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: Anthony Silvestre

Date: September 21, 2016

Location: LGBT Oral History – Silvestre, Anthony - 107

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: Anthony Silvestre
Interviewer: Barry Loveland
Date of Interview: September 21, 2016
Location of Interview: Pitt Men's Health Study Clinic, Pittsburgh
Transcriber: VJ Kopacki
Proofreader: Kailey Zengo
Finalizer: Mary Libertin

Abstract:

Anthony Silvestre was born in 1946 in the Bronx in New York. He grew up in a working-class, Italian neighborhood and is familiar with stigma. He began identifying as gay in the sixth grade, but went through school still in the closet. After high school, he entered a Catholic religious group in the Boston area called the Holy Cross Brothers. He left after three years due to his disillusionment with the church, not his sexual orientation. He finished his final year at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, PA, and then attended Penn State as a graduate student.

Silvestre was introduced to LGBT rights while at Penn State, where he remained as student for five or six years. While there, he became active in an organization called the Homophiles of Penn State [HOPS], and, as president, met many of Pennsylvania's leading activists. He was appointed Chair of the Pennsylvania Council on Sexual Minorities and became a leader in the Pennsylvania Rural Gay Caucus, which supported numerous groups across Pennsylvania. He was appointed Chair of the Pennsylvania State Council and supervised all of the subcommittees, one of which worked with the State Department of Education to create a gay high school in Philadelphia for the young gay kids from the Cuban Mariel Boatlift.

Silvestre worked with the department of Children and Youth Services to ensure that non-straight populations were not short-changed in the bureaucracy. He became executive administrator of the Eromin Center. Eromin [Ero: erotic, and min: minorities] is a center established to provide culturally competent mental health services.

Silvestre discusses how the State Office of Administration during the 80s effectively handled issues related to the AIDs epidemic, including writing policies and conducting sensitivity training around gay issues in various agencies such as the State Police. He interacted with the Governor and made policy with the governor's aides, adding LGBT language into contracts and policies and requiring reports be generated concerning their efficacy, especially in regard to complaints that were made. He helped establish a community advisory board, probably one of the first in the country dealing with HIV.

Silvestre was hired at the University of Pittsburgh at the Pitt Men's Study program to supervise their six-month grant sponsored by the NIH—and he still works there, thirty-plus years later. He is now working on non-discrimination policy and education for HIV individuals in nursing homes and home health care.

Silvestre is married and a practicing Buddhist. He has created a group for young LGBT Buddhists, and has organized HIV services through the Ball community by supporting SILK,

which is a group for African American young, MSM and trans kids who are members of the Ball community.

BL: Do you want another test or?

G: I can splice them or you can continue.

BL: Why don't we do another test just to be sure? My name is Barry Loveland and I'm here with Greg who is our videographer today. And we're here on behalf of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania History Project. Today is September 21, 2016, and we're here for an oral history interview with Tony—Anthony Silvestre. And this interview is taking place at the Pitt Men's Health Study Clinic in Pittsburgh. Tony do we have your permission to record the interview today?

AS: Happily, yes.

BL: Okay. And we have a consent form for you to see after and sign after the end of the interview.

AS: Fine.

G: How does that look?

BL: Good. Okay, well. I wanna start kind of at the beginning and get some basic background on where you were born, when you were born, and what life was like growing up.

AS: Okay, well. I was born in 1946 in the Bronx, grew up there. Spent my life there, was very… being in a sort of working class, Italian, urban neighborhood I was very aware of stigma and some of the issues facing LGBT people. I identified myself as gay back in the sixth grade, so I went through high school knowing I was gay but not doing anything about it or talking to anybody about it. So I really got familiar with the closet and the woes and problems that arise from that closet and I think that has somewhat informed my development, centered my interest in the gay movement, since then.

BL: And did you have brothers and sisters…what were —?

AS: Yeah.

BL: How about your parents? Were, did you come out to them at some point or?

AS: Only after I left town. [Barry laughs] And my one brother knew about my sexual orientation pretty much when I was in high school but my two other sisters—my two sisters and my other brother, we never talked about it till later, after I left town. I entered a religious community of brothers in—near Boston [Massachusetts]. The Holy Cross Brothers—and I spent three years there, before I left. And my leaving was not related to my sexual orientation at least as far as I

can recall in terms of my conscious mind. It had more to do with my disillusionment with the Church at the time. While I was there I went to college, undergrad, and I finished my last year of undergrad at King's College in Wilkes-Barre—that's what brought me to Pennsylvania, so I could get my degree—and from there I went to Penn State and at Penn State I was introduced to LGBT rights.

BL: And how did that come about?

AS: At that time, some students at Penn State tried to organize a gay group called the Homophiles of Penn State. And they had four people signing the papers to do that, two were openly heterosexual and two were gay. One of the gay people was also in ROTC [Reserves Officers' Training Corps], and he also was getting a degree in teaching and was doing I guess an internship or practicum in a school. And in the process of — so the group was sued, the group was not allowed to organize on campus, which was very unusual, and so the Homophiles of Penn State sued Penn State and that got a lot of attention. And it gave a lot of attention to Joe, this teacher, potential teacher. And at that time the Secretary of Education denied him a teacher's license based on "moral turpitude" or something. One of those clauses. And so that led to another suit and a whole bunch of organizing and so the first thing I did was, as an activist, standing at a table collecting signatures on his behalf. And so that was the begin— and then I became active in the organization, Homophiles of Penn State.

BL: Mhhm. What, about what year was that? Do you recall?

AS: That was, early 70s.

