

Wendy: Let's do it again because I'm not sure that was...Okay. So one more time, you can refuse to answer any question you want. You can stop the interview at any time.

Chuck: Alright.

Wendy: And my name is Wendy Chapkis, W E N D Y C H A P K I S, this is November 12th, 2017 at the USM campus. And you are -

Chuck: Charles F. Sawyer. C H A R L E S, middle initial F, Sawyer, S A W Y E R.

Wendy: Excellent. Okay, so, Chuck, can you tell me how old you are?

Chuck: 77, just turned 77 last week.

Wendy: Happy Birthday. Oh wow.

Chuck: Thank you.

Wendy: And also where were you born?

Chuck: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Wendy: How long did you live there?

Chuck: I lived there, uh, let's see I've been in...until I moved to Maine, which was probably about 1970 I moved to Maine.

Wendy: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

Chuck: Well, my fortunately are, yeah, it's very, fortunately when I came out, my parents were very broad-minded. You know they, uh, I was in the military. They let me go from the military because of suspicion of being gay.

Wendy: Well let's, let's go back for just a second. So you lived in Philadelphia until you joined the military.

Chuck: Yeah.

Wendy: And then how did, how did that happen that they found out you were gay?

Chuck: Well, I, at that time I was engaged to a girl. I got a beautiful letter from her one day, and the next day when I called home I found out she got married the day I got the letter. Uh, my father was in the hospital, my aunt was in the hospital and I was working 12 hours a day, seven days a week in the military. And I just went the doctor to get something to relax me. And I unfortunately told him, and I think he was one that turned me in because I did nothing on base.

Wendy: Aha. Can I ask you to take your watch or whatever it is off? I think it's gonna pick up on that tape deck and we want to make sure this is clean. Thank you. So you, you were engaged to be married, but you knew you were gay.

Chuck: I knew I was gay, but also because of the times back in the 40s and 50s, you know, we had girlfriends and things like that. I knew deep down in my heart what I was. I never fell in love with a man till I was 21, and when I told my parents I were gay and I was getting out of the military that I was either going to come home or I was going to go out to California. Both of my parents, who were at the breakfast table says, you are our son, this is your house, we love you. That's it.

Wendy: So what decade was this? The 19-

Chuck: Uh, this was the 1960s.

Wendy: The 1960s. Wow.

Chuck: And, I've always had a lot of friends of different backgrounds and everything. I never hung around with one specific group. Even in high school. I used to love to go to dancing. I would go dancing seven nights a week.

Wendy: Wow. So you had a community in Philadelphia?

Chuck: I had a community in Philadelphia. I mean, my brother and-my brother knew I was gay. My sister-in-law knew I was gay. We never discussed it. The funniest part about it was when my mother passed away, my brother and I were going down to the lawyer's and my brother says to me, me, Charlie, did mom know that you were gay? I said, yeah. He said, she never spoke about it. I said what was there to speak about?

Wendy: So you never had a conversation with your parents about being gay?

Chuck: Yeah, I did. I mean I told them I was gay. My lover of 53 years, my partner of 53 years, my mother always called him her third son.

Wendy: But you didn't feel any need to talk about it.

Chuck: I don't think at that point my parents, they knew, my mother would be the first one if someone...One of the neighbors had mentioned the fact that, that I was queer and-

Wendy: Not, they didn't mean that in a-

Chuck: No, they meant it in the sense, and my mother got very upset and had a big argument with person. Told them that it was none of their business. Both my parents were very liberal parents. I mean, they would help anybody in the neighborhood.

Wendy: Wow, that's great. So you were kind of outed by the military, but do you think your parents sort of knew before?

Chuck: I think, I think mothers always know. I think they always know, they don't talk about it. And back in the 60s, you really didn't sit down and discuss it.

Wendy: And your brother and sister were concerned?

Chuck: My brother and sister-in-law.

Wendy: Sister-in-law. Oh.

Chuck: No, they weren't really concerned. I mean I wasn't...My brother defended me because I liked to dance and everything and some of the kids, the older boys would pick on me, but then they picked on everybody, every young boy.

Wendy: So dancing was considered a little not masculine enough?

