

HC: Okay we are now recording

RC: We're live! From USM campus in Portland Maine

HC: Yes. My name is Hannah Cain H-A-N-N-A-H C-A-I-N Could you say your name and spell it?

RC: my name is Ralph Cusack R-A-L-P-H C-U-S-A-C-K

HC: Thank you for being interviewed and at any time, just so you know, if there's any questions you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer them we'll skip them.

RC: Okay

HC: Um, so can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where and when were you born?

[Laughter]

HC: If you don't want to say when you born the decade

RC: No that's okay. I was born in 1955. I'm 63 years old. I was raised on Peaks Island, Moved off Peaks when my mom and dad divorced in '67. Uh, grew up here in Portland, got away from Portland in '73 when I dropped out of school and joined the navy. Met my first partner after I got out of the navy he was stationed in Brunswick and we moved to St. Lewis. I met my second partner while we were in St. Lewis and moved back to Ohio and then back to

Introductions and location

Bibliographical information

Portland in 1980. That just ended five years ago after 32 years.

HC: Okay, and when did you move to southern Maine? South Portland I think you had said

RC: Yeah I just moved across the bridge after my husband and I divorced I lived on State (?) Street, still owned Blackstones on Pine Street And lived on State Street for about a year and a half, and found a house to rent, got a roommate and moved across the bridge four.... This is our 5th Christmas in the house.

HC: That's lovely. So you had written down on the sheet that you had wanted to talk about employment. And in particular, fighting for your job.

RC: Yeah I actually, It's funny too, about two weeks ago I had that conversation with the son of the man I had to fight with my job for. He's now running the business. So uh, back in the early days of AIDS, before testing was, around, and available, I was diagnosed HIV positive, by symptoms alone. By uh, Dr. Owen Pickus (?) Who has become the Maine authority on HIV. I should've sued his butt. But then the ali blot came out, but during that period I was working at a marina in South Portland and the owner, I won't use his name I'll just call him Bob, was uh, a very nice guy. And everyone I worked with was a nice guy, until they realized that I *could be* HIV positive. And he had his three sons working there and he was afraid for them. So I had to prove

Living in Portland

HIV diagnosis, Dr. Pickus

Struggles with diagnosis affecting employment

myself to uh, to keep my job. And there were a lot of restrictions; I couldn't eat after anybody, nobody could eat or drink the soda after me. It was the early years, of fear.

HC: Right.

RC: But I had to prove myself. And I did, and we stayed on good terms. And now I'm dealing a project with uh, his middle son, now whos, over there running the marina. Um, about helping a build, doing a build on a theater project in South Portland.

HC: Oh Nice

RC: Yeah, so it all worked, it all worked. It was scary, and like I said then the alia blot came out, the first test, and I know I was negative, and I'm still negative to this day.

HC: That must have been really stressful Finding, you know having the symptoms, but also on top of that having your workplace..

RC: Well you deal with, when, HIV positive or AIDS at the time, we didn't call it HIV uh, was prevalent and unknown and it was a big fear. Uh, I feared for my relationship I was in a relationship. Uh, I feared for my job, I just feared for my own life. My friends are dropping around me, how long is it gonna take for me? You know when you're looking for all the early symptoms which are numosystic pneumonia, uh karposi sarcoma, skin lesions, and every time you get a blemish it like, is that? It's like, no it's not, thank you. So yeah, it was a pretty scary

HIV status

Fears with diagnosis

time. I don't know if that's the kind of things you're looking for.

HC: Yes, it is that's perfect. Um, so you were living in Maine at that time?

RC: Yes. living in Portland.

HC: and that obviously had an impact on your job. What did you see any impacts of the uh, AIDS epidemic at that time in the LGBTQ community around you?

RC: Oh a lot. There was a lot of impact. Uh, fear was the biggest this because a lot of it was unknown. So nobody knew what to think. Um, Christmas was hard. This time of year was really hard. You'd send out uh (pause) sorry.

HC: It's okay

RC: You'd send out Christmas cards [pause] uh, I realize that wasn't picked up. But Christmas cards would come back. "Deceased", undeliverable. God that was a long time ago.

HC: That must have been really hard.

RC: God I hadn't thought about that in a long time. But uh, yeah owning a bar, being in the gay community, being an active member of the gay community, leather community, uh, sorry,

HC: No that's fine.

Impacts of the AIDS epidemic on the LGBTQ community

RC: I wasn't anticipating this. Uh, I, I saw a lot. We saw a lot. My husband at the time was in health care. So he's trying to gather as much inside information as he can on AIDS. and uh, and and the, I won't mention his name, it's on file somewhere I'm sure, but uh, he converted in '87, he became HIV positive in '87. Still alive, still living with it.

As the expression goes now, you don't die from it, you live with it. But just seeing families torn apart. Uh, people isolated. Ah, it was difficult. And then the names project developed. Um, there's a woman here in town, Deb Freeman, her and I started the names project, Maine. Making quilts, for people who didn't have the uh, availability for materials and we hosted workshops that they could bring their stuff in and we'd help them do it. I've made nine, quilts. Um, and probably would still make more if it was a thing but, its not. But the impact on the community again isolation was a big one. Families turning people out. You know it was bad enough growing up, coming out as gay and then families would say, well then get the hell out of this house, you know? Then you're on the street that never happened to me, I was very fortunate I had a great family. I came out at the age of 13. Uh, but uh, just to find out that you're HIV positive and be rejected by your family, you have this life threatening disease that very little is known about. And then to be pushed out, is uh, I think is the worst, thing that ever happened in the early AIDS epidemic. Until more knowledge was known and still not everything is known about it. I'm rambling, sorry.

AIDs and its impact on romantic partner

Deb Freeman

Quilts project

HC: No that's fine. What was, can you tell me a little more about the quilt and the names project?

RC: Oh! The names project. I absolutely *loved* working on that. Deb Freeman is, she still sews, she's a big sewer. I'm a tailor, by navy training, and my grandmother taught me to sew. You know with the (?) machine, and she'd teach me things. Sewing was always a passion of mine. And again I

became a tailor in the navy. Uh, so I still liked sewing. And her and I got together, she's a storyteller now. She gets together- you know Deb?

RC: I don't but I've heard her name.

RC: Yeah she's a great storyteller. An amazing storyteller, so animated. She's wonderful to watch and listen to. But uh, her and I were introduced by um, a man named Tom Lions.(?) He was with the P.W.A. coalition at the time, which is the People With AIDS coalition in Portland. Eventually that got absorbed into the AIDS project which became the Freeman Peabody center for AIDS. you know it was that whole conglomeration that pulled together. But we started the names project and we got together and we gathered materials and fabrics and sewing machines and we hosted workshops for people to come in and make their quilts so they could remember. And submit them. Have you ever seen the quilt?

HC: I have not.

Names Project

Deb Freeman

P.W.A., AIDS Coalition, Freeman Peabody Center

RC: Oh! My god it's, it's breathtaking to look at. It's huge! It's absolutely huge. It's first display in its entirety, in D.C. took up almost the entire mall between the Lincoln memorial and the White House. And now it's so big in its entirety, it can't be displayed anywhere. It has to be in pieces. Parts of it have come to Maine several times, they, when you request a display, they try to send uh, panels that, they're- each panel consists of was it, two, four, six, eight names panels. A names panel is three foot

by six foot. So these are twelve foot by twelve foot squares. And they try to find regional names to send to you.

HC: That's nice

RC: So families can come and say, of there's my son, there's my husband, there's my wife, whatever. Um, it's an amazing, it's an amazing piece.

HC: That is amazing. Um, During that time period, un during the AIDS epidemic, did you feel that there was support and resources for people who were diagnosed?

