

B- OK, we're recording. So today is November 16th and we're here in South Portland, at Jeff Ward's home. And my name, the student researcher, is Benjamin Cornwall, B-E-N-J-A-M-I-N C-O-R-N-W-A-L-L, and if you could just say and spell your name as well.

J- Jeffrey Ward, J-E-F-F-R-E-Y W-A-R-D.

B- Thank you. And just so you know, if there are any questions that you don't want to answer, feel free, you don't have to answer them if you don't want. And can I ask your age?

J- 67.

B- And if you'd like to state your pronouns and gender identification?

J- Male. Oh, sorry, male and gay.

B- And so, starting out, if you just wanted to talk about kind of your experience growing up I think that would be a good way to start.

J- OK. Well I was raised in Aroostook County, Maine. Our family was always quite involved with the church, particularly my mother. So, it was a little bit of a double whammy. I knew, probably, at a young age that I was gay, but I was also very family oriented, loved children, at one point said I wanted to be a minister. So I suppose I kind of suppressed it all through high school, probably mostly through college. I didn't come out until a very late age. I had lots of male friends, but I was, let's see, I did date females. We started out, I lived the first 13 years of my life in Limestone, Maine. Which is a base town, there's an Air Force base there. We moved when I was 13 to Caribou, so I graduated from Caribou High School, class of 1969. At somewhere around 27 I confirmed to myself that I was gay, and basically didn't date at all, anybody. I had a couple of little experiences, gay experiences, before that and after that but not.. nothing that lasted more than just a one night stand kind of thing. I was very involved in the community, both in

Childhood

Caribou

the church and in business. I ran a business in town and it was probably the busiest business in town, so I was very well known. Not only because I was in the church, I was the youth group leader, I was the chairman of the administrative council, this was the Methodist Church. I was on several other committees. Drama committee, the finance committee, that was all part of being the chairman of the administrative council, or the finance committee was. I was also in a handbell choir. At, I guess I was 47, it was 21 years ago, I finally decided that I needed to do something about it and I didn't want to be alone all my life. So first thing I did was come out to my pastor. I had a very good experience, she was very accepting, very supportive. One of the reasons I went to her was because I determined that I was going to come out, and I was going to come out to as many people as I determined to, and I didn't want there to be problems in the church. So I came out to her and, as I said, she was very supportive. I told her that I thought I should drop out of all the committees, and she said that was not an option. That God would take care of that. Go ahead.

B- Oh, I was just going to ask, when you say that you kind of decided at 27 to finally start living this way, was it that before, you felt you were consciously suppressing it, or?

J- It was actually from 27 to 47, I didn't come out to anybody. It was when I was 47 that I came out to everybody. From 27 to 47, even though I knew I was gay, I was living in Caribou, Maine. I didn't know anybody, it didn't seem like there would be anybody out there that would be a role model or anybody I could connect with. So I just kind of lived my life alone for 20 years. And then at 47, I determined I was going to come out, and that's when I talked to my pastor. And, again, mostly I determined I just didn't want to live my life anymore. Until I was 27, I had a lot of friends, did a lot of stuff, from 27 to 47, I was pretty much just involved with the church. Those were my friends other than some people at work. Finally at 47, I was like, well what am I going to do. Am I going to live alone all my life? I don't want to live alone all of my life.

B- And you said your pastor was really supportive about it. I know that a lot of the time, religious communities can be pretty opinionated about homosexuality, have you experienced any sort of discrimination?

Profession, social life

Coming out, Methodist Church

J- I have never personally. Neither in my business world or in church. I never heard it preached against from the pulpit. I did hear whisperings in the back about different people in town. But after I started coming out, it was only a matter of three years from the time I came out up there before I moved to South Portland, or to the Portland area. So, but in the meantime, I've gone back to that church a few times and I've always been welcomed with open arms. And I'm sure everybody knows. I'm out on Facebook.

B- So you did feel that the community in Portland was especially welcoming?

J- Yes, definitely. I found lots of friends here, I spent a whole summer coming back and forth. I think I made 9 trips one summer before I decided to move down here. I needed to discover what kind of community I wanted to live in: Whether I wanted to live totally open, whether I wanted a partner that was totally open whether I was going to get involved in the bar scene, whether I was going to get involved in other organizations. I just needed to spend a lot of time with that.

B- And, if you don't mind, can I ask what your relationship with your family has been like?