BL: 'Kay. And can you remember in terms like, your sort of coming out process at Penn State, what that was like in terms of, ya know, how was it about discovering other gay people and just your kind of experience going through that?

AS: Yeah. Well, because of my association in the organization I had a lot of opportunity to interact with people. So, we organized a hotline, which is a very common way of starting in many rural areas. And so we had a lot of verbal interaction with people from Pennsylvania and it didn't take much to get our address, so we were also doing written communication with people who themselves were coming out or who wanted information. We had a gay bar in State College, actually it was half a bar, called the My-Oh-My. The entrance from College Avenue, the main drag, led down some steps into the bar. And then as you walked further into the bar and made a left, you walked into a straight end of the bar, where they usually had women dancing. In—scantily-clothed women dancing [laughs]. And so it wouldn't be unusual for the Steel Worker's Convention to have a bunch of their delegates watching the women and of course on the gay side have a bunch of gay men and women. But things were touchy back then so that we weren't dance— we weren't allowed to dance in the bar because that's how rigid society was. As a result of having that organization and having the resources of the University, like free rooms and so on, meeting rooms, we became a natural place for Crossroads, for other activists

going across the State. So we would bring speakers in from Philly or Pittsburgh, many of our own members would leave, graduate Penn State and go down to Philly or Pittsburgh and get active locally. So, we really had a— already we were building networks with these other communities.

BL: Mhmm. Okay, good. How long were you at Penn State?

AS: Let's see…I was there, got my Master's degree and then was in a PhD program for a few years. Probably about five or six years.

BL: Uh-huh. And that was from 1971 to… what year did you start there?

AS: Probably I think— I moved to Philly in '76.

BL: Okay, so like, '71 to '76, in that range. Mmkay. And in terms of, I know that you got involved with the Pennsylvania Council, you got appointed at the Pennsylvania Council, as the chair. How did that whole thing come about? How did you find out about what was going on in Harrisburg and how did you, how did your name come up, I guess, as like, someone that should be on the council?

AS: Well, because I was president of HOPS, Homophiles of Penn State, and because we were involved in some high-level lawsuits, I knew a lot of the activists in the state. And, yeah know, like I said, we invited them, Barbara Gittings [organizer of Daughters of Bilitis and edited The Ladder magazine] to come speak; we invited Mark Segal, Randy Forrester, to come and speak at Penn State. And for some reason I was invited to a meeting in Harrisburg and I can't recall the details of the invitation, but it was a meeting to deal with, to create an advisory committee or board on LGBT issues. And that's where I met Terry Dellmuth, who was an aid to the governor [special assistant in Human Services] and Barry Kohn, who was an attorney with the Community Advocate Unit [with the Pennsylvania Department of Justice]. [car noises in background] And they really were driving forces behind the organization of the council, and so it was through my interactions at that meeting that I began to meet some of the people working at that state level.

BL: And when you started attending those meetings how did you, well, did, you said you knew some of the activists around the state, but did you get to meet a lot more activists at that point?

AS: Sure did. We had, at that time, more than a dozen groups in the state. Well, we had a great variety and a level of sophistication, resources and so on. Many of the members, leaders of those groups showed up for this meeting in Harrisburg and, in fact, out of this came a group called the Rural Gay Task Force I think it was—

BL: Caucus. Rural Gay Caucus I think.

AS: Rural Gay Caucus. And that was a very valuable forum for intra-state communication and resource sharing. [clears throat] So we had groups in Erie, Harrisburg, Allentown, Bethlehem,

State College, Philly, Pittsburgh, and we would meet every, every other month I think in one—a different city. And, we worked to develop initiatives, regional or state-wide initiatives, supporting the development of changes in the human relations ordinances in the state, working to support some of the local groups by attending their events or providing resources at their events, going to each other's gay pride marches and so on.

BL: And did you, did you find it interesting that, to see all these people at this point and realize that their— the community is so extensive?

AS: I think that it was unusual. I don't know many parts of the country where there were organ— regional or state-wide organizations like we were developing. So it already was an unusual coming together of organizations. We, our group, was very diverse, in every way. And I think that there was therefore a lot of education that went on among members about the needs of different populations so we learned about some of the problems of our older members dealing with nursing homes and assisted living facilities, of course our young people went to schools, and high schools, and colleges. Some of the employment problems that people had. Relations with the police, and state police, and so on. So, the Caucus was a great source of information and communication and as a result it educated all of us as to the kinds of issues that people were facing and because we could come together allowed for sort of a big brain trust to try to figure out how to move society along.

BL: Do you remember any specific projects that you got involved with, with the Caucus that were particularly interesting to you?

AS: Well, one of them was a college professor [coughs] -- I think it might have been out of Pitt campus, actually -- who, for some reason, the police entered his home and found some marijuana and also a copy of the Advocate and so he was arrested. And as a result, he was also fired from the University. Again, using a moral turpitude clause. And he came to us and we took that case. And since Pitt was a state-related university at the time and because we could stand on the shoulders of the State Department of Education, we were able to make our views widely known about the illegality of their action, especially as we interpreted, they violated the Governor's executive order, since he forbid discrimination in all state contracts, including with universities. And happily, the university backed down and he was restored and I think received financial recompense for all of the legal costs and all of the annoyance and trouble that came as result of their action. And so that was a very important lesson for us that we could, in fact, be successful taking on major institutions and using the executive order as a vehicle for doing that.

BL: And that was while you were on the council, right?

AS: Yes, right, uh-huh.

BL: And what are your memories, kinda going back, just before the council was formed, what are your memories of your first meeting with Governor [Milton J.] Shapp?

