connect with that as much. And then I was like ... the next summer, I think, “I don’t really want to do investing any more but I don’t know what I want to do but I really, really, *really* hate Rick Santorum who is a US Senator” and so I thought I’ve got to do something to help get rid of him. And maybe I can do that in Philly or Harrisburg. And so I got an internship with the Casey campaign, when he was state treasurer running for the senate in 2006, and I did fund-raising. And so I had met Dan Miller when he was running for city council. And they had just started the capital region Stonewall Democrats and as a college student I had saw about that and I remember going to their kick-off meeting across from the capital and meeting a lot of people that I’m still friends with today. And there was this meeting and a lot of energy—Ben Turner really spent a lot of time organizing that. And so the first big thing they did for 2015 was there was a gay guy running for city council and I thought, “ok thought I’m still sad John Kerry lost but maybe this is something I can help out with. And oh, and he’s an accountant and I’m a business and accounting major.” And so I came and I canvassed and went in uptown

Harrisburg in Italian Lake, and I thought, “Well, this is really pretty. This isn’t what people say cities are like.” And I thought, “Well this is a nice area.” Another kind of touch point on why I fell in love with the city. And then, um, after that, you know Dan had had a reception at his house for the Stonewall Democrats, a holiday party that I went to. And then we connected in Philadelphia at Equality Forum and he said, “Well, I’ll have a fund raiser for Senator Casey,” who was then running for the office. So he had a fundraiser; I worked some other fund raisers.. And we developed a great relationship. And that eventually led to him offering me a job at his accounting office. But that was a really cool summer living in Harrisburg. And I met a lot of great LGBT folks. Everyone could not have been more welcoming to me. And I thought this is really where I want to move to. And so I didn’t know that I was going to have a job here, but I knew that this is the area that I probably wanted to move to. And I knew that this area was welcoming and I’d gone to Common Roads a few times and so I knew that that existed, back when they were in the basement on Third and Verbecke when Carol Reisinger was the executive director, and so I knew there were things kind of going on. And I knew that this would be a friendly place.

BL: Great. Um, well this kind of led into our – to your occupational history. So I guess you can talk more about coming to work for Dan?

AR: Sure. So, um, I never thought I was going to be an accountant; I thought I was going to be—go into investments. And I had a job offer to go work with Senator Casey as well, that came a little later. But I thought well this was a pretty cool opportunity. Um, I could be doing accounting, but also Dan was on city council and active politically ... And so I thought this can be a fun place to work. And maybe we can try to elect more LGBT people and maybe *I* want to run for office or something like that—cause every young kid thinks they should take over the world and run for office [gestures and smiles] but that’s a weird thing. Um, and then I really got to meet lots of people and I really fell in love with the county and the office that I worked in and a lot of our clients and going to—the LGBT Chamber had just reorganized right after I moved here. I remember going to the International House for their big kick-off as they were reformatted from Bagel and meeting Russ Boggs and that group of people and thinking this is a pretty special place that there’s really a lot of involved people in different facets of the community and that was exciting. And so I got involved with politics and local campaigns in Harrisburg then, as well, and then tried to get involved with the Center. Um, and my friend Shaun Maloney worked there for a while and Loui was there, working mostly with the youth programs. And it was pretty *exciting* times. And I remember thinking that’s when they were transitioning from “Common Roads” to being the “Center.” Um, and we had—I decided I’m going to have a party at my house. They were like “oh, we should have some meet and greets.” So I thought “oh, I’ll do one.” So I just moved into a place that I was renting and I thought, I’ll have a nice fancy party and have wine and cheese and whatever. And I thought it would be an adult thing to do. And I remember it being the end of September and so thought it won’t be that hot, and it was 95 degrees that day. And there were 60 people in my house sweating and it was just kind of a failure [laughs]. Everyone of course was very sweet and nice about it but I just remember people like with their make-up running and just feeling horrible and thinking oh gosh. But, of course, everyone was really nice about it that that sort of thing. And then I got on the FAB committee.