RC: In the early days, no, there wasn't. Because so little was known about it. It was a mystery and it didn't even have a name. For a long time. It's just this disease that was killing homosexual men. And men in Africa, and they finally made that connection. But it didn't have a name for a long time it didn't have a diagnosis for a long time. The treatment was even, for the beyond the

Names Project quilt history

name, so there were no resources, there were support. There were support groups. Uh, again the P.W.A. coalition started out of the need for support the Peabody Center, obviously out of that same need. Franny, have you ever read anything on Franny?

HC: I haven't.

RC: Oh she's an amazing woman. Uh, her son, her older son, her grandson, Johnathon Currier (?) We called him 'Elf' or 'Imp'. and uh, he was uh, he was her reason for starting. He died from AIDS. His mother, her daughter, wrote *The Screaming Room*. If

you've not read that your really should. Uh, it's, what a family would go through or what a mother would go through. When their child was diagnosed HIV positive. So it, The Screaming Room was an apt name for it, because there was time you just wanted to seclude yourself and just let it go and start screaming.

HC: Looking back, at that time period, what resources do you feel *were* needed that weren't available? And do you think those resources are available to the community now?

RC: Well, the obvious thing back then was the lack of medications for an unknown disease. You don't know what it is so you don't know how to treat it. It's all test, it's all trial so there was the big block right there. And fundings for studies, and stuff like that. Again local support, people, I know people that moved to Maine just for the support that they could get up here, from Early AIDS support groups

Peabody Center

The Screaming Room

other states like the southern states who were much more homophobic. To come up here and find a hug when you needed a hug. Or a shoulder when you needed a shoulder. People couldn't find that in the south and they came up here. But uh, again, a disease that wasn't, that had very little known about it, and no idea how to treat it, people were just dying from this mysterious disease. And they would die commonalities. Become disfigured with Kaposi sarcoma. Which was an old, Jewish man illness. That was the only place it was ever seen. And now it's appearing in all these people. And pneumocystic pneumonia. A lot of people died from pneumonia. They can treat pneumonia,

but numosystic pneumonia was new. And uh- I'm babbling, I'll get back on subject.

HC: That's fine! That must have been incredibly scary to, for so many people to be dying and getting so sick and not knowing the cause.

RC: I uh, actually lost my insurance, one time.

HC: Oh wow.

RC: My insurance was cancelled. Uh, I was hospitalized, with, bilateral pneumonia. Just pneumonia in both lungs. My doctor at the time, same doctor, had written in my file, '*no fear of AIDS at this time*'. And uh, the insurance company got a hold of that and just, nope. We're not covering you anymore, here's your premiums back, you pay your own damn bill. Yeah, there was a lot of shit

AIDS symptoms

Impacts of AIDS on personal life

that really went on, and it was all out of fear. It was all out of fear.

HC: Yeah, that's unbelievable having your insurance dropped just because of that.

RC: Yep. I hope I answered your question.

HC: Yes you did, definitely.

Y Because you asked the same question rephrased, differently.

HC: You had mentioned that you owned a bar.

RC: I did.

HC: Is that Blackstones?

RC: That was Blackstones, it still is Blackstones. I don't own it, but it's still there.

HC: Um, how long did you own it for?

RC: I owned it for 27 years. It opened in '87 and I was the manager, and I bought it in '92. We bought it, my husband and I. My name was on it, like I said, my ex is a medical professional, and required medical liability insurances on himself. And should anything ever happen to him in a medical setting, they could take the house. The house was in his name. But they couldn't attach the bar. The same thing with liquor liabilities. If something happened at the bar, and they attached it for damages, they couldn't go to the house. We kept them

Owning Blackstones bar

Purchase and early ownership of Blackstones

separated. But everybody knew that uh, my husband and I were partners in the whole thing. So, but uh, no it was fun. It made such a resource to do things in the community. I loved doing community support. I absolutely love it. Uh in fact, tomorrow, what are you doing for Thanksgiving tomorrow?

HC: Um, I'm not sure yet.

RC: Alright, well do you know where lyric theater is in South Portland? Over on Sawyer street? My roommate and I are hosting a dinner for anybody who doesn't have anything to do.

HC: Oh that's wonderful!

RC: So uh, we're gonna start gathering about 1 o'clock, there in the kitchen. It's a small thing so have the turkey and stuff like

that ready. And gonna eat around three. So if you find yourself in South Portland, come on over, stop by.

HC: Oh that would be wonderful, thank you.

RC: Theater group can be quite colorful. But back to the bar, uh,

HC: So you saw it start, you were there when it-

RC: Right after it opened. I wasn't there when it opened. I was aware of it opening, and I knew the owners. I was actually, I wasn't tending bar, I was tending bar and I wasn't tending bar. I was, there was, do you

Opening of Blackstones

know where Flask is now? When that opened uh actually that's a lie too - How far back do you want to go in that space of history?

But when Blackstones opened it was called The Chartroom. Chartroom Saloon and uh, I was tending bar there. And uh, they, needed somebody at Blackstones so I jumped in. Alright I'm even gonna go back a little further. It opened in '87 but what I used to call the dark summer of '88. Was when my husband met someone else and moved to Springfield Massachusetts, and uh, loaded up the truck, bye, met somebody younger, cuter, whatever. And then a month later asked if he could come back. But during that period I needed additional income.

HC: Right.

RC: So I took a job tending bar at Blackstones. And then I started at The Chartroom, that's how it worked, yeah. I was doing part time at The Chartroom uh,

and then they made me manager at Blackstones. It was about a year, a little bit more than a year after it opened when I started management.

HC: Um, what, to you, is the significance of gay bars in the LGBTQ community? And what role have they played in your life?

RC: Well they used to be a safe haven. It used to be a place you could go and be yourself. And not worry about ridicule. Which was really funny because the gay community is so fractured. We are a community with so many facets. And, I hate

Flask

Chartroom Saloon

Gay bars and their significance in the LGBTQ community

to say, that there's actually bigotry amongst ourselves. Uh, I could go on that too, but as far as the bars go it used to be a safe haven. And now they're not needed anymore. The uh, the community now, and I'm not even going to say the gay community, but the younger community now, just don't care. They go where they wanna go, and you be who you wanna be, and the people around you are being who they wanna be, and it's okay. So, yeah uh, but Blackstones is being maintained, by a straight man, uh, the owner is gay, he was one of my bartenders. That's why I sold it to him, he understood the legacy and the history and the community involvement, that I developed. Um, and uh, now he has a straight man, uh managing it who's doing a great, great job with it - uh Carl- he's uh, he understands, more, I think, about the legacy of Blackstones than Matt, the owner, does. Um, but he's making a safe haven. He's actually done some facebook public announcements that, if you're coming through these doors, this is your list of behavioral requirements. You can't do this, you can't do that, you can't do this. And it

protects both sides. It protects everybody who comes through the door. You know, you see a cute man you don't grab his ass. He might be straight. He might not like that. And he probably won't. So, but he sees that, he sees that.

HC: Yeah. That's important

RC: It is! It's very important to feel secure, where you can go a relax and just cut loose. You know, Blackstones has a drag crowd, a

Younger LGBTQ community and gay bars

Importance of appropriate bar behavior

leather crowd, a transgender crowd, a straight crowd, a neighborhood crowd, it's a, I always classified it as a gay neighborhood bar. It's on the West end, a lot of the West end people would come in after work and grab a beer, or grab a pizza when we were doing pizza or some type of food that we were doing. So it's always been a very mixed bar, but gay first. But gay first.

HC: Um a lot of uh, gay bars in the LGBTQ history have had um, you know acts of prejudice done against them. Was there anything like that you ever experienced while you owned Blackstones?