AS: I met him in the current Governor's mansion. I was invited by Terry and Barry to meet with him. And it was for breakfast so I remember we had breakfast together. And he was a very quiet spoken man. Intense man. And in our conversation it became clear that he was very progressive in all of his views, all of his political views. He formed the first Women's Commission about that time and was amenable and probably by then had already agreed to form the Council on the urging of Terry and Barry. So I guess I was rather tongue-tied [laughs], a college student, sitting there with the governor. I don't recall what we talked about actually. But…

BL: But, so shortly after that, I guess, he appointed you to Chair of the Council?

AS: Council, yeah.

BL: And then what, what committees or specific issues did you get involved in with the Council and what progress was made during your involvement?

AS: As chair, I was of course in a way responsible for all of the committees. And so a lot of my work was making sure that each committee was functioning appropriately and had resources and reporting back to the whole council. At the time, I spent a good deal of energy making sure that the various state departments and agencies were represented on the council. So that we didn't have vacancies lasting too long, if someone retired or resigned. So I was usually, I might be called in, by a particular committees of the Council if they felt they needed my intervention somehow in moving something along.

BL: Did you find any particular agencies more problematic or difficult to get cooperation from, than others?

AS: I can't say, that anyone stands out in particular. I mean probably, it's counterintuitive, one of the most cooperative agencies was the State Police.

BL: Really?

AS: They met with us regularly. And anytime there were complaints that we received, basically relating to sexual activity at rest areas on the highway, the State Police were very responsive to those. They even allowed us to come in and help train their officers. So, I have to say that was probably one of the more interesting things I did was sitting with a bunch of brand-new police officers, ten or fifteen in a room, talking about homosexuality. And I have to say they were very respectful and seemed to respond in ways you would expect and hope that they would.

BL: Did you get involved with the First Lobby Day that was held for the legislature?

AS: Right, Gay Lobby Day in Harrisburg.

BL: Yes.

AS: Yes, I was, not only helped to organize it, of course, but I was there participating, and we often went and suggested people go in groups of two or three. For a lot of reasons, one certainly was so that we could be, make sure to bring up all the issues we were concerned about [coughs]. So, my partner on that day was Spencer Cox, who was the head of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] in Philadelphia. And Spencer was unrelenting in his support of LGBT people, and he was used to dealing with legislators, just from his position, and they were used to him. And so it was very interesting to see the level of discretion he had and it was also interesting for me to see that no matter how rural or conservative the district, the members of the legislature would talk to—or their aids—were always very responsive and supportive. I think, by that time there was a lot of movement in the country and even in the state, in support of various commissions and issues related to feminism and even gay rights so we didn't surprise them—they weren't surprised by us and they seemed to be very receptive in what we had to discuss.

BL: I know there was, shortly after Governor Shapp created the Council, there was kind of like a number of bills that got introduced in the legislature that were kind of anti-gay and there was a lot of activity kind of right around that time period, push, trying—pushback against what he had done with the consecutive orders. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with that?

AS: Yeah, there was a state senator, Nolan, I believe, who was avidly unreasonable when it came to this issue. And he kept trying to pass legislation allowing, or forbidding, the employment of gay people in jobs working with youth, especially in the education field. And he was just outspoken in his position and he passed—tried to pass—and inspired other legislators to introduce bills, so that we had constantly had three or four bills going through the house or senate. But indeed, they didn't seem to have much behind them. And in fact, at one point, he resigned his positon in the senate and— [recording cuts off]

G: …from here on out.

BL: Okay. And so we, where we left off was Senator Nolan,

G: Pushed out.

BL: Pushed, pushed out.

AS: Right.

BL: If you could finish that thought.

[laughter]

AS: So, Nolan at that time was, I think, majority leader in the senate. He and Shapp had had many run-ins, since Shapp of course in getting elected sort of did so outside of the democratic party internal systems. He was sort of a maverick and I don't know that he was actually the choice at the time to run for governor, I think the democrats might have chosen someone else, so

he wasn't one of the favorites. And so Nolan was already pre-disposed to be unhappy with this, with Shapp. And as a very strong, outspoken supporter of the Catholic church, very anti-abortion, he sort of naturally found us to be a government organization that he did not want to approve and could not approve. And so he would write legislation off and to disband—revoke the governor's executive order or to create new legislation that would forbid hiring of people known to be gay in jobs working with children in particular. And so, that remained a thorn in our side for a long time. Although, he didn't get anywhere with his bills, except really to alienate the other legislators, because they found themselves getting lobbied both from our people and from the other side. And it put them in very uncomfortable positions to have to talk about these issues back in their home towns, issues that they didn't really think were relevant since there was nothing happening in the public that was generating all this legislation. It was just being self-generated from Nolan's office and from some of his allies. And so, as a result, more and more pressure built so that he was voted out of his majority position, majority whip position, I believe. Because he was devoting too much energy to this issue in particular. And it was becoming more and more difficult for his allies in the democratic party to have to declare themselves on this issues as one issue. People were much happier to just turn away and not pay any attention to it. It was a no-win for them, in their view. No matter what they did.

BL: Do you recall the, the first gay conference that was held in Harrisburg at the Friends Meeting House and State Museum?

AS: Yes.

BL: Maybe talk a little bit about that experience.