J- Excellent. When I decided to come out, I knew, I thought, I shouldn't say "I knew", I thought there was a possibility I would lose my brother, for instance. He's quite conservative, he's a farmer, he's, y'know, all-american heterosexual male. But, he cried when I told him and he gave me hugs, and we talk on the phone constantly. My partner goes up there and if for some reason we don't go up North together they're always asking us what's going on. I do have a story about my father when we get to that point but it also was a very good experience.

B- Oh, we can talk about that now if you'd like.

J- Ok, well I came out, so I was 47 when I came out to everybody. First I came out, as I said to my pastor. Then I came out to my sister, because my sister is 15 years younger, and we've always been very close. I knew that she would not turn her back on me. She's

Portland

Family life

always been a little bit open, and obviously she's younger, she's in another generation, so, y'know I felt she wouldn't.. Sure enough she was fine with it. One of the funny things about that was that she, she said to several people, when she talked about her brother, this was before I had come out to her. When she talked about her brother people would say, "Is he gay?", cause I liked theater and I liked to travel, I liked cities, I dressed.. y'know, probably differently than people in Aroostook County dressed. Although, I always think.. I didn't want to stand out. So I might've dressed well, but I didn't dress flashy. I didn't want anybody to know that I was gay. So when I did come out, I bought rings and necklaces [laughs], and bracelets. But in any case, she said all kinds of different people would say "is your brother gay?", "Noo he's not gay, he just hasn't every found anybody!" So I came out to my sister, then I came out to my brother, and then we determined that when it came time to come out to my mother, everybody needed to know when. The exact day, so that she would have some support. So my pastor was on call [laughs], for the night I was going to do it. My sister, my brother, everybody was on call. So I come out to my mother, and it was different. I don't think she believed it, at first. For some reason she heard.. because here I was, 47, and I really hadn't had, when it comes right down to it, I hadn't had sex with a man before. I mean I had, but they were one night stands, and I don't consider it the same thing. So we didn't really talk about sex but I said I had never really been with a man. So somehow she heard that I was gay but I didn't like men. So she, a couple days later, she called me and said "I want to know something, why do you say you're gay if you don't like men?". I was like, "where did you get that?", "wasn't that what you told me?".. " no Mom, I didn't tell you I didn't like men. I said I really hadn't had a relationship with a man". And, really, in my own mind, I hadn't really had sex with a man. And, I mean, obviously I wasn't going to go into detail with my mother, but you know, obviously, she heard what she wanted to hear. She was hoping that there would be a little.. you know. But then eventually everything was fine, our whole family discussed it. Except for my father, she didn't want me to come out to my father. And we had a deal that I would honor her wishes until such time that I had a relationship. Once I was in a relationship, and it looked like a relationship that was going to go somewhere, I was going to come out to my father. So about 8 years went by, and everybody in the family knew, except my father. Obviously my father knew, because at one point I was in a relationship, I was living with someone and we talked about it in front of my father. Still didn't come out to my father. But when my current spouse and I bought a house, we bought a bed, we had everybody here. My father was here. We talked about the new bed we bought. Obviously he knew, so we weren't really hiding anything. But I still didn't officially come out to him. So 5 years ago, when my spouse and I got married, we determined that my father was going to have an option to come to my wedding. I wasn't going to get married and not invite my father. Everybody else in the family was invited everybody was going to be

Coming out

here. So we went back and forth about how it was going to happen and I said, "I want to come out and talk to him, I think I should tell him", "No I think I should do it." I said, "well, if that's what you think then I guess that's alright, I'm not convinced that that's the right thing to do." So, one night she told him. We had about three weeks, we got married kind of at the last minute, for several different reasons, economically for one of them. It was one month after the law had changed. So we had three weeks so, one day, about two weeks before we got married, she talked to my father and she said "Jeff and Rick are looking at getting insurance and there's a possibility that if they get married" .. oh no, actually she came out to him first and said, "you know that Jeff's gay right? He and Rick are partners." And he said, "yeah, I think that's quite obvious isn't it?" She said, "okay, I just wanted to make sure you knew." So two or three nights later, she waited, and she said, "well there's a possibility that Jeff and Rick can save about 700 dollars on their insurance if they get married, I mean because that's just the way it works. He can put Rick on his insurance." Dad said, "well, if they can save some money they ought to do it." [laughs] So then, another week goes by and she said, "I guess Jeff and Rick are going to get married, what do you think, do you think we should go?" He said, "Of course we should go! He's my son isn't he?" So, first she hit him with the pocketbook! [laughs] "He can save some money." [laughs] So, I was 62 he was 82.