RC: If you look at Blackstones now from the outside, all the windows are boarded up. Uh, Blackstones has two main rooms facing it. The room on the left, is a pool room. Uh, and that had four, full glass windows in it. And it did when I started there. But they kept getting broken out. Which got very costly to replace. So they got boarded up. And then on the, on the barroom side it's got three big front windows, and again those kept getting busted out. And been boarded up and, yeah I mean, at one point, there's a new windbreak outside the front door. But before when the first windbreak went up-it

literally just stopped the wind from rushing in the door, it had a glass panel in it and uh, that got smashed. Even that got ruined. irrelevant to anybody. One time, twice, within two days, I had to repaint the front of the bar because somebody spray painted 'leave the straights alone' across the front of it. And that was a surprise, because that was the nineties. I remember that being in the

Fractions of the LGBTQ community at Blackstones

Prejudice and hate crimes against Blackstones

late nineties. And it shouldn't have happened back then but, it still did. It was still, prejudiced.

HC: Yeah. That must have been, that must have been really tough as the owner to see all that

RC: I took it personally.

HC: Yeah

RC: It was personal to me.

HC: Definitely to a place that was just a safe haven for the community, and to see the backlash.

RC: And again I mean, Blackstones enabled me to do a lot with the community. Uh, and not just the gay community, the neighborhood community, the West end community center. Was uh, owned and operated by Ethan Strimling who's our mayor now. He and I go way back. I supported his causes um, the neighborhood watch, provided them with whistles, flashlights stuff like that. Sure it had Blackstones name on it, but 'here, take it, you need it'. So.

HC: That's nice. Um what are the biggest changes you've seen with the gay bars in

southern maine? Since starting as a manager of Blackstones up until now.

RC: Well I think I've already touched on that, that they're almost a white elephant

now. It just, they're not really needed with today's newer generation. Um, that's, okay, I'm gonna go off on a little, whatever. All the fighting that we did over the years for, for gay rights. Um, has become a double edged sword. We, we fought our way up uh, to be recognized and accepted and get our rights. The basic rights, you know the right to marry. You know was a big thing. You love somebody you want to marry them, plain and simple. I don't belong in horse marriage, dog marriage, all that shit. Uh, but then it went, so far beyond that uh, after we established ourselves, and became mainstream and stuff like that. We didn't need the places to be protected. And again, I said today's generation of young people who are old enough to be drinking, especially, just go where they want to go and they're able to be themselves. So it you, we've fought for the right but now we don't need it. (laughs) it's really weird, It's really weird. But it's still nice to have gay identifiable places. Some place that's gonna you know, raise- you must be familiar with Stonewall, the bar in New York and all that?

HC: Yes.

RC: um, it's kind of like when you see a pride flag outside of a business, its, its, more pride than just, gay pride celebration, it's pride in achievement now. That we were able to do this and we can freely express it.

HC: Yeah! Do you have any particular special memory, or a time period from owning Blackstones?

Gay bars and their influence now

RC: God! So many!

HC: Or something significant that stands out in your mind?

RC: From personal celebrations

[loud noise from outside]

RC: Oh! Excuse me

HC: We're losing snow off the roof!

RC: Okay, being attacked. Um, personal celebrations, many parties. Uh, I think what tugs my heartstrings the most is people who come back now and say, 'oh we met here in '89 and it was our first date, and you introduced us!' and it's like, now they're married, you know? Those kind of things. Uh, political celebrations, having Candace Gingrich come up. You know, and opposing her father, Newt Gingrich, in the whole political gay thing. And having city counsel, the entire city counsel, behind that bar. Doing fundraisers for causes. Uh, um, support of other candidates. Uh, oh my god, things that we did for the gay men's chorus. To help them get going. There's a lot of good times. And, I'm writing these down, actually. I started about seven months ago. And uh, I ah it, I, I'm pretty healthy, I don't take any medications, I don't take heart meds I don't take cholesterol meds. I smoke weed and take ibuprofen. And that's all I do. And I do this while I'm stoned. I type while I'm stoned. Um, and it's been about

seven months, I've got about nineteen pages and 33,000 words or something like that.

Candace Gingrich at Blackstones

Uh, but it's what goes through my head and there's no particular chronological order to these events. They're just-as they run through my head, my fingers try to keep up with my brain. Uh, and the-they kind of funny. And a lot of these things I just spoke of are reflected in the stuff I've been writing. So, I'm going off again.

HC: That's wonderful. I like that, that people have come back -

RC: You call it a memoir, is it a memoir?

HC: It is a memoir.

RC: A memory

HC: Um, talking about employment you had said that you had severed in the navy.

RC: I did.

HC: Was it difficult being, being gay and being in the military?

RC: Well it was during the time of don't ask dont tell. Um, Zumwalt. Admiral Zumwalt was in charge of the navy back then. Ah, it wasn't difficult. It became difficult at one point because it- the gays on board the ship came to the forefront. Um, when it was behind the scenes nobody ever spoke of it. Uh, I was on the flagship for the six fleet, I was stationed in Italy. Um, and there were about thirty of us, and we could tell, on board ship. Um, I had a roommate, I had two roommates, both gay. And we had an apartment in Italy. Uh, and there was a new guy came on board ship and everybody

brought him back to the apartment. And, he wasn't.

HC: Oh no!

[laughter]

RC: So a fight broke out. And the land lady who lived downstairs called the carabinieri, the Italian police, and they in turn called the shore patrol. So the whole thing came out, and my two roommates to save their butts, signed affidavits for everybody that was, gay onboard ship. So like, it all just came rushing to the forefront. That there's all these faggots onboard ship. And of course, my name was attached to all that. And so I thought, 'oh Christ I'm gonna need a lawyer'. So I went to uh, I went to legal aid and I spoke to the admiral's lawyer. His legal representative who was another admiral himself. And uh, it, I, I have to laugh he says 'you look me in the eye and tell me you don't suck dork and I'll represent you.' and I, I mimicked him, I said, 'I don't suck dork'. So I was acquitted of being homosexual. But I was sent back to the states. And uh, my records were lost. Seems convenient. And that kind of screwed up my military career. You know I sat for almost six months in Philadelphia with nothing to do that was at the, the back at called, master at arms. And uh, on the base. You know clean compartments, do dutie and stuff like that. And I finally told them, you got my home address, you want

Service in the navy

Stationed in Italy

though, oh yeah he is, he is. He was hot too. And uh, so they took him up got him drunk,

Gay sailors being outed

company, who wasn't. Thank answer the question?

HC: Yes. Um, so you had said earlier,

RC: Oh! And out of that, out of that just prior to all this happening, uh, there's a book that was published called *Conduct Unbecoming* and there was a race riot mentioned in there that happened on board our ship.

HC: Oh wow.

RC: So it wasn't just a gay thing it was, we had the whole race thing too. Uh we slept with wrenches and knives and stuff like that under our pillows expecting, you know, just something to happen. Um, and my best friend on board ship who, was gay, happened to be black. He was a photographer's mate. And we'd just go to the photography shop and lock the door and you know, spend the night in there. Not a sexual thing, just a secure place.

HC: Right. And so it was a lot harder for you know, like for him being gay and black.

RC: Yep, yep.

HC: That must have been, I can't imagine what that must have been like.

me you come get me. So I kinda screwed up my own military career but I enjoyed it. And being gay onboard ship was cool 'till it all came to the forefront. They knew who we were. There was a marine who liked my

Race riots on board ship

Unsafe times on the navy ship

RC: Scary. I was young, foolish. I was seventeen when I went in. So I told my day I said just uh, I twas the family thing, you know. Going between my dad's house, my mom's house. And uh, my brother had gotten out, I have two year older brother. And he did the same thing. He dropped out

and joined the army. And I got my dad, I said, 'Dad I'm seventeen now, I need your signature, sign me up.' Bye. no problem. It was a good thing. I think everybody should go through at least bootcamp. And some sort of military, even a two year program. Just for, for structure.

HC: Um, you had mentioned that there was some fractions within the LGBTQ community um, some prejudices. Now, to sort of relate that, um I had done a little bit of research about The Harbor Masters of Portland Maine.

RC: Yep.

HC: And you had written down that you were the founder.

RC: I am one of the five founders, yes.

HC: That's really wonderful. Um, can you tell me a little bit about how The Harbor Masters came about?