Chuck: Right. Until some of my friends that got to the age where they start to get interested in girls, then I had to teach them how to dance even though they were straight. I had to teach them how to dance. And once they learned how to dance they stopped picking on me.

Wendy: So, it sounds like you also were popular with girls. You had a girlfriend.

Chuck: I did, I mean I, I never had any problem with any of my friends. I mean if one of my friends didn't like it, I didn't associate with them. They were non-existent.

Wendy: Okay. So uh, you're, it sounds like it wasn't that much of a problem for you in your teen years and-

Chuck: No, I mean I, I had had, um, relations, but you know, nothing more than kids' stuff, experimentation. And I know I enjoyed it.

Wendy: How old were you when you first really fell in love?

Chuck: With a man? I was 21 years old.

Wendy: Was that in the military?

Chuck: No, I was actually out of the military at the time. I met this very, this fella Carl. He had told me he was 18 and we dated, and of course we had sex. And then one day he was at home and I had met his parents. You know, he used to go home and, you know, I was his friend Chuck there was no question. Then one day Carl just got mad at his parents and says he was queer and that I was his lover. So at that time I could have gone to jail or prison, general prison. But, Carl's mother and father called me and had me come over and the four of us sat down and Carl

had to go see a psychiatrist. And I had to agree not to see Carl, because he was a minor, but as long as we made that agreement that he stuck by it.

Wendy: So he wasn't actually 18?

Chuck: No, he was only 17. But even back then in the 60s, I could've have to jail anyway for being gay.

Wendy: Wow. So, this is, uh, mid sixties?

Chuck: Nope, around 1961.

Wendy: 60s, early sixties.

Chuck: Yup, early sixties,.

Wendy: In Philadelphia?

Chuck: In Philly.

Wendy: Did you keep in touch with him after?

Chuck: Well I kept in touch. He called me, my father had died two years later and he read it in the paper and he called me and gave me his condolences and wanted to come and see me, but at that point he wasn't 21 and I wasn't going to break that. Then a couple years later I met him again. And a mutual friend of ours, Doris—well, she was a friend of mine, but she knew Carl—and we went out one night. I was living in Maine at the time and I was home in Philly and Doris and I went out the bar and Carl was bartending there. So she spoke with Carl, and then Carl came over and spoke with me and Doris said something to the effect that Carl said something that really amazed her so, I said, “What did he say?” She said, “I can't tell you.” So I walked over to Carl and asked Carl, what did he say? He had said he knew I was going out with my current lover, or my current boyfriend or partner, and he said that he would do nothing to break us up. I was the only one guy he loved up until that point. But if Dave and I would break up, no one else but he would have me.

Wendy: Oh.

Chuck: So.

Wendy: So he was working in a gay bar?

Chuck: Yeah.

Wendy: So I guess the psychiatric intervention didn't—

Chuck: It was funny, because when I spent the night over his house after work and we sat around and talked about old times and little bit of love making without the sex, you know, and he said that his parents sent him to the psychiatrist and he says they were paying him 100 bucks every time I went there and he was going to bed with his psychiatrist. So it didn't work out.

Wendy: Oh my god. So you moved, around this time is when you moved to Maine?

Chuck: Yeah, it's a few years. Let's see...my father died in 1963. I was going with Carl prior to that, about '61. And then I had met another guy that I thought I loved, but at that time relationships never lasted a long time anyway. And then I found out that he—the guy I lived with, Eddie—was sleeping around, so I decided uh uh. It wasn't for me. We lived together. I immediately called my parents, my mom and stepfather, and said “Look, can I move back home?” And they said, “That's your bedroom.” So I moved back home. Called my brother up since he had a car. I says, “Come and pick me up.” I packed my bags and I left that day.

Wendy: And moved back to your parents.

Chuck: Moved back to my parents.

Wendy: Can I ask you a little bit more? So this is now, we're getting almost into the mid-sixties. Right?

Chuck: Yes, the mid-sixties.

Wendy: And and you were involved with a number of men and not really long-term relationships yet, but it sounds like you really were focused on monogamy. I mean, if somebody-

Chuck: Yes, oh yes, I was. I wasn't against sex, but if I was with someone, I was with them. It wasn't that they were my partner and I was running out on them.