AS: Yeah, we think that was a very important, already we had, as you know, the caucus, so we already had groups around the state, but the expertise of the leadership of those groups varied. And it became clear that we would benefit by having opportunities to get together to bring in experts and to hold brainstorming and planning sessions in some kind of a, conference-like setting. And so we called, created this conference, and brought in people from the state as well as people from outside government who could help us develop our skills, whatever they might be, and that we needed in order to work with the state. Understanding how much has happened, understanding how services were developed or created in the state in the bureaucracy, talking about some of the issues that people were concerned about, STDS for instance, adoption, foster care. So these were some of the issues that were on people's minds. Dealing with police, dealing with employment discrimination, and by bringing in experts, and educating large groups of activists at one time, it really equipped many of us with a lot of information that was useful in carrying out the everyday act—activities that we were involved in.

BL: And do you recall, you had people from all over the state, attend or?

AS: Yes, we did. We had our membership always from the very beginning, it was pretty expansive. Usually there were groups in most of the cities in Pennsylvania, not only the major

cities like Philly and Pittsburgh. But also maybe as we might say, second tier, in terms of population. Harrisburg, Erie, Allentown, and many of the people who were in those organizations often came from even less populated areas. We had people who lived on country lanes and we had people in towns that were— just— had a few thousand citizens. And so the issues facing our members were very varied because of the backgrounds, the places where people lived. And that challenge I think to the activist at the time was to make sure we had enough resources to address the issues of this wide-ranged, very diverse population.

BL: Do you recall how the idea of the Governor doing a proclamation for gay pride week came about?

AS: Yeah I think that, I think, it might have come from one of his cabinet members. I was thinking about it this morning and her name just escapes me. It was either Ethel or Ester. Ethel Allen, I believe. I think she was secretary…of…I was gonna say commerce, but I'm not sure, I'll have to double check. And she's the one who asked the governor to make the proclamation. I'm not sure—I think she might have been asked to do so by activists from Philadelphia since that was where she lived. And she was herself predisposed to support LGBT people so I'm not surprised that she originated the request. And she was very well respected in the state and I'm not surprised that the governor agreed to do so and did so. And [clears throat] the reaction was mixed. It caused a fury of backlash, we received dozens of letters from around the state condemning the governor for issuing the proclamation. Some people, people found it much easier to accept the notion that he supported civil rights, but not that he would support Pride. It was sort of a new idea for many people and many people saw it as a kind of proselytizing or a level of approval that they thought was not appropriate for a governor. In any case, we tried to counter that by generating letters in support but it's a lot easier to get letters from people who are angry and opposed than it is for people who are supportive. So we never matched them letter for letter but we did generate some dozens of letters in support of his position. It sort of brought him more national attention on this issue, there weren't too many proclamations—too many politicians out there at the time doing this kind of work. He was one of the few politicians statewide in the US, in the US, that I can recall who were so outspoken on this issue. Cherry Brown was certainly out there being supportive. A lot of the governors of East Coast, West Coast, San Francisco, L.A. [Los Angeles], New York, even Philadelphia were more use to being openly supportive of LGBT people but it was very rare for a governor to be so outspoken. And it brought a lot of attention to the issue and it helped us develop our own understanding of what the state could or could not do in terms of LGBT people. I don't think we ever really fully understood the potential for change that could be generated through state government. Most of the focus of the community at that time was on getting rid of sodomy laws and supporting federal efforts from GRNL, Gay Rights National Lobby, to get a statewide anti-discrimination bill passed. But not too many people, it was very unusual, to look at other ways that one could change, bring about change, and Shapp gave us an opportunity to focus on county government and the counties as providers of services. And we did that in a couple of places; both in

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh there was movement in their children and youth agencies to support sensible placements for gay foster kids and so there were attempts to find foster parents who would support these kids so that these kids could be placed in healthy environments. And this is important because there are thousands of children in the children's and youth services throughout Pennsylvania, many of whom were there because they were LGBT. And maybe had come from homes which weren't accepting of them. So finding homes in support for these young people was very important. It was Shapp's executive order which showed us how one can move county governments and therefore move county programs around jails, around children and youth services, around services for the aged, services for disabled populations, all of these services that, that served millions of people around the country could all be moved to better serve LGBT people in their populations. And so this became more and more evident to us as a counsel and we began to do more and more outreach even nationally, to the national gay political community to try and move people on these kinds of issues. And I have to say, even to this day, I don't think people appreciate the importance of moving the bureaucrats who run government services to include proper policies and programs for LGBT people. We still have most programs in this country operating with the assumption that their clients are straight people. Whether it's nursing homes, whether it's hospitals, whether it's group home for kids. Most of them run with the assumption that people receiving these services are straight and we know that's not true. And well, because of that assumption these other populations, non-straight populations, are being shortchanged. They're getting— they're not getting services that are culturally appropriate. So I think this was the major, probably the most significant finding, or position, that the counsel developed and tried to export as far as we could even throughout Pennsylvania and then beyond Pennsylvania outside the state. We were successful I think, within the state, in the, as I said, in children and youth programming, we did have support for gay youth in Philly and Pittsburgh and some of that support is still there. When the Cuban Mariel Boatlift was happening and Cubans were coming to Florida, sort on undocumented refugees coming to the shores of this country, many of them ended up at the Camp Hill Center for Refugees and there were a gaggle of young gay kids in that group. And we worked with the State Department of Education, I believe at that time, to help move those kids into programs in Philadelphia where they could find a group home that was secure and also developed a gay— a high school for gay students. Said these kids could have educational opportunities that we weren't finding available in Philadelphia public schools at the time. And again, I think that was very educational for us because our community, I don't think, has fully appreciated the power that county governments have. When people think about lobbying, they think about lobbying their state senator or congressman or governor, but they'll go off and think about lobbying the county commissioners. But in fact, it's the county commissioners who often develop the agenda for the democratic or republican party in their state. The county commissioner's often choose, have a lot to say about who becomes members of congress and who becomes the nominees for the senate as well as the government—governor. And it's the county commissioners who hire and fire the various heads of health departments, welfare departments and so on, wardens and jail. And so it's those county commissioners who