And when they brought FAB back I was on that for two years and got to meet a lot of great people that way and got plugged into the gay community here in Harrisburg.

BL: Okay. Good. Um, I assume you were not involved in the military at all.

AR: I was not involved in the military.

BL: Okay. And then, um, in terms of any other organizational affiliation, you want to talk about any other, -- ah, you mentioned earlier Planned Parenthood before the interview.

AR: Sure.

BL: And any other groups you missed that you might have want to talk about?

AR: Yeah. Sure. So when I moved to Harrisburg I had just started in the office and like six months in, Dan got a call, cause they were trying to get him to be back involved with Planned Parenthood cause a lot of non-profits are looking for accountants just to sit on their finance committee, so they want someone with some skills. And he said, "Well, I'm busy, but I've got this young kid in my office. Maybe he'd be interested" [laughs]. And I thought it was interesting, because I did not find a primary practice physician yet for Harrisburg and I'd gone to Planned Parenthood for testing. And I went when I was having some stomach pains, just basic stomach cramp things, and I needed to find a doctor quick, and I remember going through the phone book because no one—the people that they suggested, weren't taking patients. And I just went through and dialed so I could get someone. And so I went to this physician in Lower Paxton Township and in the first room there were a Noah's ark and children's Bible stories playing on the television. And it wasn't a pediatrician practice [grins]. I thought that was interesting. And then I went – I did my intake form and I had to list these different things and they ask you questions about what you've had done previously, etc., like they typically do, and I'd mentioned that "oh I've been tested" and that sort of thing. And so when I go in to get some medicine for my current ailment, the doctor was questioning me about why I was getting tested for STDs. And I said, "Well I think it's a responsible thing. I try to do it every six months." And he said, "well you know, I'm a nice boy and have a job and I went to college and I'll meet a nice girl real soon and I should be saving myself for marriage" [laughs]. And he made all these assumptions about my sexuality: that I was straight, that I should be waiting for sex before marriage. And it was pretty horrifying. I remember just thinking, "Just write me the script. I want to get the heck out of here." And I remember thinking well no one should have to feel that sort of judgment from their medical provider. And I thought well, what if you wanted to get tests. Then he asked where did I get tested. And I said well Planned Parenthood. And he made this face and grumbled and said, "as long as you don't prescribe with their politics." And, so this had happened probably like a month before Dan asked me if I wanted to get involved, and I was never really that involved with Planned Parenthood, other than going to go there to get tested cause it was convenient. And I thought, well maybe there are other people in the same situation like me and maybe that would be a way for me to help some folks. And so I got involved in on the finance committee. And then on the board. And then I was on the board for ten years. Um, the ... for two years I started as the board chair, we did three mergers. So, Harrisburg Lancaster merged with Allentown, and then we merged with Bucks County, and then we merged with York. Um, so it was an exciting time

and a lot of interesting developments. There was a lot of changes, you know, with Obamacare--with people having access to more health care, there wasn't as much need for clinics like ours—which was a good thing, because that means more people had access to care. But it really changed the business model. And it really was an interesting learning experience for me. Um, they tried to do a lot with LGBT care and taking care of folks in that way, and really having sensitivity. We had LGBT youth programs—there's one in Reading that they run, one in York, um, and one in Bucks county, which actually now they're in talks to work with doing some collaboration with the Center, actually, which is pretty exciting right now. Um, but I'd always really thought it was a really and exciting kind of organization. If there's one organization that people say you make friends with quickly, it's Planned Parenthood, I think, because it means you pretty much know that you're a little outspoken and you have common beliefs, systems, and all that sort of thing. And people you meet through Planned Parenthood usually stay your friends for life. And I, I found that very much to be true. Then I also got involved with the Dauphin County Democratic Party. I was head of their candidates' committee. I am now the vice chair of the organization. But my exciting thing is to elect more democrats. But my other ulterior motive has always been to elect more LGBT democrats. And so ... involved with the Stonewall Democrats, too. I was the vice chair of that organization and treasurer and different roles. My husband was the chair for a while. But we've really tried to grow our numbers. And we've been successful at doing that. And it's really exciting this year, um, she hasn't won yet, but we have a woman, Josie Bissett, who won the Republican and Democratic primary in Susquehanna Township. So, we've had success electing white gay men. But we haven't had any success electing any women. And mostly we just couldn't get lesbians to run. And so we really—that is something I was been really working on, and really was so thrilled when I heard Josie announced she was running. And now we really need to elect some LGBT folks that are non-white. And so I'm working with a guy. There's two guys that are running in Lebanon right now, and hopeful maybe one of them can win, and try to increase the diversity that I know that our community has, but on that elected level in Central Pennsylvania. And they always say with the Victory Fund, which works to train openly gay people—I was on their campaign board, and they've helped a lot of candidates I've worked with—they always say, “If you're not at the table you're on the menu” [laughs]. And so that's really been something that's always been close to my heart—has been trying to elect more gay people, and I quickly decided that I didn't want to run for office [laughs], and that I wanted to be in the background. But, um, I really think that that's important and I think it still is very important.