RC: Okay uh, let's see. 1982. There were, I was doing some work, uh where was I? Work wise, I was a waiter at Maria's. And my appendix erupted. So uh, yeah, so, uh while that convalescence happened, two guys who owned a guest house in Ogunquit,

Joining the navy

Harbor Masters of Portland Maine, founding

Tom (?) and Tom St. John, was the tall chimneys came to me and, I've always been out in the community. Everybody knew me so, I guess they came to me and said 'we'd like you to be a bartender for us.' and it was Cycles, where Brian Boru's is now. On Center Street. And uh, I said okay, and I'm still holding my side, went and met with them. And um there was a photographer/writer uh, he's passed now he

died from AIDS, John Preston. Uh, couple amazing books, uh, and an amazing man in himself. Uh, he was our connection to the leather community. He was a friend of Tom and Tom's. Uh, I had not met him until that point. So there was Tom and Tom, John, myself, and my husband Butch. We sat down one day, uh having a leather background- I had a leather background from St Louis when I lived there, uh when I left there I was the vice president of a club like The Harbor Masters- a leather levi club, not motorcycle. Uh, down there so I had a club background, a leather background. My, my husband did too. Uh, John obviously a big leather connection, uh with Drummer, magazine and stuff like that. And he had really good strings to pull uh, so, and we sat down one day and said does Portland need this? Will Portland support this? Is there that much leather around? And yeah the club turns thirty just turned thirty-six.

HC: Nice.

RC: It's still around.

HC: Can you do, I know what it is, but just for the sake of the transcription and the

John Preston

Drummer magazine

Leather community

interview, just a really brief background on what, um, the leather community is?

RC: Oh, what The Harbor Masters are? Well okay, to give the, the body of The Harbor Masters, we are a nonprofit, benevolent fraternity registered with the state of Maine. Basically a bunch of guys who enjoy the look and feel and uh, um, the... image of leather and what it can portray. We like to get together and raise funds for causes. That's who The Harbor Masters are. Uh,

we've become kind of a motorcycle club. A lot of the members have motorcycles now. Uh, some don't, but it's not required. Nor is wearing leather. John Preston, the leather he wore was a belt, and a pair of loafers. That was the leather that he wore. But everybody knew his image from being a photographer and a writer. Ah, in the leather community. It was all there, he just didn't portray it.

HC: Um, were there any difficulties that you faced um, maybe in founding the group,

RC: Oh yes.

HC: And also backlash from the gay community.

RC: Uh, from the gay community? no, but the problem we had when we decided to become incorporated-we formed first. And we started, 'you wanna join? Okay come on' it's very loosely structured. And then we realized we're producing money, for causes so we should become incorporated. And we did. Um, when we filed for our name, it's The Harbor Masters of Portland Maine

Incorporated, is our, is our registered name with the state. The state granted us that. You, you can be this group. And then uh, we got a letter from an attorney, representing the board of harbor commissioners. Saying that it impinged on their job title.

HC: Oh.

RC: Just a job title, lik the police, like you know, it's just a job title. Um, and the secretary said, 'no they don't have to change their name'. And then about four months after that they formed an organization uh,

The Board of Harbor Master Commissioners or something like that. And the state wouldn't give them their name. Because it impinged on ours. So they wrote to us, asking the right to use it and our attorney basically told them, uh yeah, you can use the name, just lay off this one. So yeah, we had some issues with that and that was from the- I don't know if it was straight bias, or if it was just corporate structure, corporate jargon. Uh, impingement on names and stuff like that. But that was kind of a milestone for the gay community back in '82. To, to win that from the state of Maine. No, they can have that name, this is their name, they're gonna keep it.

HC: Yeah, definitely.

RC: But as far as pushback form the gay community, no, we've been welcomed everywhere. Uh, when Cycles closed, uh, we went to The Underground. Which was a dance club. Which was really a twink dance club. And that became our home bar. And

Difficulties naming Harbor Masters

it'd be funny because we'd walk in, in full leather and it would be like parting the red sea the crowd just (gestures)
[laughter]
and let us through. And we were there for a while and then, where did we go after that? Gotta remember. [pause] I don't know. I don't remember. But ah, a little gay bar history, uh, the Spring Street gym was where Flask is now. Uh, that space opened up originally as Michael's it was an after hours bar. And uh, I was still living in St. Louis when it opened. I came up to visit family, and I knew it as an after hours bar. So I grabbed a couple sixteen ounce beers from the store and went in and sat down-I'm all in leather-and I went in and sat down,

opened one up. And I'm just sitting there drinking my beer and I can hear them; 'You tell him!' 'I'm not gonna tell him!'
[laughter] 'You go tell him!' And I'm looking around, oh shit this is a legitimate bar now.
[Laughter]
It like, but that's where the five of us met to form The Harbor Masters, so.

HC: Okay.

RC: Alright!

HC: Have you seen any change in the amount of members over the years of Harbor Masters? Or a change in ages?

RC: Oh! Ages definately and that's very prevalent now. Uh, there's not a lot of young

Flask, Michael's

leather folk coming up. Uh, as far as membership goes, I think in full, active membership, our high was probably around 45. Uh, it's down to about 16 now, active members. Full, active members. Um, we had a guideline that if you lived within a 50 mile radius of Portland you had to be a full member. Outside of 50 miles you could be an associate member, because we wouldn't expect you to participate, you know, to make that distance travel. To come in and function as a full member. So you could be an associate. And then the club did away with that prerequisite so you could be an in town associate. And you could live 200 miles away and be a full member. Uh, but the membership has fluctuated. And again there's not that much of a, young leather community anymore. There's people that say 'I like leather' but you pull out a flogger

and they go, eeeeeee! And they cringe, you know? Yeah it ah, see there's, two SMs in the leather community. There's sadomasochism and then there's stand and model. And a lot of the leather was becoming stand and model. Like, don't I look good? [laughter] They didn't take it seriously, it was just an image. I answer that question?

HC: Yes. Um you had also written down that you wanted to talk about age and sort of the ongoing age difference. Was there anything in particular on that?

RC: It's- you can speak to this also, you, doing this project, uh, let me ask, did you request this project, were you assigned this project, were you given a list of of projects

Changes in Harbor Masters over the years

SM and leather communities

to choose from? And the reason I ask that is um, there is a knowledge gap, a huge knowledge gap between my generation and the new generation now. And granted there's decades of difference in age. But there's a knowledge gap. And the kids today don't know what we went through to give them the right, to walk down Congress Street in drag. Or, or, uh, kiss across the table at Ruskis you know and it's just there, there's what I wanted to speak to.

HC: Yeah definitely. Do you see, like what's the biggest thing with that, that you've seen?

RC: Uh, the biggest thing to that that I've seen, uh, the disappointing thing to that is that they don't want to know. They don't seem to have an interest in knowing their own history. That's disappointing.

HC: Yeah. Had you been involved in um, the film Bar Stories that I know Wendy Chapkis,

RC: She tried, she tried to get me into that. My work schedule I do, four 12s. I do Friday through Monday. And uh, I'm very tired at the end of a day. I have maybe three hours at home before I'm in bed I get up at 1 in the morning I go to bed by 6. Uh, and even on my days off. Uh, living across the bridge seems to be in a different state sometimes. Ah, so she tried to get me involved in that. That's how you and I ended up getting together. She really wanted me in on this. Ah, I know my ex did that. He went into Blackstones and spoke. No idea what it was about or what he talked

Generation age and knowledge gap

Bar Stories project

about or what they asked him but uh, yeah I'm familiar with it.

HC: That had been sort of just the idea of older members of the community sharing their stories and experiences so that it's saved and preserved.