Wendy: Did you get a sense that that was the common sexual-

Chuck: No, back then very few guys were really dating. I mean, most of them was out enjoying life.

Wendy: But that just didn't appeal to you to-

Chuck: No it didn't, it really, I really didn't feel like I wanted to be a whore all my life [inaudible].

Wendy: But did you go to places like gay bars?

Chuck: Oh yes. I used to go to the gay bars. Unfortunately at that time at the gay bars, you would go in the gay bar and the police would raid the place, ask for

identification, or when it was closing, the police, the policemen, there would be a couple of police out at the door and they'd check our identification going out. And normally there was a light that would go on in the bar saying that police were coming in. So if two guys were kissing or holding hands they would immediately know to stop.

Wendy: So it was actually grounds to be arrested?

Chuck: Yes.

Wendy: If they saw you holding hands or kissing?

Chuck: Oh yes.

Wendy: What did they do with your ID when you left? I mean, did they just write it down to check you?

Chuck: I mean they just checked it out to make sure. At that time we had draft cards and that's what they checked, were the draft cards. And social security, but we didn't, I didn't have, I didn't drive at that time, so, and you know, it was just general harassment, I think.

Wendy: Can you remember the names of any of the bars that you went to in Philadelphia?

Chuck: The very first bar I went to was the Allegro. I went to The Westbury Bar, that's where I met my life partner. Let's see, there was Maxine's which I didn't particularly care for it because they were the elderly, more wealthy people. They wasn't what I was looking for. And there were a couple of others. I don't remember their names.

Wendy: That's still, that's quite a lot of gay bars and it was—

Chuck: It was right around the area, in the area, they—the area now is called gayborhood in Philadelphia.

Wendy: Wow. So what were you doing for work in those years?

Chuck: I was, um, working in an office as accounting and various things in the office, primarily bookkeeping and accounting. I did go to hairdressing school, went to school, got my license, worked about a year. And it wasn't for me. I couldn't take the harsh chemicals that we were using at the time.

Wendy: Was that impacted by the fact that you were gay? Did it seem like—

Chuck: No, of course everybody back at that time thought a guy that went into a hairdresser people thought was queer anyway. I used the word queer eye, which I hated, but that's what we grew up with—a faggot. And, um, and that day that we... The very first time I met him, I kissed him and groped him and he didn't

particularly like it. So for about a year it was, you know, cat and mouse. You know, he'd see me and he'd be mad at me. Then one day we... After I broke up with Eddie, I was in a bar and one of my, one of our friends said, "Chuck, I don't like to see you alone. That's not you." So he says, "Who would you like to meet around here?" So I pointed at David and he called David over, and so Dave and I finally made a connection. You know, we went out for breakfast after the bar and started to date ever since.

Wendy: So tell me a little about that relationship. You said it was 53 years?

Chuck: 53 years, right.

Wendy: Did you have a sense when you met him that this was going to be—

Chuck: Yeah, well we lived together for five years in Philadelphia [inaudible]. He was a Maine boy. He came back because his mother and aunt were both widows and they were aging, and he came back to be with them and help them. So we were kind of separated for a year, but we kept in touch via phone and cards. The five years that Dave and I went out and lived together, he never gave me a ring. And that Christmas while he was up here in Maine, he sent me a gold signet ring with my initials on it. So that proved to me that he cared.

So we started talking very seriously, and I came up to Maine looking for a job. I got a job immediately, and I was up here about a month later.

Wendy: When you moved to Maine, did you move to Portland?

Chuck: No, Gray.

Wendy: Gray. Is that where David's family was?

Chuck: Yeah, that's where his mom and aunt lived. He came from a rather large family, and I was accepted by his family. There was no—the only one who didn't accept it was his mother at the beginning, but then... It took a while, you know how mother-in-laws are.

And we worked together in the same company for 38 years.

Wendy: You worked together for 38 years of your 53-year—

Chuck: Yeah.

Wendy: Wow. So what kind of business was it?

Chuck: [Inaudible] Furniture.

Wendy: Oh.

Chuck: I was working the office and he was an interior decorator salesperson. And they knew that we were together, there was never any problems. In fact, they reached a point where it was Dave and I and we had a girl who was a lesbian working for us, and when the sales manager were hiring for salespeople one of the questions he asked was, "Are you prejudiced?" And if they said yes, they were eliminated from the job.