BL: Right. Um, let's talk a little about your romantic life [laughs]. You mentioned your first boyfriend back in when you were 18.

AR: yep.

BL: Um. Maybe you can talk a little bit about a sequence of your, um, sort of, um, romantic relationships?

AR: Well, I think I really ... failed a lot of my romantic relationships [laughs]. And I think because I was living this kind of bifurcated life, where on campus I was active in LGBT community and doing all these things, and then at home I was like a celibate nun—right, you know [laughs] so at least that's how I needed to portray that in my parents' lives, and so since no boys would be welcome at our house, I think I really psychologically wouldn't even allow

myself to take someone seriously, um, because I knew well where could it really go, and what happens over summer when I go home, um, so I had a lot of shorter term relationships. I did get some really great advice from our GSA leader my freshman year. He said, “don’t date anyone on campus because there’s so few of us we all have to really like each other. So we can’t afford any drama” [laughs]. And I thought that was really sage advice. Because we really were a small gay community and it was nice that we all did really like one another. And we didn’t have any issues that way. But, um, I had a serious boyfriend that got me through the end of my internship for Casey through my last semester of college and then into my first job. But, um, it didn’t work out, and that was ok. But I realized I was probably ready for a relationship. And so, it took another year and a half. But I went to the brownstone, on “traylor park trash drive,” right? [laughs] And I found the love of my life. So if anyone ever asks me for success in finding love, I tell them that that was my story, so good luck. “You’ll never know where you’ll find love.” But I was going there to meet a friend who had moved from out of town and, and Chris Dietz who is now my husband was there after an MCC church concert. And we started talking. This was 2008 in May, and so the Obama primary with Hillary had just happened and they were both kind of camped out here for five weeks. So it was an exciting time politically to live in Pennsylvania. And I talked about being a Barak Obama supporter and he was a Barak Obama supporter. And then he said that he as a local elected official—he was on town council. And, well I think community activism is sexy [laughs], and so that so that kind of wrote itself. We set a date and went on our first date at Italian Lake. And my mother decided to come to my house that day to run along the river and then to get a shower and whatever. And I said, “mom, you need to get out of here, I have a boy coming.” And she asked me about him. And I said, “well, he is ten years older than me.” And my mother said, “It’s about time you date someone your own age” --thinking that I’m an old soul at heart [laughs]. So, I felt like I had permission from my mother. My parents got divorced, um, right when I had kind of graduated from college—soon after that—and when that happened, my mother got in a new relationship and we basically made a pact that I’ll get over that if you get over me being gay [laughs]. And then my dad was really lonely and so he basically—I said, you know, if want to see me, Chris is going to come, and if you don’t want Chris to come, I’ll come hang out with you but only when Chris is preoccupied. And so really told him that if you really want me to have me be part of your life, Chris has got to be part of it too. And my dad, I think, wasn’t bad about it or anything. I think he was just very traditional. He was never the one who was upset with me for being gay. I think he thought I couldn’t find—be happy. Because he didn’t know anyone who was gay and happy and fulfilled. And so I think he’s realized that that could happen, and all of that. And so then we were working the polls for a gay candidate for state rep, who unfortunately lost, in Chester County in the primary of 2014. And we’re working at the poll, separate places, and this marriage verdict comes out in Pennsylvania. And we had been asked to be part of the ACLU law suit, so we kind of knew—that—it was—something was coming. And I’d made a few calls to inquire how the process might work. Um, so I reached out to the Recorder of Deeds and all that sort of stuff down at the county and told them that they should be prepared in case there was a positive ruling. So, it was really exciting that day, knowing that gay marriage was going to be law. And so they said they would be taking applications the next day. So, Chris and I were down there for election night. We found that out our candidate lost at 11 o’clock at night. Drove up back to Harrisburg kind of sad, but we were first in line at 7 o’clock in the morning at the Dauphin County Courthouse to—there were few couples in front of us—but right in front, waiting for the doors to open. It was really an exciting day. Getting married—getting our marriage license. And we didn’t realize that there was a three-