really have a lot of authority and power to be able to move systems to be more accessible to LGBT people. And so that became I guess our clarion cry and hopefully it's something that will might still yet inspire people to pay more attention to county governments and county services, because they affect our most vulnerable populations. Passing the— getting rid of the state sodomy law— which is something that our state—happened in Pennsylvania that we did a little bit of support for. But even changing that very oppressive law was very, very important it was essential but it's impact is hard to see because a lot of people weren't getting arrested there weren't very many bar raids happening. But it really acted I think that law to encourage stigma and to provide an excuse to discriminate against gay people because they were breaking the law, they were law breakers in addition to being immoral. And so it sort of provided an atmosphere that allowed discrimination. But in terms of concrete benefits and pain I believe that affecting the agencies that provide services to vulnerable people is probably more important than even changing laws because those agencies affect the life and death of so many vulnerable people and really can have tremendous impacts for good or bad.

BL: You mentioned something about an alternative gay high school being set up that the refugees were able to attend. I wasn't aware of that, that's very interesting. Do you recall more about how that can to be and?

AS: Sure. The kids at that time were living in a group home in Philadelphia and going to school in Philadelphia some of the kids were cross-dressing on occasion, or a lot, and had difficulties as you can well imagine fitting into the schools. So there was bullying, there was all kinds of other issues and the kids were, attendance at school was very difficult to maintain. So luckily there was a man in the city, I think his first name was Joe, Joe Bitton who had a license—school license—because he had, had run a private school in Massachusetts I believe. And he maintained his credentials and licensure and so he was able to use those to open this school and enrolled all of our young people in it. And they graduated a class, they had a graduation party for them. But of course, when the Eromin Center closed, the school closed with it. We have to remember at that time getting resources for services for LGBT people was not very easy it was hard to get support financial support from foundations and certainly from state agencies to support these kinds of programs

BL: That's interesting though that that something like that could happen that early that's…it's…

AS: It happened, it was very early. First one of the country—

BL: Yeah the Harvey—yeah the Harvey Milk School wasn't even in existence then in New York.

AS: It was not, that came later.

BL: Yeah, yeah.

AS: Of course, that's been more successful, at large, it's survived a long time.

BL: Right, right, but that's pretty amazing of how that happened. You also, well I remember from the program that we had with the council that one of the gentleman was talking about the fact that through the work of the council you were able to kind of embed so much more in terms of services and so forth, regulations, policy changes and everything with different departments, and I know you talked about the counties a lot. Were there other examples that you can recall that where some of those changes really became kind of institutionalized in the agencies?

AS: Well one major change that happened in the governor's office of administration was the requirement that every new state worker was trained on LGBT people and then later AIDs. That requirement, especially as it came to AIDS, applied not only to new hires but to existing staff. And I like to think that had a major impact in this state on the AIDS epidemic. Because we know nationally the federal government was very slowly to react to the AIDS epidemic. Normally, the CDC reacted within three or six months to any new disease or outbreak. Just look at Avian flu or the Zika virus. There's almost immediate response, the feds go out immediately and start examining the problem and start trying to develop vaccines and other solutions. Well this didn't happen with HIV, the first cases of HIV became identified in the late 70s, early 80s, and it wasn't until 86/87 that the federal government began to even talk about the issue publically. I think it was Reagan in '87 who mentioned the words for the first time and it was his surgeon general who produced the first

[tape cuts out]

AS: And these were—so knowledge and information about this disease was very slow in coming. And many providers in the state had no idea what to do so agencies, departments of education for instance, the local high schools didn't know what policies they should support in terms of this disease. If someone was found to have the disease should they be removed from school? If they're students or teachers. These became very important issues affecting people every day. And so the governor's office of administration in requiring this education went a long way in allowing I think many institutions in Pennsylvania to develop in appropriate ways with this disease. People were taught what kinds of policies were useful they were taught how the disease was transmitted, how it could be prevented, and so on and so on. It was a very major, I think, profoundly important affect on this— the office of administration.

BL: How about the university system? How did it effect the employment practices and other aspects of the university?

AS: Well certainly the—many of the LGBT groups in the state at that time were organized around campus groups. It was probably the easiest way to set up an organization. Because you automatically got a room to meet, sometimes you got a budget, you had ways of publicizing through these school newspapers and so on. So it became a very— and of course young people were always interested in becoming activists this was the kids of the 60s and the 70s. Activism

was expected and so the college campuses were often the place where organization happened and often it was organizations led by students and faculty members. Many of the college organizations by nature of their presence were able to change the anti-discrimination statements of their universities or colleges so that sexual orientation was explicitly mentioned as a basis for non-discrimination. And again it stayed those organizations often who could bring in speakers that would educate not only the university campuses but the community at large about LGBT issues. It some cases, universities were able to generate courses on LGBT issues and actually get other existing courses like health courses to focus on issues of particular importance to LGBT people. To pass AIDS policies at those universities and so on. So, again, I don't think we could underestimate the importance of the impact that those groups had. And a lot of them were inspired by the governor's council many of the—many members of the council themselves active at university groups are on faculty and they were able to help generate activity through the Rural Gay Caucus as well as the Governor's Council. And we also got [clears throat] the State Department of Education to issue the kinds of protections in their own policies, for gay students, or gay faculty members.