Wendy: This was a heterosexual man who was hiring for—

Chuck: Yes, he was a dear friend, too.

Wendy: Wonderful.

Chuck: I mean, most of our friends, we... Most of our life with our friends have always been straight and gay. We didn't get into gay life. I mean, we had straight friends that we associated with more so than the gay friends. But we were at the bars here in Portland.

Wendy: Which bars did you go to in Portland?

Chuck: Well, we'd start out...it was Forest Avenue and Cumberland...

Wendy: Roland's?

Chuck: Roland's was the first bar. Then from Roland's we went to the Phoenix, but before the Phoenix there was another bar, and I can't think what it was called. It was on Fore Street and I forget the name of the street, but there's a hotel on the spot right now. Do you remember? It was a disco place, so all I know is you walk down these hallways to get to it. Everything had to be secret.

Wendy: Did it really? Did you feel like the gay bars had to be kind of discreet?

Chuck: Yeah, they had to be discreet at that time. Now today there's only two gay bars here in Portland, and there's really no need for gay bars because most of Portland accepts the gay people.

Wendy: Do you think you would—that if a person went to any straight bar and held hands with their boyfriend or kissed their boyfriend, it would be okay?

Chuck: I wouldn't say any bar, but a majority of bars it would be okay.

Wendy: And that wasn't true when you were—

Chuck: No, it wasn't true. I mean, you didn't dare walk down streets holding hands. If you wanted to hold hands, it was always done under the table, or, you know, very discreetly.

Wendy: So Portland was the place that you came to, though, for if you wanted to be in gay culture and community.

Chuck: Yeah, if we wanted to be in gay culture, we would come here for dancing. But most of our friends, like I said, were straight couples and their families, and you know, we had no problem with that.

Wendy: And they had no problem with that—

Chuck: No, they had no problem.

Wendy: Wow. And mostly this was centered around Gray?

Chuck: Gray and Portland. We had a lot of friends in Portland. In fact, a few of our friends, their kids were very happy to have met Dave and I, because they grew up with us, so they had no prejudice against gay people.

Wendy: Did you ever play the role of the sort of gay uncles for a kid that was coming out?

Chuck: I tried, yes. I’ m part of SAGE Maine, and one of the things we want to do is try and get together with the younger people so we can discuss our stories.

Wendy: Is that working? Has that—

Chuck: Um, there’ s a little bit of hesitancy with the young people because they’ re totally different, they think differently than we did because we had to be closeted, basically, for so long. [Inaudible] or whatever.

Wendy: And when you were young, you were mentioning that there was a bar—Maxine’ s, was it?—that you didn’ t go to because that was the older—

Chuck: Yeah, that was the older crowd.

Wendy: I wonder if it’ s the same for the young people here, that they think, “Oh, the SAGE people are so different— “

Chuck: I think they do, but I think the younger people today, they come out, they’ re a little bit more vocal than we were. We couldn’ t be vocal.

Wendy: Were you involved in any early organized—

Chuck: The only thing that was I was really organized, involved with, I was involved with the, in Portland working on the equality campaign. That was where I was involved with working on the right to marriage campaign. I volunteered at the AIDS Project, I was [inaudible]. I worked with the hotline at the AIDS Project. I became a buddy, we would be with people the last couple months of their life.

Wendy: Yeah, so I wanted to ask you about the AIDS epidemic. So you were in Portland—

Chuck: I was in Portland.

Wendy: Can you tell me the first time you remember hearing about AIDS?

Chuck: It was on TV. It wasn't called AIDS back then, it was called SIDS, the gay man's disease, the disease that are affecting gay men only. And it was weird because Carl always used to tell me, "I love you, I always have, and I always will." And one night, I woke up, I heard Carl say to me, "Chuck, I love you, I always have, and I always will." And I jumped up in bed, and Dave said, "What's the matter?" And I says, "Carl just died." He says, "How do you know that?" I says, "I just know he died." So that's when through my church, St. Luke's Cathedral, we were asked one Easter to do twelve Easter baskets for people in the hospital living with AIDS. So they outreached to me, I said yes, so they put me in charge of that—they knew I was gay, so. And I brought the AIDS awareness to our church.