day waiting period. And so we were really nervous—cause Tom Corbett was Governor--that he may put a stay on the ruling or at least, you know, file for an injunction for one. So we thought we're going to put to get an exception to this three-day—which the only exceptions were if you were leaving for the military or if you were going to have a child that was born out of wedlock. So, sort of antiquated rules, I think, but we had already been together a long time and knew this is what we wanted. But they waited until they heard that Corbett wasn't going to appeal the ruling and then they issued a ruling denying our request. They never said if they would of issued it had he—had they thought he might have gone the other way or not. But I think they were just trying to punt the idea. So we waited. Six days later we were able to finally get our immediate families together and we got married at Italian Lake, where we went on our first official date. So that was a pretty cool and exciting time and got to see a lot of our friends get married within that year.

BL: All right. And, what do you think about, um, the differences in growing up in the eighties and nineties ... versus what—you probably have some sense of what that was like in central PA before that.

AR: Well, it was certainly different in that there were out kids in high school. There weren't many of them. But there were the two lesbians that I mentioned. There was, um, this one kid who never said he was gay, but everyone kind of just teased and taunted him. And it was pretty clear he was. And he didn't go out of his way to deny it. And so those were the three gay people that we had at our high school. And then this other one that I knew pretty well that I knew that then came out later on. So at least I knew there was some people and that they weren't being killed or, you know—I mean they were harassed—but no one was ever beaten up that or anything like that that I knew of. Just a lot of taunting. But I was already used to that [laughs] so, um, that sort of thing. You know, I was kind of the popular kid in school—ish. But I was not part of the popular crowd. But kind of we all went K through 12. We all knew each other. So, everyone liked me. Um, but I didn't really have a lot of close friends like I have today. So, I kind of was everyone's friend, but, not really. I didn't have those really deep close friendships. Most of them that I did have were with girls. So, I think that also made it more interesting for folks in thinking that I was gay, cause I sat at a table at lunch where everybody was female except for me [laughs]. But, ah, yeah, even looking to my dad's generation or my uncle, they certainly didn't have any of that—you know, there weren't any out kids at all. So, I mean, that was an improvement. And the fact that some of the teachers—like my AP history book including those little blurbs. I can't tell you how much those couple paragraphs in the history books mattered to me. And I think that that's really important with the History Project—is that having that history—because so much of it has been hidden—to bring it out to life and to talk about it and to know that there have been successful people, and scientists and all sorts of spectrums of academia, etc., that there have been gay people for many, many years. I think that that's a really comforting thing to know.

BL: And how about the role of media, uh, how that may have played into it, too. Because I think that there was a lot more of coverage of gay issues during the time period that you grew up in rather than, you know, that long period ago.