B- And can I ask, did you have a lot of friends when you were young that you still have today that reacted well to it as well?

J- Not a lot. There are a couple of high school classmates that I've come out to. I mean, they all know, but two of them in particular. Both girls that I've come out, I didn't realize it at the time, but it ends up that both of their sons are gay. So that obviously worked out quite well, I didn't have any problem. One of them though, was a girl that I dated in 8th grade. And we went to a Methodist [laughs].. She was Catholic, but I invited her to a Methodist Youth Fellowship party that we had. And then, for some reason we're both mixed up about the fact that we also went to the movies once. But I mean, I guess you can't say we dated but [laughs]. In any case, we always joke about that. She was my first kiss and I was her first kiss [laughs].

B- And what was that experience like for you, having dated women when you were younger, in retrospect.

Coming out, Family life

Childhood friends

J- In retrospect? I think it was.. I don't know.. for a long time, I was dating woman because I thought, well it could be a phase. That was when I was quite young and up until I was in college. Then when I dated in college it felt a little uncomfortable, but I never had sex with a woman. Even though I dated. I was engaged also, to a woman. And it's a little bit of an odd experience right now, she's my sister in law's best friend, so I still see her every once in a while. We dated about.. I think I was 27 cause that's when I determined that I couldn't do it anymore. So we dated for about 6 months.. we went to two hospital, she worked in the hospital with my sister in law, we went to two hospital Christmas parties. So I started dating her just before Christmas one year, and we were supposed to get married sometime after Christmas the next year or in January. So, the day that we had to order.. and again, I dated this girl for a year and we never had sex. We slept in the same bed and we never had sex. So she must've known I would think, but in any case, she had a son. She was an unwed mother and she had a son and somehow in my whatever mind, I thought well, if I get married I can have a child and not have to have sex with a woman. Obviously there was a flaw there [laughs]. But, in any case, the printer called us and said that we had to set a date, because the next day would be the last day that they could print the invitations in time. Because we had chosen.. we had this window of two week that we knew it was going to be.. after Christmas some time and maybe the first week of January. And when that crunch time, I knew I couldn't do it. That was in the days of CBs, you probably don't even know what a CB is. They were radios and you could talk on them to people, a lot of people had them in their cars. I had one, for some reason, only because everybody else had one, and I knew 3 or 4 people who had them and so I had one. And I sat in my car for two hours one night talking to people about.. and I didn't come out to them but I told them that I loved the girl, but I wasn't in love with the girl, and I knew it was the wrong thing to do and how could I break up the relationship. My mother and her mother had both bought their dresses already for the wedding. How did I get in that position and how could I.. and everybody was just like, you just have to do it you just have to do it.

B- Through the coming out process, did you have any gay friends that were kind of a strong support for you?

J- One, a little bit. A distant relative that was quite a bit younger. I can't say it was a strong support but, he knew a lot of people in the area, I was still in Aroostook

Dating, engagement

Love

County at the time, so we started.. there was a group of us, there were a couple of doctors actually who weren't originally from there and shall remain unnamed. I don't think they're there anymore anyways, so it doesn't really matter. There were a couple of doctors, a couple of other business people, there was myself and this younger kid that was a very distant relative. We all used to go to dinner about twice a month, every other week we would either go to dinner or we would go bowling or we would go to the movies. More often than not it was to dinner. So that helped me a lot. To some degree it also helped me determine that there were very few people that were up there that would interest me and that I just needed to get somewhere where there was, you know, more people to get to meet and know.

B- And if you don't mind, if we can go back to the Methodist church for a while, would you say that, on a personal level, that your spirituality has been pretty important to you throughout your life?

J- Yes, it has. I continued to here for a while and.. I don't know why I stopped actually. I really need to go back. It's been a very peaceful time for me, being in church. I like the sermons, I like the singing, especially the singing, in the Methodist Church. It's really, generally, an open church, although nationwide it isn't, but in New England it's open and accepting. Some areas of the country, just like areas of the country are more conservative [partner asks question], so yeah I have a lot of spirituality.

B- So what has your involvement in the local gay community been like? Can you tell me about some areas which you feel you were especially a part of and that you enjoy around here?