RC: Yeah the last time um, the quilt was here, there was a board discussion, a forum, whatever you want to call it, at the library and I sat and spoke on it. I sat and was part of that discussion. Given a little bit of history in Portland and stuff like that. Has anybody, do you know, I don't, there's only probably three of us that I can think of, qualified to sit down and discuss every gay bar that's been in the city of Portland. And actually it goes beyond that. The Red Carpet in Old Orchard Beach, PJ's in Augusta, uh, The Swan in Lewiston, uh, a lot of places that have come and gone. I have a piece I want to donate to the library uh, I'll get it over here eventually, it hung in

Blackstones for a, a long time um, uh a local person drew this up, it's done in caricature style and it shows the outside of Rowland's Tavern which was Forest Avenue and Cumberland, uh, officially Portland's first gay bar. Which was called Kings and Queens, prior to it becoming Rowlands again, you wanna know bar history, just ask. Uh, and it's a black and white drawing and it says 'what do you remember?' and everybody wrote their remembrances and it's all been framed and under glass and stuff like that. And I have that, it was given back to me and I want to give it to the archives here. But it has a lot of cute memories on it.

Historic, Maine gay bars

HC: Yeah that's really wonderful. So you remember a lot of those early gay bars.

RC: Oh yeah.

HC: Did you go to them?

RC: Oh yeah. I went to Rowlands at seventeen. I've been, I went to Rowlands in my navy uniform right out of bootcamp. I came home and wore my uniform, I was only seventeen. Uh, and drinking age still hadn't turned eighteen at that point. When drinking age became eighteen I was onboard ship. Off from Crete. Um, prepared to evacuate American citizens from the local upheaval that they were having. Um, but I actually wore my uniform into there when I was seventeen. I was popular.

[Laughter]

HC: What was um, what was it like having that space um, you know when you were seventeen years old and being able to go?

RC: Well being active navy it was really, like really if-y that I should even be there. Being active navy again it was don't ask don't tell, do I really want to be out in public like this? Let alone in uniform. But in cities uh, it was nice, and I knew a lot of people there. I went to school with them. It's like 'What are you doing here?' 'What are *you* doing here?' ah, um a really good friend of mine, we go back to fifth grade together, we came up to each other there, she was there and I was there. It was like, 'what are you doing here?' 'ahhh I like it here' 'yeah I do

Rowlands bar

Being “out” and active duty military

Finding community at local gay bars

too’ so, yeah she’s lesbian. But uh, that goes back a long time. It was affirming. It was, it was affirmation to walk in and see people you knew and people like you, having a good time.

HC: Yeah. Um, what has been, other than Blackstones, which I’m sure you’re partial to, did you have a favorite bar, in the community? Or maybe out of Maine, because you had lived out of state for a little while.

RC: Ahh, I would have to go to, uh, take it out of state we’ll go back to St. Louis. Uh, the bar that I got my leather background from was Clementines. And uh it was on uh, tenth. I lived on twelf. Close, it was uh tenth and, don’t remember, but it was a couple blocks away. Had a patio out back it was great. You know it was, kind of in city thing. It’s uh South , not deep South of St. Louis but still part of St. Louis of a neighborhood called (?) It’s where the Anheuser Busch Brewery is. And uh a lot of it was immigrant housing for the brewery for the workers at the brewery. And Clementines was in that neighborhood. And that was, formative years for me, so there’s a

lot of fond memories that come out of that as far as a favorite place goes. The support I had, you know the mentoring that I had. Stuff like that. Yeah a lot of fond memories out of there.

HC: Yeah that’s really important to have mentoring.

Clementines, gay bar in St. Louis

RC: Yeah! But keep in mind I enforce this with so many young people, mentors are good, uh, um, who am I trying to think of? Um, you have, when you have somebody in your life that you wanna be like it's called a..? I'm asking.

HC: Oh! A role model?

RC: A role model! Yes Thank you. It's funny I, I think of this a lot. Role models aren't always a positive thing. There are role models that I don't want to be like. There are people, who are a role model, of someone I don't wanna be. And that's not a bad thing. It's not a bad thing that's just the image that you have of yourself and that should form you and shape you.

HC: Do you think that um, being part of like Harbor Masters, has that given you the opportunity to mentor?

RC: Oh yes! Many many times. Excellent question. A lot of people come into the club, uh, with no knowledge. With curiosity. Um, through the university system, my husband and I would host workshops. Um, at the time, prior to uh, equality Maine was the MLGPA and then prior to the MLGPA was the Gay Straight Alliance and the University they were a big

group here on campus. Right here, um, that, that would promote uh, a positive gay image you know and, try and open doors, and avenues, and resources for gay people to come out and just learn and straight people to learn about us and that sort of thing. So

Mentoring younger generation of the LGBTQ community

Importance of role models

Mentoring through Harbor Masters

MLGPA, Gay Straight Alliance

uh, though the University of Maine we would host workshops on it. Through USM.

HC: Okay. Yeah that's nice to be able to give back in that way.

RC: Yeah! That was, I have a lot of good memories.

HC: I think that,

RC: And the people that remember this, I run into people who remember that, 'you know I sat there do you remember me? I was in the corner over there. You were talking about tying up with neckties' And, well people think of that. They think of well now, Fifty Shades of Grey and Fifty More Shades and all that. I have still yet to see any of those movies. Uh, I would probably just sit and laugh through them anyways. Uh, but you think of bondage, okay? Bondage, uh leather, cuffs, straights, I'm sorry husbands and wives have been practicing bondage for a long time. Those neckties come in really really handy. That's all considered bondage, you know? And people don't realize that. You know so once you set your brain around this that's gonna set your avenues to explore deeper things, or stronger things and stuff like that. So that's the stuff we used to like to talk about.

HC: No that's good! Because a lot of people don't necessarily know that.

RC: Yeah a feather is, is a feather is torture. Can you get hurt with a feather? No. can you get hurt with a leather crop? Probably, if it's

Bondage and SM

handled wrong. Uh, SM is not hurting somebody it's causing pain. Pain can be pleasure. Um so, it's never, and I can't say it's never because because there's assholes out there who just don't stop and think, uh, you're not trying to inflict pain. You don't want to hurt somebody. Well you're trying to inflict pain, but in a controlled manner. That is considered pleasure. So, and people think a feather, oh how is a feather gonna hurt? It's not, but it's still torture. The person that you're using a feather on does not have control-you do. Therefore, it is sadomasochism. Alright, okay sorry.

HC: No that was good. Um, I think you had also written down activism. Was that something that you were,

RC: Oh good god

HC: Or something that you...

RC: Protests in D.C., yeah, marches in D.C. uh, marches here in Portland. Did a little CD a little civil disobedience. Um, yeah just the 70s and early 80s there was a lot of that going on.

HC: Did you, you participated in those marches in the 70s and the 80s what ones did you participate in and what was that like?

RC: the biggest one that I ever attended was, I wanna say it was '87, march on

Washington. Maybe it was '86 I don't know. But, what was it like? It's like- have, you're not gay? You're not lesbian?

SM informational workshops

Participating in protests in the 70s and 80s

1987 march on Washington

HC: I'm bisexual.

RC: You're bisexual okay. So you participate in gay pride?

HC: Yes.

RC: Okay so you understand having gay pride Portland is affirming. To have all these people watching you or you watching all these people that have all these common interests. It's affirmation. Um, went to gay pride San Francisco one year and it just blew Boston out of the water. And you know Boston to me was just, it's amazing to have all these people around! But no San Francisco just blew that out of the water so the march on D.C. uh for rights was, was , the biggest affirmation you can imagine. That it's not just your group of twenty people in Portland Maine, and not another group of fifty people from Boston Massachusetts, it's three million people from all over the country getting together and saying Yes! This is what we need. Uh, yeah I think it was '87 was, was the biggest one that I ever attended in D.C. and again affirmation was just a big part of it. I use that word a lot, I know. It is, it's a very affirming, to know that you're not alone.

HC: Definitely, yeah. I know, that's huge, that's important. And it's wonderful that you were able to be a part of that.