Wendy: I want to talk to you about religion, but before we get to that, had Carl actually died?

Chuck: Yes, he did.

Wendy: And he died of AIDS?

Chuck: Yep. It took me about seven years to find out he really did die, but...

Wendy: Wow.

Chuck: I knew because nobody had heard from him. I would always go back for Thanksgiving week to Philadelphia to be with my family and have dinner with them, and that was my Christmas/Thanksgiving with them. And I would go out sometimes to one of the bars that I had frequented where I knew people, and I learned very early on when I went back to Philly and would go to a bar, I wouldn't ask, "Where is so-and-so?" Because I knew where they were.

Wendy: Because people were getting sick and disappearing—

Chuck: People were getting sick and dying from [inaudible], yep.

Wendy: Wow. Did you lose a lot of close—

Chuck: Yeah, between the AIDS Project and friends in Philadelphia, some good friends in Philadelphia passed away. Of course, at that time, people weren't discussing they had AIDS because of the discrimination against them. When I got involved

volunteering with the AIDS Project I also eventually became Vice President of the PWA Coalition. I don't know if you knew what that was...

Wendy: The People with Aids Coalition.

Chuck: Yeah. So they asked me to Vice President. Of course, I was uninfected at the time. And I think my involvement really came from between Carl dying and watching TV and I said to David, "You know, I want to do something." He says, "Like what?" I said, "I don't know." I says, "We've been very fortunate that neither one of us have been stricken with the disease, but it's primarily hit our generation very badly." And I did the baskets for AIDS, and I wanted to volunteer. I had to go meet with them to volunteer, and I was on the phone, and then I was assigned a couple cases in which I would be with them to the end. [Inaudible] they were friends when they were dying.

Wendy: And this was in the 1980s?

Chuck: Yep. Late 80s and early 90s. And it felt like I became mother, father, sister, brother, whatever they needed because a lot of times their friends deserted them, their parents deserted them. A lot of times they were gay, but then it was even worse when they had AIDS.

Wendy: Yeah. So was your response common in the Portland community during those years? Were there a lot of people volunteering, or—

Chuck: No. There was only maybe about three or four men really doing it. A lot of women. Women that were—the lesbian community was so, so supportive. And straight women, they were very, very supportive.

Wendy: Why do you think that was? That there were so many more women than men?

Chuck: I think it was because women are a lot more caring. And I think the men were afraid of being associated or for fear that they may be [inaudible] or they would see someone die, and they were losing their friends also, so it made them very skeptical.

Wendy: Too close, maybe. Just too close.

Chuck: Too close. It was too close, right. But yeah, when we had... We used to do, the AIDS Project used to do the all-singing, all-dancing concerts. Do you remember those? No? Well, there were a bunch of volunteers from the different schools, and the Portland Ballet, they would donate their time, and it was a fundraiser. I always manned the, took care of the food tables with all my volunteers who never showed up.

Wendy: Where were these—so this was in the early 90s?

Chuck: Yep.

Wendy: See, I moved here in '95, so I missed a lot of this. So there were talent show kind of things, or...?

Chuck: Yeah, well, there was talent show. We'd have kids from high school come. It was funny because with the AIDS Project, the women, even the girls in high school would come. But you saw very few boys from the high school. And then the first time, we showed the AIDS scroll, which was at the Chestnut Street Memorial Church, or Methodist Church, that was quite revealing. And it was amazing the number of people that would come. And it was very hard, in fact, that was one of the things I was going to bring with me today. I have a picture book of the history of the scroll which I wanted to donate to the group.

Wendy: I will set up a time for you to do that with Susie Bock, she'll be in touch with you and she'll help you.

Chuck: Yeah, and I have pins also from the AIDS pandemic. Various affairs, I've been down to Washington, been down to Washington D.C. as captain of the Maine quilt team, and I also acted as a monitor, I would walk around and see people standing there and if they were alone and there were tears there, I would walk up and say, "You look like you need a hug. Would you mind if I gave you one?"

Wendy: So this was when the quilt was spread out all across—

Chuck: All across, yep.

Wendy: Between, what was it, the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument?