BL: How much interaction did you have with Governor Shapp or his staff during your involvement as the chair?

AS: Well, I—my interactions with the governor during my term as chair [clears throat] was mostly often at social events either activities that they had at the governor's mansion like some kind of special activity, [coughs] put on by the Women's Commission. Or simply by stopping in his office while I was in Harrisburg. And those were basically most usually just social interactions that we had. Substantial relationships in terms of policy or legislation, those kinds of conversations happened through his aids, primarily Terry Dellmuth and Barry Kingerbears. I was in communication with them, sometimes daily, certainly weekly. I tried to move the different state agencies for one way or another. Our goal at that time was to embed this issue as deeply as we could in every state agency. So we were always looking for opportunities to add language to add our language into their contracts and into their policies. And we were pretty successful. We had at one point, all of the state agencies were required to notify us of any discrimination complaints that were issued in their agencies around LGBT issues. And that had a major effect in terms of letting people know that this was a serious issue that these issues had to be recorded and that reports had to be generated if these complaints came in. And so bureaucrats know that when you have to generate a report that business is serious and so I think it had a lot of impact in that I think it made sort of said, gave notice that this kind of—these kind of complaints were not welcome and that actions would be taken to remedy them. And so I think in some sense it helped change the whole attitude of the bureaucracy. This was now becoming an issue that demanded attention the same way that the governor's commission for women, his Latino council, and other programs that he supported. He was very much an outstanding supporter of equal rights and civil rights for all minorities. He was just probably one of the most

activist governors in the country in that way and it became clear to people, that LGBT people, were to be included under that umbrella.

BL: How long did the council exist?

AS: Well, it was created by Shapp, to my knowledge, it's not been dis-created so one might say it continues. Under Governor Thornburg, the council became inactive. I wasn't able to get administrative support for keeping the council going, so it became impossible to get a room for our meeting or to get mailing sent out. And so basically we just dwindled away; at the same time what was happening, however, the state was responding to AIDS and clearly a major part of the governor's attention as it affected gay people was focused on moving AIDs from the AIDS agenda forward. So his, one of his major aides, Maria Keating, was very busy working with council members to write the state's policy for the Education Department on AIDS in schools and to write policies for the Department of Health and Department of Welfare. So as the state and activists increasingly turned towards AIDS, they we turned away from LGBT activism per se.

BL: 'Kay. How much do you think the LGBT community at large at the time was, was aware of Governor Shapp's initiatives and what significance it had in the community? [siren in the background]

AS: I think at that time and I think even now most LGBT people don't appreciate or understand the importance of county governments and county programs. When you talk about governments and discrimination people think of that in terms of employment discrimination or housing discrimination being fired from a job, losing being evicted from a house, and these are true things that happen but few people think about the fact that we might have programs in our schools to help young people to stop smoking tobacco. But those programs are not designed to reach LGBT people. Those programs need to be redesigned in order to reach that population if they want to be successful. And one could go down the—, y'know we know that there's evidence that of all groups in society, African American lesbians probably get health care the least of any population. For lots of reasons; economic, race-related reasons, they're less likely to see a doctor than other populations. So when we're doing programs for women's health are we developing programs that will outreach to and successfully work with black lesbians? And I have to say the answer probably is, is probably no. Y'know, are we finding those women are we bringing them in, are we hiring them to work in those programs? If we can't yes to those questions, then we're probably not providing the services in a culturally competent way. [more sirens] And I don't think that's an understanding, that stood in the past and I really feel like it's not understood even now. That even now, most county programs, health and welfare programs, are still assuming heterosexuality of all their patients or clients. And so there's still a cost being paid because of that neglect.

BL: I wanna turn back to kind of your occupational history, to catch up with all this time period and you said after Penn State you moved to Philadelphia. What were you doing in Philadelphia?

AS: At that time, I became executive administrator, I think it was called, of the Eromin Center. Eromin was Ero: erotic, and min: minorities. And it was a center that was established for exactly what I've been talking about. It was set up to provide culturally competent mental health services. At that time, the common experience of people who went to mental health counseling services at either, especially at county-supported mental health centers, was that when they went in, no matter what their presenting problem was, whether there was say depression, or relationship problems, those were the two problems that were most commonly brought as their primarily presenting problem. But no matter what their presenting problem was, the therapist ended up wanting to treat homosexuality. So it was only in the 70s that the APA removed homosexuality as a mental illness. And a lot of therapists were conditioned to look at homosexuals as people suffering from mental health problems. So, many of our clients at Eromin who were trying to deal with alcoholism or depression couldn't find competent professionals. So what the center did was gathered volunteer therapists who came and each had a client load of maybe three or five clients, that they saw every week and provided free counseling to. And I think part of that experience helped me understand what happens when you assume heterosexuality of your patients, basically you're denying them service in a roundabout way. And I think that probably helped sharpen my awareness of the need for culturally competent welfare services.

BL: And how many years was, were you involved with that?

AS: So I was there for about five years. The agency finally went under unfortunately. Again, without any support institutional support, financial support from government, keeping such agencies sustained was very, very difficult. The only agency like it in the state was in Pittsburgh, the Persad Center. Which happily continues till today, but without government support, it was very difficult. Although we didn't pay our therapists, certainly we had to pay rent and we had to pay staff to keep the organization functioning. Although it was a small budget, primarily it was, the money had to be raised through fund-raising. And at that time, fundraising was not something that people expected to participate in, unlike—since those days, of course, now with the advent of AIDS, unfortunately people have understood the importance of raising money to support activities in the community. But at that time fundraising was sort of a new idea in the LGBT community. And it was very rare, it was very difficult to get successful monies raised through foundations or through donation. And so the agencies finally crashed.