AR: We watch a lot of news, so, you know, there were certainly things happening then, which then my parents would often kind of snicker at—with what was happening. Um, so I knew that that was not acceptable. But we did have *Showtime* [laughs]. And the reason I mention that is

there was a show called *Queer As Folk* and my parents would go to bed and I would sneak out to the living room to watch this show, and it was kind of ridiculous and out there, and I felt like these gay people weren't really like I was, but—they were gay and they seemed happy and I thought that that was pretty cool, and so it kind of gave me some hope as a young kid—I mean then there was also the internet that you can find all sorts of things to let you know you weren't not alone, although not all of that was the positive things of organizations and that sort of thing that you would normally want young people to find. But, um, you did see that. There was also—*The Real World* was really impactful for me. Ah, you know, something I watched, and they would often have gay characters and kind of show what they were going through. And there was one who had HIV and then was getting sicker and looked like he was going to pass. And I remember Bill Clinton calling him and talking to him. And I thought wow, the President of the United States like validated this person who was going through this. And cause when anyone really talked about HIV or AIDS, was always a death sentence and it was a bad person or that sort of assumption. And sex ed books were very antiquated. I think they used the same sex ed books that my parents had used when they went to the same high school. No talk about HIV or AIDS. It came up with a little kind of handout. And it was just “those people” and so that was kind what I knew of the gay community. And that's why the only other time they talked about gay people in school was when it came to relate to HIV and AIDS.

BL: Well, good. Um, and ah, what, what were the sort of important events or turning points in your life?

AR: Well, coming out was definitely a turning point—um, kind of when I decided that it was okay to be gay and I rationalized that with myself and then felt peace with that. And it was a tough choice but not as tough as it's been for a lot of other people. And I look back and I think about other generations that came out way before me and paved a pathway. And I think, golly, the things I thought were difficult just completely pale in comparison to anything I really went through. But it seemed tough at the time. Um, and then really, um,—graduating from college and getting to work with other gay people at the company that I work with, and businesses, and different folks, and getting to know all sorts of people in the gay community—was really exciting for me. And to feel like you're on the edge of making a difference. I remember we went to the Equality March, and we went to the HRC dinner the night before and Barak Obama spoke. And, and the cast of *Glee* was there. And Lady Gaga sang. And then so we sort of have this kind of Black-Tie affair where, you know, everything was wonderful. And Obama was talking about—Judy Shepherd was there—and how he was going to introduce hate crimes and push to get that passed. And then we had the Equality March the next day, which was very “activist-y,” and we were in our t-shirts and on the streets and it really felt like the world was changing. Um, another thing that we did—I'm on Democratic State Committee—and so one of the things—I was the head of LGBT caucus for Democratic State Committee and one of the things we worked to do was to pass a resolution that the Democratic State Party of Pennsylvania supported gay marriage. And so, um, part of that movement -- we got some pushback but eventually it passed unanimously and then soon after that Obama came out supporting gay marriage. And it was something we wanted in the 2012 plank of the party platform. And then in 2016 I was a Hillary delegate. So that was pretty cool. And being from Pennsylvania I was probably about eight rows from the front watching the fi—what I thought was going to be the first female president, which is pretty exciting, and all of those emotions and feeling like, okay the LGBT community was

really coming into its own, and then being terribly kind of disappointed. The other—you know, 2008—we were really excited when Obama won. But I remember we were so excited we knew Obama had won and then we found out Prop 8 passed. And I remember just looking at my husband and we got into bed that night and we just held each other and just were crying, because I thought—we thought—California! if California is not going to uphold gay marriage, we're in trouble [laughs], and it's amazing that from that time period of feeling all hope is lost and being able to get married was only six years later. I don't think there's any civil rights movement that's had change happen so quickly. And it's because we've had so many people involved in fighting for a long period of time. And the media and everything else. Attitudes really change.

BL: Um, and, ah, what challenges remain that you are excited about getting involved in?