RC: I think so. Yeah. And it, it's somebody, completely unrelated from gay rights, uh, as

ah, going back to the Vietnam war era when I joined the navy it was 'Nam era. I didn't

San Francisco Pride

Boston Pride

go to 'Nam, but 'Nam was still active. Um, and somebody had made, uh, analogy, oh, probably a couple years ago, on facebook, that they don't write protest songs anymore. We're still engaged in all these wars- my skin is so damn dry- they don't write protest songs anymore, uh, is there a need for it? There's still wars going on. Uh, is there still a need for gay rights? I don't wanna call it protest, because we have so much. But There is still places in the country in the state of Maine that it's not, uh, acceptable and uh, it it needs to be reiterated that it this is who we are, we aren't hurting anybody we're just trying to be happy. Uh, the kids today don't want to participate in that. So that is lacking in today's community. Is, is, the urge to get out and, and uh, carry our work even further.

HC: Yeah.

RC: I don't think that answered your question, I think that went off subject.

HC: No it did, it did. Did you, did you see when you were, when you owned Blackstones, so not so much now, but a little back a ways, um, did you see it as, for the young gay community, did you see it as you know an important resource?

RC: Oh it certainly was! It certainly was! They could come there and be themselves. Uh, they could come in and relax. They could come in and, and in the early years we would encourage uh, please be twenty-one when you come on the premises, our license doesn't allow anything else. But to come in

Need for protests currently

Gay bars

and talk, come in and, that's something that the bars aren't anymore. In any of the bars.

Gay, straight, or otherwise. They're not information centers. Because the internet kills us. The digital age killed us. Uh, there's no more Portland papers. Uh, Apex, our paper, all gone by the wayside here, you know the local gay regs, those were our sources. The bulletin board at the bar was always plethora of information. You wanna know what's going on? Go read the bulletin board. There's a notice for this, a meeting for this, It's not that way anymore. People don't come out for that anymore. Um, that's I, I think that's part of the bar I miss.

HC: Yeah.

RC: Uh, is, is being a public resource for knowledge.

HC: What was the um, the difference from having a, being a patron of gay bars to, then to owning one?

RC: I grew up in food service. Um, when we come off the island my mom got a job on (?) Street, a restaurant called Angelo's (?) And I started washing dishes there. I was twelve, I think. Twelve, thirteen. And uh, so that gave me an interest in food service. Uh, and I've been in some sort of food service all my life. It was scary to say, okay we're gonna commit to this, for the rest of, for what seemed like the rest of your life. Um, and I've always managed businesses that had one more person to pass the buck to. We can't do this, we can't do this, we can't do this. You decide what we're gonna

Blackstones as source of information for community

Background in food service

do. But to become that person um, it was building. It, it was letting you see what you could actually do to, to step out and say, ah,

alright I've gotta make this decision. I hope it's the right one.

HC: Right, uh exciting too though.

RC: Yes! Very much so, very much so. And I still get excited when I think about it. I don't go in as much as I used to. When I lived down the street on State Street, I'd be up there a couple times a month. Uh, it kinda bothered me to walk in and say, well this isn't mine anymore. And I found myself doing the same thing. I could sit at the bar and I could see everything that was going on, around me and make mental notes. I'd tell the bartender, 'go check this' 'go look at this' 'go see what he's up to' uh and I still did that even after I sold it. It's like, I can't do this anymore. It's not mine anymore. So I stopped going.

HC: You had talked about um, fractions within the gay community, and prejudices within the gay community. What 's some of that, that you've seen or that you are aware of?

RC: Uh, the well there's always been a big divide between the and I hate to use the term politically correct. 'Cause we never heard that term back in the 70s. Nobody used PC. even in the 80s nobody used PC. but there was a divide between the gay and lesbian. Uh, it was only gay and lesbian. That was all we had, gay and lesbian. We didn't have the GLBTQ all that, the alphabet, after it. It

Fractions within the LGBTQ community

was always gay and lesbian. And then there was, well if you're lesbian you're still gay. You know, the whole thing is gay, the whole bubble is gay. Uh, but the men are gay and the women are lesbian. Uh, and there's always been a divide there. There's very few

women who could come into Cycles. Uh, back then and be accepted. And uh, at the time um, where Flask is was called Entre New(?) there were very few men who could go into Entre New (?) and be accepted. So it was the big divide there between the men and the women. Um, and then the other factions of the gay community would develop and the leather was another one. Um, we, we got pushed back some, from, from the community. Uh, but mostly from the younger generation. Of, of twink. Yeah like, 'oh look at her she's all in leather' you know. And the drag community. Uh, and a lot of it comes from not understanding. Uh, that was certainly an eye opener for me, with the bar. You know I was exposed to a lot of that. And personally I will admit, that, I'm a man, who is gay, I like the look of a man. I don't want a man in a dress. I don't want an effeminate man. And I always had that same question about lesbians. If you're a woman who likes women, why do you want one in a flannel shirt and jeans who looks like a man? Don't you want a woman who looks like a woman? And It's kind of black and white. But you know, that, that's just me. But I've gotten, I've gotten beyond that. I like masculine men and I like feminine women, I'm bisexual as well. I like feminine women. You're very beautiful by the way.

Divides, friction between gays and lesbians, 80s

Flask

Differences in the LGBTQ community

HC: Thank you.

RC: But uh, the whole queer community now is up against the newest resistance. Uh, the uh, like the fairies without a cause. And they come in with the purple hair and the

abstract makeup and the weird clothes. You know, goth is hard enough to swallow. But, but it just amongst our own community, and the gay community itself, there are so many fractions. There's the drag, and the twink, and the emo, and the lesbian, and the gay, and the leather, and it's like, the queers. And you know, nobody understands each other. They can't accept the fact that we're all in the same bubble. That answer your question?

HC: Yes it did.

RC: Alright.

HC: You said when you owned Blackstones there were different groups within the community that came, like you said you had the drag people and then,

RC: Yeah.

HC: Was there ever any issue with that? With tensions between the groups?

RC: I think the biggest conflicts that I remember in Blackstones was the drag community. They, they, uh, very competitive. Especially back when shows. When you did drag to do a show, you didn't just do, we uh, we didn't have that many transvestites. Men who liked to dress as

Groups within the LGBTQ community

Different groups at Blackstones

women, straight or gay they just like to dress as women. Provincetown is known for their big transvestite weekend. Uh, we didn't have that many. Uh, so the drags would be very competitive with each other. 'I'm prettier' 'no I'm prettier'. One guy came in and stabbed somebody with a barbecue fork and ran out the door. Because they had a fight over a dress.

HC: Oh no!

RC: Yeah, it's like holy shit! Did this just happen? Um, but I don't think any of it was great hateful. Um, it's just more petty, uh it they would admit it wasn't their style and move on, instead of just trying to gouge it out a little deeper. Uh, it would've been fine. Yeah nothing major in the community. And I wouldn't tolerate any of it. Not in the bar. You come in the bar, it's a safe place for you. You say what you wanna say you dress, anybody bothers you, you tell me. I may not agree with you but I will defend you. To have your style

HC: That's really wonderful that you were able to be a part of making and having that safe space for the community.

RC: I liked it.

HC: Do you miss it?

RC: Not as much as I did. I still, I, have all those memories and I think that's why I'm putting them on paper. It's not just about the bar. I mean it's about Harbor Master, it's about my life in St. Louis, my leather

Drag community at Blackstones

Blackstones as a safe place for the community

background, my navy days, these pages are again, no chronological order. Uh, in my life, they're just whatever's happening to be running through my head at that time, and it's coming out on, in the computer. It's coming out in the laptop. It ought to be interesting. I might find somebody to try and edit it out. Or see what they think about it.