BL: And then what did you do from there?

AS: That's when I was hired here at the University of Pittsburgh at the Pitt Men's Study. Dr. Rinaldo, who is an investigator of that study for NIH [National Institute of Health] was— had to recruit a few thousand gay men into his study. And so they had to find somebody who could do

that recruitment and for some reason or other my plans for how to do that impressed them enough that they offered me a six month position, and 30-plus years later I'm still sitting in the office.

BL: Very good [laughs].

AS: And my work—interestingly, I was able to use that position to interact with the county and state people I continue to do so. To try to use AIDS as the hook to bring people to the understanding of the need to establish programs that are LGBT specific. And to develop the skills to do that and so I feel like in some ways I'm doing the same work but sitting on a different desk doing it.

BL: And, talk a little bit more about your work here at the…at the Pitt Men's…

AS: Study.

BL: Study.

AS: Yes

G: If we stop it, it'll break for a minute.

BL: Then start again.

[nondescript noises]

AS: Okay. So, I used a so-called social marketing strategy in order to recruit men into the study. The benefit to the men was that they got an HIV test and that they could from that—the minute after that test—get introduced to a clinic for treatment. So we were able to do lots of important programming work, we could do prevention, so we went into bars and actually drew blood in bars. And we were able at those occasions to get people to agree to come back to our office and get there. Eventually it was the summer of '84 and there was an HIV test that finally worked. And I remember that summer because it was during that summer we had to tell about 300 men that they had this virus and that they were probably gonna die within three years. So it was very difficult work, but I think we were supported certainly by Dr. Rinaldo and by our staff to do a lot to lessen the impact of that bad news, by helping support, create support groups, by helping the existing agencies provide services. So one of the things that we did in terms of our organization was to create a community advisory board. It was probably one of the first in the country dealing with HIV. And that community advisory board had some of the most popular gay bar owners and gay bartenders—it had the head of MCC, Metropolitan Community Church, it had other well-known celebrities in the gay community. And so these people helped us fashion the marketing, they helped us get into the bars, they gave us an opportunity to do a training session for all bartenders about AIDS so that those bartenders could themselves act as educators in the bars. We were able to develop even cocktail napkins that had information about AIDS that the

bartenders would give out. We also supported PERSAD center and doing it, supporting its mental health work with people who were infected, and we also, the board, created the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force which to this day is the paramount group in the city, the county providing AIDS services. And we also worked to organize a statewide AIDS consortium that was able—began to, began to, lobby the state for more funding for AIDS and HIV. And actually had some success with [Governors] Thornburg and Casey in moving forward intelligent policies and beginning funding. So in some ways the Pitt Men's Study and the work it has done statewide has had an ongoing influence in terms of the provision of services in Pennsylvania. And we continue to do that, right now. The focus of our community board is on the impact of HIV and aging. As more of our men with HIV go into assisted living or nursing homes we're finding that those agencies are ill-equipped, that often the doctors that run those provide services in the nursing homes are themselves not necessarily well educated about HIV. And the staff in those homes are also not well educated, having someone with AIDS entering one of those agencies could be from the agency's point of view very disruptive. Family members of other people living in those nursing homes could become concerned about transmission to their own relatives. Staff in those nursing homes could become, because if they're uninformed about proper procedures to avoid infections for themselves they often have reservations about accepting people with AIDS. And so we're finding that this whole, that there's going be a whole transition probably for a few years that these agencies will be able to meet the needs of people with AIDs as they require home healthcare or nursing home care.

BL: How about if we go back a little bit to—you mentioned that you had entered a sort of religious community at one point and that you got disillusioned, I assume you're, you're not as affiliated with any particular religion now or are you back to having some affiliation?

AS: Right now I am a practicing Buddhist.

BL: Oh really?

AS: Yeah.

BL: Wow. And when did that happen, what…?

AS: Well it began happening in the early 90s and got deeper and deeper over time.

BL: Wow.

AS: And right now I run a center on mindful meditation that we have here at the University.

BL: Oh wow, that's amazing.

AS: And, in fact, one of the things we're thinking about doing is offering mindful meditation to people with AIDS. Because we know that mindful meditation can increase the effectiveness of the immune system.

BL: Hmm. That's pretty amazing. Is there much of an LGBT presence in the Buddhist community that you're aware of or?

AS: Yeah, there seems to be we don't have any shortage…

BL: Mhhm [laughs]

AS: …of LGBT people. In fact, in one of the major, we had the Dalai Lama come to Pittsburgh in the 90s. And the people who organized that were leaders in the LGBT community were also Buddhists.

BL: Wow.

AS: And his leadership of some of our groups in town are gay men and lesbian, some of the other Buddhist groups. And there's certainly openly gay people in just about every group in town.

BL: Interesting. And in terms of your, well you're not involved in the military, I assume, that didn't come out so I assume that's—

AS: No, I was a conscientious objector. And I did alternative service in a children's institution so I worked with pre-adolescent young men, boys and I think it was in that work that I truly got to understand the power of the children and youth agencies and the profound impact they can have on young people. And I also got to understand how the gay kids in that system [clears throat] could often be victimized either by overt behavior or certainly by silence. When they weren't being bullied by other kids, they were being— their sexuality was being ignored by the counseling staff. And others who really could have been playing a much more pro-active, supportive role if the institution was responsive.