AR: Well, ah, I guess the big excitement for me—is, ah, it's not LGBT but [laughs] I'm really involved in democratic politics in Dauphin County's—and Dauphin County has kind of been a one-party system for many years—we've never had a democrat elected to any row office in years, and, you know, times have changed and, you know, Obama won the country twice and then Hillary won it in 2016. And so being part of that movement is exciting for me, mostly because I feel like we can enfranchise people. Um, a lot of people who are non-white, people who are LGBT, a lot of people who are different religious affiliations. Looking at what's happening with the Muslim community right now, I feel a lot of affinity for the Muslim community and the immigrant community. Being a gay person, and as a white man, I wonder would I feel the same way I feel today about all of these other groups had I not been “the other” in myself. And it makes me really nervous that would I have thought other people were bad if I wouldn't have had this experience that would have opened me up to other folks. So there's always other causes and things to fight for. And I think the transgender community is—great strides have been made, but we still have a lot of homelessness, a lot of unemployment, a lot of stigma. I mean, I think about the toughness of coming out as gay, but coming out as transgender is so difficult. And people I know that have lost entire families much more easily over that, or even their jobs. In Pennsylvania, we still don't have civil rights. We still can be fired for getting married. You can get married in Pennsylvania one day, and then the next day put your photo of your same-sex spouse on your desk and be fired for it. And it's perfectly legal. And that to me is really disconcerting. And so ... something some other folks and I have talked about is trying to see if we can get an ordinance passed in Dauphin County for non-discrimination—and still pushing at the state level, but because we're so Republican-controlled and their party—a lot of the moderates have been weaned out who were more supportive—it seems difficult to get that passed, today. But it's part of the reason I'm involved in politics—is because I would like to elect more people who share those views. Cause no one should fear getting fired or not getting an apartment because they're LGBT and it's a shame that that can still happen. It's exciting we were able to pass an ordinance in Harrisburg and in Susquehanna Township, but not, you know, for the whole county and not all of Pennsylvania. So ... there's a lot of work to be done.

BL: And in terms of ... ah, thinking about your generation, your peers, um, what have you—um, what observations have you had about LGBT people in your, your generation are they—do they seem more ah, open, adjusted, ah, involved?

AR: I think they're very adjusted and involved and I always felt like I was kind of the conservative one [laughs]. I was like, well maybe we should wear a dress shirt? Maybe we should do these meetings ... I was always a bit more on that conservative-bent side of things to where I felt other people were really pushing the envelope much harder than I was. But I really feel like if you really look at young kids today, that I know who are coming out, and they were out at 13, 14 and their parents were great about it, and their parents have encouraged them to date and to meet their significant others, just like they would anyone else that they would be dating. And now, you know, now I've moved out of Harrisburg because my husband lives in Millersburg and so we moved in together. And like just going to a homecoming football game in a rural community and people come up to you and say oh you know my daughter is, you know, is I think a lesbian and, you know, my son ... and this and that ... and I think it's a much different time for young people, I don't think there's the same stigma involved that there was. And I think they're a lot bolder and I think they're making demands more-so, where I was happy just to get some acceptance, they want full equality. And they want it to be across the spectrum. And they're not just focused on just being gay. They're focused on breaking down gender and, you know, being non-binary and talking about being intersect—there's just a whole different openness there that's really exciting. And I think the other exciting thing is—I've seen that the African American community, the Latino community, and the Asian community have often gotten more open than they once were. I had had a lot of friends who were non-white, who were gay, who felt a lot of stigma and shame in their own communities—and it's been fun being involved in politics and working with black ministers who are involved in democratic politics and being gay and I think that that's—you know, we've started to, change minds, and I think that that's really exciting, and I think that our movement is becoming more intersectional and growing.

BL: Great. Um, have we missed anything that you can think of that you wanted to add?

AR: I just think it's so great that you're doing a history project and then writing a book. And I think that the more we can tell our stories—I think coming out, as Harvey Milks said, was so important for people to do. And if that to know you changes people's minds. But I think looking back and knowing we have a rich history—that we aren't doing anything for the first time that really hasn't been done before. We may be pushing the envelope further but we all stand on the shoulders of all those that have stood before us.... and in much difficult ways. And to think back to Stonewall and those sort of things. I think it's been really important that we remember the past.

BL: Great, ah, well, thank you so much. We appreciate your time, Alex.

AR: It's been my pleasure.

BL: And I've really enjoyed talking to you.