J- I haven't been really that involved, there was just, when I first started coming out there was a group called Casco Gay Men. They met at Williston-West Church once a week on Mondays, and I was still traveling back and forth from Aroostook county to Portland. I was luck, I was a manager so I could write my own schedule. And I would work Tuesday at noon and I would work until Saturday at noon and then I would take Sunday and Monday off. And then I would return so, as I said, I think there were nine weekends that I came down here to learn so, I went to that group quite often, so I met a lot of people there. That's really the only

Social life

Spirituality

Casco Gay Men, Portland

involvement other than the bar scene that I've had. I mean I met a lot of people through the bar scene, I made some strong relationships through the bar scene, there were a lot of people from Casco Gay Men who ended up going into the Portland Gay Men's chorus so I know quite a few of those guys also. Some of them also through the bar scene. I know I marked the parade, I've asked to be in certain sections of the parade before, Casco Gay Men marched one year before they broke up. I was asked to help carry the flag a couple of years just through people I knew, not specifically through organizations. I feel like I should do more for organizations and I feel like I should do more for the community. This is one of the reasons I really wanted to do this project.

B- When did they break up?

J- I don't really know to tell you the truth. Once I moved down here, the following summer, I was going for a while that winter and then the following summer they didn't have any more meetings so. That would've been around 2000 I guess, they broke up and I don't know how long they were going before that. I know they were, they've splintered up, there's a couple different, I think the SAGE group, one of them went to SAGE. Some of them went to.. I can't remember the name of the other organizations but.

B- And you mentioned the bar scene, would you like to talk about your experience in Ogunquit, for example?

J- Yeah I spent, as I said, 9 years coming here and I had never been in a gay bar in my life, never. It was I guess one of the first places, even though I was told that even though The Front Porch was a gay bar, that there were a lot of straight people there singing at the bar, and it would be probably the easiest place to go to first so I went there, probably first. And the funny thing is that, when I came to Portland the following week, I decided I was going to go to Blackstones, I walked back and forth and back and forth, I don't know how many times, before I decided, well I'm going to do this, I'm not just going to walk by. But I didn't find, when I was in Ogunquit I didn't have any problems going in, I guess because of how people had described it. I also went, at Ogunquit I went early at about 4 or 5 o'clock. So it was obvious there were other people in there, so it wasn't like I felt.. Of course, now I'm later in life, I hardly ever go to a bar, I hardly ever.. you

Social life, community

SAGE

Gay bars, The Front Porch,
Blackstones, Ogunquit

know we go to Ogunquit, we go in and have one drink and we go and do something else. We go to Blackstones twice a year, maybe three times a year, we stop in for a drink. Of course, times have changed in the bar scene, haven't they. There isn't that need anymore, because you can go almost anywhere and be yourself and not worry about it. The night we got married we went to straight bars with friends, the people that stood up with us, they were a straight couple, and we danced together. And nobody.. a couple people actually said "did you just get married?", of course we had suits on and we were dancing together "did you get married? Oh wonderful".

Marriage

B- And do you feel that that's an entirely positive thing or do you feel there are aspects that have been lost, of having that kind of separate community?

J- I wouldn't say it's totally positive, but I think it's positive. I would generally say it's positive. It's too bad cause, there's still a need for that connection, I think, to other gay men, there's still a need for the connection and not to be.. y'know, but I don't think it's necessary to have it to the degree it used to be. I think, matter of fact when I went into Blackstone's sometimes I'm like, can't you get those black windows off and get the windows open?

Community

B- Would you like a to talk a little bit.. did you say your partners name is Rick?

J- Yes.

B- Would you like to talk a little about how you guys met and how long you've been together?

J- We've been together about 15 years, we've been married for 5. We've lived in this house for 13.. 14, so we've been together 16 years, sorry [laughs]. We met, it was a little strange actually. When I first came down to Portland, when I first moved to Portland, my brother in law was, my sister's husband, was involved with an organization and he had just left there to go to another company, and he went back one day, there was a get together and they invited him. Somehow in the conversation I came up, and he said, "So does anybody know any single gay men that my brother

Partner

could hook up with?" This one girl that he had worked with raised her hand and she says, "I know somebody, he's my hairstylist and he's single, I don't think he's dating and I think he's a wonderful guy." So my brother in law got his name, called me up even [laughs], "found someone that you might be interested in!" So, I said okay, I got his name and I started asking around. So one of the people from Casco Gay Men was dating him at the time, somebody that I knew pretty well was dating him [laughs]. He says, "I know him, but I'm afraid I'm dating him right now." "Oh, Ok." So, a couple years went by and I was walking down the street, so this guy that he had been dating, now they weren't dating, but they were living in the same building. The guy from Casco Gay Men owned the house and Rick rented the apartment upstairs. So, Rick was coming out and he had a brand new little puppy dog, and he was walking with two other friends. And I was headed toward Blackstones actually, because it was right there. And just "Oh my God, the little puppy!", and I knew who he was because, you know, some people had told me who he was and I had been introduced to him before. So we talked a few minutes and they went their way and I went my way. Rick got my name confused, he thought I was somebody else, so he asked his landlord, he said "I was just standing outside, I think you walked by the window, do you know who that was I was talking to?" He told him and he said, "Would you give me his number?" "You know him don't you? Would you give me his number?" And he gave me his number and we had, I guess, a date a couple weeks later, and it went pretty well [laughs]. So we dated about a year and we lived together about a year and then we bought the house.