Chuck: Yep.

Wendy: Powerful.

Chuck: It was really powerful. And the book shows, it has [inaudible] pictures, and it shows the people who was involved in doing a few, helping out with a few quilts for people that died here in Maine that I knew.

Wendy: How did you emotionally cope with the extent of that epidemic?

Chuck: Oh, I would get very depressed after I lost a client or something. But then I think my religion had a lot to do with it, and I think because of the upbringing I had from my parents I felt very good about being able to be with that person and sharing the last moments of that person's life with them, and they didn't die alone.

Wendy: So tell me a little more about your religion. Were you always a religious kid?

Chuck: I was born and raised Roman Catholic. After high school I kind of dropped out of religion. I got involved at the Cathedral Church of St. Luke's right after David's mother died. She had her mass there, and her interment from there, and-

Wendy: That's an Episcopal Church.

Chuck: Yeah, right there on State Street. And they had a weekend food kitchen that would feed the homeless, and I got involved with that, and I became a weekend manager. Like every four weeks I was a weekend manager for the weekend. And then I got on the outreach team, and like I said, I had brought the awareness of AIDS to the church. Terry Dannenmiller, I don't know if you've ever heard of her. [Inaudible], did you ever hear of her? Okay, Autumn Atuino was a young girl, had always been very, very sick and they didn't know what it was. And then they-she was living up in Bangor at the time. And they finally diagnosed her with AIDS, or HIV. And of the scare of the HIV, they separated her completely away in the back of the hospital and very few nurses wanted to go visit.

Wendy: This was in Bangor?

Chuck: Yeah.

Wendy: Can you spell her name?

Chuck: A U T U M N A T U I N O and her mother is Terry Dannenmiller. Her mother had found out that, you know, once Autumn was tested HIV her mother went and got tested. They found out she was HIV, and you know, as far as she got it, she lived in New York and she was married and her husband was doing drugs and supposedly he had stopped doing drugs, but he was injecting between his toes, and he was HIV and infected both of them.

Wendy: And then she probably was pregnant, is that what--?

Chuck: Yeah, she got pregnant. Autumn had an older sister fortunately who was not HIV, but... I introduced them, and they came to church, and Autumn, I think, was... At that time certain groups from the PWA Coalition wanted to put faces with AIDS, and Autumn was one of the poster children, Terry was a poster mom, and when Autumn came down here she went to school at Reiche. But she didn't want to go to school and hide her disease, so Terry went and spoke to the school administrator, to the principal, and they had a meeting with the teachers and then they had a meeting with the families. We had had dinner previously that evening over at the PWA Coalition, and then I stayed and cleaned up, and then I went over to the meeting. Terry was about ready to stand up to talk, and she had admitted she was petrified to me later, but she saw me walk in and that gave her the strength to really go out and talk. And Autumn was there with a couple friends, and I immediately--she was done and I immediately went over to Autumn, picked

her up, and gave her a great big kiss and hugs just to let people know you can't get it.

Wendy: Yeah, I well remember the years when people were afraid to touch people with AIDS because of the stigma.

Chuck: Yep. Like, I changed diapers barehanded. If I was with a someone and they accidentally had a bowel movement and there was no nurse around or anything, I didn't bother to look for gloves. I'd just change him.

Wendy: Wow. Can I just ask for a clarification? You talked about the People with AIDS Coalition and the AIDS Project. Were they two different--

Chuck: They were two different things. The AIDS Project was... They were working with AIDS patients. They started to form different groups, parents of AIDS patients, and people who had lost their friends, or lost a specific spouse, and they had different groups that they had going together. And they were the ones that had the clinical counselors there that would connect the people if they were there for support. PWA Coalition was something that the people with AIDS wanted for themselves. They wanted to be able to say what they could do and what they couldn't do.

Wendy: And interestingly they wanted you involved with the People with AIDS Coalition even though you weren't living with AIDS.

Chuck: Right. Well, they wanted me, there were three of us involved that were non-infected with AIDS, but most of the people were with AIDS. And they just wanted us so if something happened they didn't lose the entire board.

Wendy: Wow. Yikes. So this church has continued to be an important part of your life, St. Luke's?