HC: Do you have any favorite memories or any that are currently on the top of your,

RC: Ahh, god I was just on vacation for two weeks and I took my laptop, and I took my weed, and I'd smoke on my balcony and go out in the sun and drink. Uh, one I just wrote about, this was like two, three weeks ago. Uh, again I was stoned, I'm drinking Captain Morgan and Ginger Ale I'm up on the deck Bette Midler blaring out of my laptop, and I'm typing away, typing away, typing away and I notice my battery is getting low. So I, I've gotta go down to my cabin. So I stand up and almost keel over. go, okay this has been fun. Got my laptop, got myself down to the cabin, and uh, I'd been in the pool, the saltwater pool on the boat, the suntan lotion, I really should take a shower so stripped down and noticed the bed looked nice and comfy, bright white. So I just lay down on top to take a nap and when I woke up, there on top of my computer, that I had set down and plugged in to charge, was a plate of chocolate covered strawberries. That someone entered my room, I'm laying on top of the bed, buck naked, uh, yeah I couldn't wait to get that [laughter] It was so funny. Uh, other times,

Memoir writing

uh, Mary Abromsom, (?) Linda Abromsom (?) at Blackstones. She was hilarious. Her and uh, michael Chip when he was police chief at the time. The two of them behind that bar playing off each other for a fundraiser. We have so many pictures of that. I hope Blackstones still has them. I left boxes and boxes of pictures at Blackstones to uh, I just collected them, you know? It'd become somebody's archive at some point. Uh, a lot of pictures of those two playing off each other for this fundraiser. A lot of just an amazing, a lot of good memories. I have a lifetime full of good memories. Yeah, life is good. And it

is now, it is now. My, my ex husband and I were a little over thirty-two years. And then one day he said he didn't love me anymore. I said, what the fuck are you talking about? Uh, so, we separated, and uh, he filed for divorce in May and remarried in December. And I'm just now getting my life back together. This year has been my life to , uh my- do you make New Year's resolutions and keep them?

HC: I try to keep them.

RC: Try to? I very seldom do that's why I stopped making them. But this year my New Year's resolution was to let go of my past. And I've been able to do that. Ah, in the separation, uh, I would get in my car at the bar, and there would be all these boxes my husband dropped off. Left them in the back of my car. All of our old photo albums, excuse me, all the memories. He didn't want anything to do with them. And I finally got rid of those this spring. Finally

Fundraisers at Blackstones

got rid of them. It was, difficult to do. I did keep some, I'll admit. Like out twenty-fifth anniversary. Uh, that was a big community event. That was so much fun. We hosted a sit down dinner for a hundred and fourteen people at the Holiday Inn. for our twenty-fifth anniversary. And a lot of the community came. They actually, the city of Portland named a day after us.

HC: That's wonderful.

RC: We have a, I don't know where it is now, if it's still on the wall in the house on Riverside Street. Or if he's taken it down. But uh, who is, uh, trying to remember the counselor's name who backed it. Barb

Wood, and Peter O'Donell. They were the ones who backed it in the city of Portland. We had a day named after us.

HC: That's wonderful.

RC: Yeah. A lot of good memories.

HC: Being a little bit older now, what do you feel that you can give back to, or do you want to give back to the younger members of the LGBTQ community?

RC: I yeah, yeah would definitely want to. Uh, oh god, uh well with Harbor Masters, working weekends, my job is important to me, uh I'm a good worker, they treat me very well, and I'm a company man. If they need me, I'm there. And I'll drop everything and go do it. Uh, so my participation in harbor masters has fallen out because uh, the world revolves the weekend

Twenty-fifth anniversary

Mentoring through Harbor Masters

of festivity and activity uh, and I work weekends. Nobody does anything Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. I was on Facebook, I tried to start a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday weekend club, yeha no interest. So I, I've not been participating in The Harbor Masters events. Uh, over the last couple years. And uh now they've come to me and they want me to be treasurer. Uh, and I've agreed to take the, to accept the nomination. I got elected, got voted in for treasurer. I take office, next month. Um, so I am trying to get active again. Yeah, at least in that aspect of the group. I don't wanna see that falter. And over the last couple of years it has. And I talked to my ex uh, I said do you think it's worth keeping alive? Uh, he says he does, he really believes it still has a future to it. It's not been beaten. And a lot of the leather clubs,

like ours, uh do fall by the wayside after thirty years, after thirty five years. They're just uh, and again, the youth today doesn't have an interest in leather and in organization. I think that's it. That's a big part of it maybe. I hadn't thought of that. It's organization. They don't wanna be a part of an organization. Uh, although there's a lot of rewards to that, to being a part of a group. Yeah, so yeah I'm getting active again, at least in the leather community.

HC: Did that give you um, having been or also being in The Harbor Masters did that give you an opportunity to mentor?

RC: Yes, you asked that question. And yes it did, very much. Uh, uh, we do, we- Harbor Masters- still do, and have for many

Leather clubs and younger generations

years, a night at the bar. And we did them privately for a while because we couldn't bring it out into public. Uh, a stocks and bonds night. Which has nothing to do money. Uh, we would set up a makeshift dungen. We'd do a St. Andrew's cross and a whipping horse, and stocks and uh, and have an assortment of accessories available. And it was an educational session. And , you know, young couples, young male couples mostly, we've had some women couples, uh, would come in. 'We've always wanted to try this' So who wants to be this and who wants to be that. Who wants to be the top and who wants to be the bottom? And we would help them, go through that. In, in flogging there's some really heavy floggers out there. Uh, that ah, can do some damage. And so you wanna stay away from like, the kidney area. You know, play with the thigh and the butt and the upper shoulders. You know, careful not to wrap the neck, stay away from the kidneys, stuff like that. And that's the stuff that they need to be taught in

far's the SM community goes. And we did that.

HC: Yeah no, that's really wonderful that, you know, you were able to teach that also, not just

RC: But, but, I'm going to go into my facebook...the last club night with Harbor Masters, if I can find our page..

HC: And they're still based out of Blackstones, correct?

RC: Blackstones is still their home bar, correct. Let's see, dooo doo doo, that was

Harbor Masters private SM workshops

last club night, yes, um, I posted this October twenty first, which was a Saturday. Um, I took this off from Facebook. We set up the stocks and bonds night, [shows picture of a couple lying across a sock on top of one another, laughing] and went in during the day. So when the bar opened all the equipment was there. And you know, that's how they were using the equipment. They were posing on it

HC: Oh well...

RC: You know? Okay. So they're not taking it seriously. And they don't much anymore. I'm surprised that the club still wants to do this things. There's just, no interest. There might be but, it has to be, uh, a nurturing environment. And you have a lot of naysayers, and chucklers and people, oh haha sitting there, there's just no respect for it. And people won't come out and say I want to try this. Because they're gonna think , oh well, they're gonna laugh at me. So, it's gonna, this is something that's gonna have to go back into uh, into private session.

So hosting workshops? I'd love to do that again. I really would.

HC: I think like you said before it's a real lack of information that the younger generations not-

RC: Is there a paper towel or something? DO you wanna pause that?

RC: I'm in no rush.

HC: Okay.

Lack of interest in the leather community with younger generations

RC: I almost smoked before I came in, which means you would never have shut me up

[laughter]

HC: Well for an interview that's a good thing. Um, was there anything else that we haven't touched on that you had wanted to, to talk about?

RC: I didn't even know what to write down on that, when she uh, when Wendy sent me that, fill out what you'd like to talk about. I was like, well this isn't my project, was the first thought, well what do they want to talk about? What do you want to talk about? What do you want us to talk about? And I just like banged out a couple things that were foremost on my mind. Um, I can't think of anything else, but I can think of a ton of stuff. That it, it, but it's all reflection. Um, oh, like the names project. That was, that was an amazing time to do those quilts. To, to be there for people. For a mother supporting her son, or a lover supporting uh, and listen to their stories and help them

develop their image of what they wanted to remember.

HC: That must have been an incredibly emotional experience as well.