B- And you have written here the name Tom, would you like to talk about..

J- I've forgotten why I put that down [laughs], to tell you the truth. There are a couple of different Toms but I can't tell you why I put that down. One of my roommates was Tom, but we were not romantically linked, and his.. maybe it had something to do with Blackstones. When Rick and I were dating there was a friend of his named Tom and he was here to visit for a short time, and it was another one of Rick's exes. He's remained friends with a lot of his exes, he's managed to do that quite well. So, I was in the bar at Blackstone's, this Tom was sitting there and he was talking to the bartender and he was talking to some other guys that he know because he was living in Florida. He had been in Florida about 4 years and he came up every summer for a while. So he was talking to everybody and he said he was living at Rick's! And everybody's, "Rick, Rick Elias?" I went, "I know Rick Elias, Rick and I are dating. Tom goes, "ooh, you're Jeff!" [laughs]. I said, "Yes, I wonder how come he hasn't introduced us!", he said the

same thing! "I wonder how come he hasn't introduced us!" So I don't really know if that's the reason I put it in there but it's a cute little story.

B- You said you had a good experience at the Portland Parade? Can you say a little bit about what that was like for you?

J- Yeah, I really think the Pride Parade is awesome, I think it makes.. I mean.. you just see what support you get from this community. It's the biggest parade in town isn't it. The biggest parade of the year, it really is and it brings out so many people, the festival is awesome, the flag, I understand there's some.. a little bit of problems with people feeling the rainbow flag is an issue and I think they're working on that. But, in my own mind, the flag.. the rainbow flag is important because it kind of brought us all together to where we are now. You don't want to just forget about the rainbow flag in order to have all of the other flags.. you know, obviously they can be all included, and they need to be all included but that's kind of a whole different issue I kind of got off track there but I feel that the festival is an awesome awesome awesome event.

B- And have you spent a lot of time in other cities? Can you talk a little bit about how Portland relates to maybe other major cities, or not major cities but other smaller cities you've been in?

J- Smaller, or? Smaller cities? I haven't been in any smaller cities where I've seen the support. Bangor has a pretty good support, of course, having been from Aroostook County, I kind of just skipped Bangor [laughs], I skipped over Bangor and came, basically, right to Portland. That first summer that I had told you that I was coming here for 9 weeks, they also had a pride parade in Portland. I didn't come to the Portland Pride Parade, they had a Bangor Pride, and I didn't go to the parade, but I went to a dance afterwards in Bangor. I feel they have, I think they have support, of course they have a much smaller community and it's harder to.. it's too bad people couldn't experience more.. the bigness makes you feel more comfortable I feel, for one thing. You're more able to, I don't know, be hidden I guess. If that's what you need. At first I think there's a lot of people who need to not just come right out, and need to experience the love and the compassion that happens with a bigger city. I've spent time in Provincetown, NYC and some of the bars and Miami and some of the bars.. Key West, and some time

Portland Pride Parade

Bangor Pride, City life

in San Francisco. The bigness helps, in my mind. You know, if you're really struggling to come out, I think, being somewhere that there's a lot more people you can see that, " Oh, this is alright. Why am I scared?"

B- Well I think that's really cool that you found the community you were looking for here.

J- Yeah, I did.

B- I'm gonna look at the time here. Let's see is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

J- I don't think so, I don't. I guess, the one thing I would like to say the most is that I feel that it really is a good thing for people to come out. I know it's difficult, I know some people just, there's no way it can be done, and there needs to be support in smaller towns for people who are having difficulty. I know that that's not easy because, some places just don't accept it. It's not safe, necessarily. Younger people who are not comfortable in their own skin need a support system and I really strongly believe that. And the more they see that other people have come out, the more they role models available, or role models that they can see that are not afraid to be who they are, then I think that, obviously it's better for everybody.

B- Alright awesome, well just thank you so much for this, and we really appreciate it..

J- No problem, thank you.

B- I'll stop the recording.

Coming out