Chuck: Yes, it is. I mean, I do the food pantry there, and since I retired I've been doing a lot of other volunteering at church.

Wendy: Did your decision to--you mentioned that you joined the Episcopal Church in part because of your mother-in-law, but was it a more welcoming community for a gay person?

Chuck: Welcoming, it was more welcoming. Yes, yes.

Wendy: Was the Catholic Church doing any outreach?

Chuck: Catholic Church, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Wendy: And nothing in the context of the AIDS epidemic around--

Chuck: No. A lot of condemnation. God's wrath.

Wendy: Wow. I'm curious about your life now as an older gay man. Can you tell me sort of the best thing about being in your mid-70s and gay?

Chuck: I think the best thing about this is that...the love and support I have from David and my family. My nieces and nephew grew up calling my partner "uncle." And we were both active in church, he in one way, I in another. We still are. And I think I don't know how I would have taken the loss of losing a lot of friends, and David got involved, but very little, because he was my emotional support back home. And I got home and he knew I had had a rough day, there always that hug and a kiss and a little holding of the hand. And I try to, you know, I try to talk to people. Our church is very welcoming. We have several gay and lesbian families there. Somebody says they think our church is like half-gay, but it's not. We only have maybe...oh, we have maybe 40 people who are gay. And most of them are older, and some are with their families, they were fortunate to be able to adopt children and raise them.

Wendy: Do you have children that you raised?

Chuck: No, I have no children that I raised. I mean, I've always had my nieces and nephew, and I've had other people's children. I mean, not that I didn't want to, but at the time that we were younger, there was no way in hell we could adopt. Of course, there was a point in time of people being born with HIV. The babies were not allowed to go up for adoption.

Wendy: I didn't know that.

Chuck: Yeah, they kept them in the hospital. It was more money for them.

Wendy: Wow. So when you look over the, say, 50 years that you've been gay, out as a gay man, what do you see as some of the most significant changes that have happened over the years?

Chuck: I think it's great that the younger people have the opportunity to be able to get married, to be who they want to be. I feel I've worked with the marriage equality and also with the equality in Portland, which started out as just for this. I didn't do it for me, because at that point I was too old. I did it for the children coming up.

Wendy: The anti-discrimination work that you did?

Chuck: Yup, yup.

Wendy: Do you have a sense of what gay culture is like in Portland now? Do you go out?

Chuck: No, most times we hang, you know, we hang around with our straight friends. Don't go to gay bars. About the only thing I go to that's gay is the SAGE meetings. You ever heard of SAGE?

Wendy: I have been, yes.

Chuck: Yeah, over at St. Luke's?

Wendy: Yes.

Chuck: Oh, good! I sit at the table checking people in.

Wendy: I'll see you again there, I'm sure.

Chuck: Yeah!

Wendy: Well, is there anything else? I think we've covered all of the topics that you said you wanted to talk about. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you would like to share?

Chuck: I think people should learn to understand and appreciate people they have around them, whether they're straight, gay, whether they're disabled or what, that we're all brothers and sisters. And say what you feel, don't hide it. Now how long have you been gay?

Wendy: Oh, jeez. Not 50 years yet, but say, what, since my thirties, early thirties, and I'm 62, so 33 years, yeah.

Chuck: One of my best friends in Philadelphia was, the girl I was going to marry, was her cousin, who I've known all my life. Her name was Doris and she was a lesbian. We remained friends for years and years, and at the time in Philadelphia, men didn't go to women's bars and women didn't go to men's bars, and I used to go to the women's bars only because I was with Doris, and I'd take her into the men's bars because she was with me. We were, I would say, like brother and sister, because she and her cousin—just because her cousin and I didn't get married didn't mean we weren't friends.

Wendy: Did you find that it was unusual then—you said women didn't go to the men's bars, men didn't go to the women's bars—was it—

Chuck: No, it wasn't unusual, it was standard back then. I don't know where you grew up, but I think if [inaudible] you had your lesbian bars and you had your gay bars. In fact, in Philadelphia you had your leather bar, you had your gay bar, I mean your trans, your drag bars, you had your normal bars that all the guys went into.

Wendy: Did you find that in Portland when you came here? Were there lesbian bars and gay bars?

