

Johnna: Okay, so before we start, I just want to remind you that you can stop the interview at any time for whatever reason. You can just say, "I want to stop." And if I ask you any questions that you don't want to answer, you can just say, "I don't want to answer," and we'll move on from that question. So my name is Johnna Ossie, I'm going to spell it for the recording: J O H N N A O S S I E, and we're here in Portland, Maine. Can you spell your full name for me?

Dick: Dick Harrison, D I C K H A R R I S O N.

Johnna: Okay, great. And how old are you?

Dick: 68.

Johnna: Okay. And where were you born?

Dick: Buffalo, New York.

Johnna: Buffalo, New York. Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

Dick: I have one older sister. My parents are both gone, they've been gone for a while. I grew up in a conservative, strictly kosher Jewish household. I went through the whole thing, Bar Mitzvah, but I'm no longer religious. I'm an atheistic Jew, I guess I'd say. Culturally, I'm still a Jew, but I'm not a religious person, so...

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: I lived around Buffalo until I was sixteen, then my parents moved to Albany. Pretty much a loner, stereotypical gay boy. Just alone. Two years in Albany finishing high school, then undergrad in Plattsburg, New York where I kept changing majors. I ended up in art. Went to Boston, got a master's in art and teaching, and then found a teaching job in Maine. There were only two that year, one was in Millinocket and one was in Van Buren. Do you know where that is?

Johnna: I don't.

Dick: Way, way up. If I have a map, I can show you. It's way, it's on the Canadian border.

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: North of—three hours north of Bangor.

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: I taught art there for two years. I didn't like the area. I didn't like the teaching, but I liked the area, so I stayed there. I met someone and we were together for about

twenty years until we split up. After teaching, I ended up working at Loring Air Force Base. I was their in-house graphic designer for the recreation department.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: Civilian job. It was before computers and desktop publishing, it was all things done by hand. X-Acto knives and hot wax and blue pencil, parallel rulers. Computers came in, I learned Macintosh and did that. The base closed, I had been with the base for over twelve years. The base closed, I didn't—instead of moving away, I bought a building and I started my own graphic design business. I did that for six or seven years. Sold that, and I landed a job, I was lucky to get the job as the in-house graphic designer/photographer at the University of Maine in Presque Isle, where I was until I retired.

Johnna: Wow, great.

Dick: And then moved to Portland in November of 2016.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: While living in Van Buren, I hadn't come out—is that enough to start?

Johnna: Oh, yeah, that's—I have a whole list of questions, so I can keep asking you.

Dick: Okay, okay. Am I loud enough for that?

Johnna: Oh, we have like—it usually takes about ninety minutes, so you can...

Dick: I mean am I speaking—

Johnna: Oh, are you loud enough? Yeah, yeah. I put it towards you so it should be fine.

Dick: Okay.

Johnna: It's pretty good at picking up sound.

Dick: Okay.

Johnna: So just, I'm going to take a little bit back to your family.

Dick: Sure.

Johnna: When you were growing up, you said you have a sister?

Dick: Yes.

Johnna: Is she older or younger?

Dick: Older.

Johnna: Older, okay.

Dick: Six years older.

Johnna: Are you close with her?

Dick: No.

Johnna: No, not close.

Dick: Not really.

Johnna: So when you were growing up, do you remember what your family's ideas about gay people were?

Dick: 1950s, it wasn't spoken about, wasn't discussed. My mother knew. Mothers always know. My mother knew. But I just repressed it until I was...I didn't come out until I was twenty-seven.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: But I knew that there was something different there. I didn't know how to identify it. I wouldn't acknowledge it.

Johnna: Right, so you didn't really have an idea until you were in your late twenties. Or you knew—

Dick: Well, I knew, but I just didn't acknowledge it.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: Yeah. Self-oppression, homophobia, so...

Johnna: Yeah. What was your parents' reaction when you did come out? Do you remember?

Dick: My mother had died. My father—I was living in Van Buren, and he wrote to me and I wrote back to him, the letters crossed in the mail. He wrote, he said he wanted to come up and visit. I wrote and came out. So—

Johnna: You wrote back and you said you were gay?

Dick: Before I got his letter I had started to send it back.

Johnna: Mhmm.

Dick: His initial reaction was it's a phase I'm going through, which I said I wasn't. And he said, "Well, you didn't get it from my side of the family." I laughed, I said, you know, "No." But after, it took a while, he was, he grew to accept it just fine. The same with my sister when I first told her, she said, "Intellectually, I can accept it, emotionally I have to deal with this." And it took a while, but she's okay, too.

Johnna: Yeah. So tell me again where you were living when you came out?

Dick: I was living in Boston.