BL: Mhhm. Anything else about sort of your organization affiliation history? You know, what kind of groups have you been involved with over the years?

AS: Well, I've certainly been involved, again, with the Community Advisory Board with a lot of organizational development in Pittsburgh. So we've helped organize a group—Asians and Friends. We certainly have been supportive of the student gay groups and staff groups here at the University. We helped organize, I was involved with organizing the Rainbow Buddhists which was a group of LGBT Buddhists. And part of my working career is helping the state facilitate its HIV planning group. So that group gives advice to the state on how to develop its plan for HIV care and prevention. And so some of the things we've done … I think the most important things we've done in the last few years was organizing HIV services through the Ball community by supporting SILK which is a group for African American young, MSM and trans kids who are members of the Ball community. And we've also been involved in an anti-stigma campaign where we've had billboards and bus signs throughout the city telling the stories of heterosexuals who have gay people in their families. So we might have a bulletin board which shows a picture

of a gay father and his gay son or a mother and her gay son or somebody had a gay siblings and someone. We've organized at libraries and other places, groups to discuss, at churches, groups to discuss these stories. So basically we get someone to tell their true story of having of being supportive of a gay person and then we create those into cards with a picture on one side and the story on the other side and then we use those in group discussions. At gay churches or other places or minority churches in particular. The program is mostly aimed at social acceptance within the minority community, African American community, and so we use whatever venues we can to bring people from that community together to discuss these scenarios. The notion is that people are mostly likely to change when someone they know is gay or lesbian and so we try to bring up this notion that someone in your family probably is and allow people to have that opportunity to think about that and to see whether other people in the group respond and so on.

BL: You mentioned the Ball community, I'm not too familiar with that term so maybe you could expand on that a little bit?

AS: Yeah, the Ball community are— there's a whole community of young black MSM and trans kids who do drag shows.

BL: Oh, okay.

AS: And have competitions, so competition might be the most glamorous or who would win the most— sometimes you have people doing— being asked to dress as their future self. So you might have one of the kids dressing as a female astronaut or some other interesting occupation and they win prizes based on these shows that they have, these competitions which also usually require some kind of dancing and can be pretty demanding. And prizes are given to the winners of the show, so we've supported those and we've created a center in downtown Pittsburgh where these kids get to meet and they spend their time there organizing for the show, which might mean that they're making wigs or they're doing some sewing or sequins because sequins are very popular in these shows. And but even at those, at this event while they're there they have opportunities to meet in private with people who can give them, provide them with services or if they need housing if they need a high school diplomas if they need an HIV test if they need hormones or those services could be, and are, organized and available.

BL: Good.

AS: So it's a very, again a very underserved population but we work with a list of county agencies, and again getting the counties' agencies to buy into their obligation to meet the needs of these kids is important. So we can take one of these kids and walk them over from our center right into housing, free housing and get them food stamps. All within 24 hours so it's very fast turnover.

BL: Great. Turning a little bit more to your personal life, I know you have a long time partner. Is he the first long term partner you've had, or did you have previous partners or?

AS: I've had previous partners.

BL: When did you first meet your first partner, for example?

AS: I think it was about 1970, 71 and…

BL: Was this at Penn State or before Penn State or?

AS: This was while I was at Penn State.

BL: That's right.

AS: In fact he moved to Penn State and we were together for I think about ten years and then we separated. He moved away and I met my second partner at Penn State and he moved on to Philadelphia with me and we lived together there for a number of years and then we separated and eventually he passed away. And I met Michael through a Buddhist dating service online and we've been together since, so it's only been about six years now.

BL: Okay.

AS: Then we actually got married.

BL: I was just gonna ask you that. [laughs]

AS: Yeah. It was something that my tax accountant explained the benefits of and so for very unromantic reasons we self-married in Pennsylvania [laughs]. The Quakers who don't cotton to making oaths to government got legislation passed where they could marry each other without the need of an officiant and so in Pennsylvania you can self-marry and just get two people to witness it and that's it, it's done and over with. And so we did that at a Buddhist retreat.

BL: And in terms of your family members, have they all kind of come to accept your relationship and…?

AS: Yeah, I have to say even more than that. My older sister who's in her 80s is quick to argue with some of the other old friend, old lady friends she has about LGBT issues. So yeah they're not only supportive of me but they've become pretty much advocates.

BL: Great. Are there anything else that you can think of that we've missed talking about that you've like to mention?

[Long pause]

AS: I guess the only thing I would like to say is that all of these things that I've talked about, or any of the progress we've made has really been due to the efforts of lots and lots of people. That I could, in very few minutes, come up with a list of a hundred people who made all these things happen so that someone like me just happened to, to be maybe there, maybe the face of a lot of

this work. But the activism in this state was very, was generated by lots of interesting and heroic people. I know activists in Pennsylvania who have had, have been shot at, have been threatened, who've been attacked one way or another, who've been pressured by their employers and so on. But even in the face of that and kept being active with not much reward. Even from within the community I remember vividly early on in the days of being told more than once to stop rocking the boat, gay people were afraid that if we rocked the boat too much they would become visible and therefore begin suffering consequences of stigma. And so being a gay activist didn't mean that you made friends with a lot of gay people, sometimes people avoided you.

[Long pause]

BL: Okay, well thank you so much. I appreciate your time and all of your memories. I think we've covered a lot of ground and I hope that you've found it to be a useful thing as well.

AS: I did, thank you.

BL: Good.

AS: Happy to do it.

BL: Thank you.

AS: Thank you, Greg.