Chuck: Yeah, there were lesbian bars and gay bars here. Well, at one point the only one that was was the Phoenix and was the, uh, Roland's. And then after that they, I think they opened up Sister's and a couple other bars for the girls.

Wendy: But initially when you moved here, everybody went to Roland's?

Chuck: Yeah, they all went to Roland's, which completely blew my mind coming from Philadelphia and the isolation. "No, no, you can't go here, you can't go there."

Wendy: The isolation? Say more about that. What was the difference between Philadelphia and Portland?

Chuck: The men and women, you know, were together in bars.

Wendy: I see. In Portland, but not in Philadelphia. I see.

Chuck: In Portland, not in Philadelphia. In fact, I had friends that I knew who got married and they married a lesbian couple, and they were a gay couple, but they married as husband and wife and they shared a duplex house, but once they were inside the house, they went back to their own business.

Wendy: Was that in Portland?

Chuck: No, that was in—a couple like that in Philadelphia. Just to satisfy mom and dad.

Wendy: When you said you were planning on getting married, did you imagine something similar for yourself? That you would be able to—

Chuck: Yeah, well, I was hoping, but in later life, of course, with all the illnesses I've come up with, it's not practical, because my bills are mine, and my insurance coverage is mine. I don't want anything to happen if I die for David to be burdened with all my bills.

Wendy: I see. So you two decided against marriage for practical reasons?

Chuck: For practical reasons. And like I said, 53 years. I mean, who needs a piece of paper?

Wendy: Well, that was absolutely wonderful, Chuck. Again, is there anything now that you're kind of thinking back and thinking you wish you had said more about, or anything else?

Chuck: No, I just think that if anything happens again like AIDS or something that people are more enlightened and more accepting, and work together rather than divide.

Wendy: Yeah.

Chuck: Because it always bothered me when I saw lovers or heard of lovers who were together for ten years, and one would come down with AIDS and the other one would walk away. Marriage has its benefits if you're younger. During the pandemic of AIDS if one lover died and there was property together, the parents of the survivor would come and take everything. If they had a joint bank account, they even went after that. And I would say to everyone in any relationship, regardless of how old you are, if you're committed to that person, go see a lawyer and get wills made out to protect yourself and to protect your partner. That's a very important thing.

Wendy: Yeah, as we get older, it's so interesting. I mean, I, like you, went through a wave of deaths in the AIDS epidemic, but now as we get older I'm going through a wave of deaths again.

Chuck: Because of age, right.

Wendy: Age.

Chuck: And I mean, I was diagnosed with cancer, but it's a very low-grade cancer so there's no treatment involved. I've always said that if I did develop a grade 3 or grade 4 cancer, that I would do nothing but, I wouldn't fight it, I mean I would just let God do his own thing and just keep me comfortable. And I think if we know people who are sick or people that need things, that we sometimes look at people in the street and we don't realize what they've been through. That but for the sake of God go I. And be who you are, but find a safe place where you want to be. And it's very hard in big cities because there's still a lot of prejudice in big cities, but you find your neighborhoods and you find your friends.

Wendy: Do you still live in—no, you don't live in Gray anymore, you live in South Portland?

Chuck: No, we live in South Portland, yeah. We've been in South Portland 13 years now.

Wendy: I find the greater Portland area to be pretty diverse—I mean, for Maine, ethnically diverse—and also lots of gay people in this town.

Chuck: Oh yeah, lots of gay. And I mean, it's like yesterday we were out, we had a church fair yesterday, and there were six of us. After the church fair we went out and had dinner together, and the other four were straight. Two were widows and one straight couple. But they're not afraid to hug or give a kiss, you know. Even

the straight fellow that was there, he's a big hugger and he'll kiss you on the cheeks, and, you know, that's why you treat people the way you get treated back.

Wendy: Well, it sounds like you have a good community.

Chuck: I believe I do.

Wendy: Well, thank you, Chuck. I will be in touch with you or I'll put you in touch with Susie Bock about donating the materials, and I will send you by email—I have an email address for you—a copy of this audio tape so you'll be able to listen to it.

Chuck: Okay.

Wendy: The last thing that I need from you is to have you sign a release form and gift form that gives the interview to the Sampson Center.

Chuck: Yep!