RC: It was, it is still. Still is. Tearing up because of that. Uh, community events. Gay pride. The parade. It used to start in front of Blackstones. It's they, they blocked off Pine Street. And then we could only walk on the sidewalks and it was more, it wasn't

Names Project

Early pride parades in Portland

gay pride. It was a gay march. And we carried protest signs. 'We deserve the right' signs and stuff like that. Uh, and then it just morphed into what it is today. It's a big celebration. Uh, yeah, just all the stuff I want to write down.

HC: Yeah definitely. That must have been really interesting to see it change form more of a protest march to more, pride march

RC: To celebration, yeah. And it, but, but, some people still don't see it as a celebration. And that's too bad. Um, uh, some of the, not even the gay community, there are those in the gay community that still see it as a civil rights thing as a, as a, protest. But it's the, it's the straight community and again it all goes back to being uninformed, uneducated. Um, when the right to marry was big, when that was a big subject to talk about, uh, I used to talk on that a lot. I was a member of a dance team. I was the only gay person on it. But they knew I was gay, they knew my husband, it was all good. But several of them could understand why we wanted, why we deserved the right to marry. And I talked on that 'till I was blue in the face. Uh, like

what if somebody told you no, you can't marry how would you feel?

HC: Yeah that would be really,

RC: So yeah, um, I could just rant
[laughter]

Experienced prejudices against the LGBTQ community, marriage equality

HC: No that's fine! So you were involved in, actively involved in getting the right to marry.

RC: Yeah! When, when Maine-Portland did the domestic partner uh, benefit first. And uh, the council passed it. And then people said, no that should go to public vote. In the Portland referendum. It went to vote. And it still passed. So we were registered as domestic partners from that. And then the state passed it and then uh, we were one of the first couples, on a Sunday, that went to Augusta, they had a special session uh, the doorman at Blackstones now, his name is Nick. I don't wanna use his last name. Uh, is a notary, and uh, he said that he would do this. He went to Augusta. They had a whole bank of notaries uh, set up. And he notarized our certificate, and then we all marched across the street and filled them and they kept the office of records open and they filled them- it was a big political thing, we were in the newspaper and all that. So yeah, we've been involved in this for a long time.

HC: What was that like to be one of the first couples in the state to get that?

RC: Scary! And it was really like Oh shit! We're in the paper! Look! It's out picture. Uh, but that was all cool and it was like, wow, this really happened. And then, we, we did mary on our thirtieth anniversary was when we decided to get married. Uh, Maine hadn't passed the law yet, but we didn't want our thirtieth anniversary to pass uh, unrecognized, so we went to P-town.

Domestic partnership passing in Portland

Filing for domestic partnership

Wedding in Provincetown

HC: Okay.

RC: Are you familiar with P-Town?

HC: Yes.

RC: You know where Bayside Betsy's is?

HC: We used, Okay, Betsy and Steve, they lived up over. Uh, they had a big deck above the dining room. So we, we used their deck.

HC: Oh that's wonderful!

RC: And got married at sunset. And then we went down and took over the dining room and everybody had dinner and they gave us our cake and champagne and stuff like that. And then Steve died a couple weeks after.

[Pause]

Yeah so, okay.

HC: It's definitely exciting to have been one of the first couples in the state...

RC: Yeah I still have those files. Uh, my ex was big on uh, keeping everything organized. Filed and compartmentalized and all that kind of stuff. So I know, there is still a file that I have that has uh, the news

page and has our picture, and our domestic uh, partner paperwork from the state and the one from the city. Yeah I still have all that. Maybe that's something that the Glickman would like to have, I don't know.

HC: Yeah I think definitely.

RC: Maybe I'll dig it out. Alright so, what else.

HC: Um, what was, what was your coming out process like? If that's something you're comfortable talking about.

RC: My coming out process. Uh, well like I said, I came out when I was thirteen. Uh, told, I was in the car with my mom, and uh, she started going off on a friend of mine who she thought was, was gay, and was gonna be a bad influence on me. And uh, 'I don't want you hanging around with him. He's queer.' I said, 'mom, I'm gay, he's not.'

HC: Oh!

RC: And I don't know if she accepted it or not, but it never got spoke of again. Uh, I was in the navy, station in Norfolk. And we were there before I went overseas. We, I had picked up my ship in Boston, out at dry dock, we went to Norfolk to finish the refit uh, and stock, and then we did the transatlantic crossing. I was in Norfolk and met a young man named Keith. And uh, again I was only seventeen. Um, it was like a crush or puppy love, whatever you wanna call it back then. So I wrote my mother a letter, I said, I've met somebody and his name is Keith. And I explained the whole

situation. And she wrote me back and said, uh, she carried me for nine months not knowing what I was and loved me, and still did. After knowing so,

Coming out

Mother's response to coming out

HC: That's really wonderful

RC: Yeah I lost my mom in '99. I miss her. Sorry about that.

HC: That's fine.

RC: But I don't have a problem telling my coming out story. It's very sweet that she would write me back and say 'I carried you for nine months not knowing what you were and I loved you then, and I still do' so. And she's liked all my husbands. There's only been two. And a couple summer flings.

HC: But we don't count those.

RC: No, no. My mother was married six times.

HC: That's really important to have had that support.

RC: It is, and um, it, I had a great family. There was nothing that we couldn't talk about in our family. Uh, I, I had on my mother's side, a gay uncle. Her younger brother was gay. Uh, my dad was bisexual. My mom and dad were really kinky. Uh, which I found out later in years. From my father. They're both passed. Uh, the year my husband divorced me my dad died. And that was a really traumatic year. And uh, I dropped a whole bunch of weight. [checks phone] let's see, what did I look like six years ago when I was divorced?

[shows picture of himself, slightly heavier,
happy and smiling]

HC: Oh yeah

RC: So, over the last five years, look who I am now. In this [gestures to photo] that's not me, that's not me anymore. What was the question? [Laughter]

HC: Um, there wasn't anything else that you, any, any particular fond memories

RC: If I stop and think, I'm gonna provide you with more memories than you can write about.

HC: That's fine!

RC: Um, oh my god. Well let's get away from Blackstones. Uh, alright uh, at work. Back at the marina. When I had to, you know, prove myself, that I was like everybody else. Uh, the guys that I worked with. I ran the canvas shop. My sewing took over, my navy training took over there. Uh, the guys in the machine shop and the fiberglass shop they all knew me, they didn't care that I was queer at all and they treated like one of their own. And we'd go out every Saturday. Uh, every Wednesday and go sailing. We'd take out one of the customer's boats and go sailing. Um, they, they didn't care. I was just one of them. And that was cool. Even though my license plate I used to get fun, made fun of, um it was TBCSIT which actually stood for The Best Canvas Shop In Town. and uh, one of the guys in charge of the dock departments said TBCSIT huh? The best cock sucker in

town? Is that what that means Ralph? Yeah it was all cool. Um, so there was

Personal support from the straight community

community there was my center of acceptance right there. Um, oh Harbor Master event. Probably our third anniversary, fourth anniversary. It was early on uh, we always try to do what's called a poker run. And it's a throwback to a motorcycle club and everybody would get on their motorcycles and go from point A,B,C,D, and collect cards and make a poker hand out of these cards. So what we did, is we positioned people around Portland. Uh, like uh, corner of Congress and High, stuff like that. Where people had to go and get a card. And uh, we, we hid wild cards on members. And speaking of Congress and High, uh, our member got stripped down to a jock strap.

HC: Oh wow

RC: People were looking for this wild card. Right in the middle of Congress Square. Um, one woman asked, oh who is the silver ice group the berets? Not the, the black berets? The red berets? The red berets. They weren't around for very long. Uh, this old woman asked if we were members of their group and stuff like that. Um, so yeah, just a lot of good memories. Nothing major.

HC: But good fond memories

RC: Good fond memories. That's it, I keep babbling.

HC: I think, we're also just about out of time. But thank you so much.

Harbor Masters event

with and, if you have any questions and clarifications, feel free to email me.

RC: Oh my pleasure. I hope you can use that, I hope it gives you something to write