Johnna: Boston. And was there a pretty big gay scene there at the time?

Dick: Oh yes, yes. But I was still very closeted. I got a picture, a copy of the Boston Phoenix had the Best of Boston, and one of the things was "Men's or Gay Bar." And I happened to work across the street from Chap's, I worked at the Copley Plaza Hotel on the front desk. And I found out where Chap's was and I walked by in the daytime, and then I went inside during the daytime, I wanted to find out where the men's room was and how much a beer was because then I wouldn't have to talk to anybody. I could just, you know [laughs].

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: And the first time I went in in the evening, I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't at all what I was expecting. There were just men in there wearing flannel shirts and blue jeans and sitting around and—I don't know what I expected. So that was the beginning.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you remember what that first night was like when you went to the bar? Were you nervous?

Dick: Oh, yeah. I didn't talk to anybody.

Johnna: Yeah, you just sat in there?

Dick: I sat there, I had a little weekly newspaper I sat at the bar and read. So I'm looking up and just very nervous.

Johnna: What year was that? Do you remember?

Dick: That must have been...1975? Yeah. In there.

Johnna: Were there other places that you liked to hang out that were specifically for gay men? Other bars or other—

Dick: That was the only, that was the one I went to.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: That was comfortable. It was just a bar, not a disco dancing place or anything.

Johnna: Yeah. Did you meet anyone there?

Dick: A few people I'd sit and talk with, but it took a while before I started to meet people socially.

Johnna: Yeah. So how long were you living in Boston for?

Dick: Five years.

Johnna: And were you there for a while before you came out, or did you come out?

Dick: I was probably there for—which apartment was I living in? I was probably there for two or three years before I came out.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you remember what your first romantic relationship after you came out was?

Dick: Romantic?

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: Well, I wouldn't call the relationship I had with the man I was with romantic, because I was still pretty naive and adolescent even though I was late twenties.

Johnna: That's fair.

Dick: Romantic could have been more recently, with a guy I met from California.

Johnna: Mhmm. Did you have—but you were in relationships with men after you came out, or did it take a while?

Dick: Not until I moved to Maine and I met someone in Maine.

Johnna: Took a while.

Dick: Yeah.

Johnna: So what brought you away from Boston when you left?

Dick: A job. A teaching job.

Johnna: Great. So you mentioned that you wanted to talk about the Maine Lesbian Gay Political Alliance? You said that on your—

Dick: Oh, that was one of the things, and Northern Lambda.

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: When I first moved up there and I was teaching school, I was a closeted teacher but I met... At the time there was a monthly magazine called *Mainely Gay*. It came out of Boston—it came out of Portland. I put a personal ad in the back and I said, “Gay man just moved to the St. John Valley, looking for other people in the area.” And I got two responses, one from a man in Madawaska and one from a gay couple in Fort Kent. So I met them both. The couple in Fort Kent and I started Northern Lambda Nord up there.

Johnna: Okay. Oh, you started it?

Dick: Yeah, we rented a PO Box in Caribou, so it wasn’t in either of our towns. We put a little notice on the county page in the *Bangor Daily News* with the PO Box. And the first meeting was held at my house in Van Buren and there were thirteen people, twelve men and one woman. I’d say half of them were Canadians, French-speaking from New Brunswick. That’s why the name—originally it was Aroostook Lambda, but after the first meeting because it was international and bilingual and everything it became Northern Lambda Nord.

Johnna: Oh, okay.

Dick: So that’s French, too.

Johnna: So you started—so tell me more about that. Why did you want to start that?

Dick: Oh, to meet other people around there. There was no social networking at the time. So the three of us who started it, and after the first meeting there were people interested to get involved, so we wrote a constitution and had monthly meetings, and we had a board. It gradually grew. We had a monthly potluck supper. It lasted for a good twenty years

Johnna: Oh, wow.

Dick: So over that time... Monthly potluck supper, sometimes a keynote speaker would come in on a Sunday afternoon, sometimes there’d be a game night, we’d play board games or card games. Everything was held in people’s houses, so we’d have a dance at someone’s barn or garage or something. The group got big enough where we would rent the Caribou Snowmobile Club or the Presque Isle—the Caribou Golf Club, or the Snowmobile Presque Isle—wait a minute, let me start again. The Caribou Country Club Clubhouse or the Presque Isle Snowmobile Club, and we’d rent those buildings and we’d have a dance there, like, twice a

year. And there would be forty, fifty people would show up, they'd come out of the woodwork.

Johnna: Yeah, it seems like people were really wanting some sort of community.

Dick: They liked to go dancing, there was no place to go dancing where you could just be yourself.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: The group kept growing, and there were never any more than forty-five or fifty paying members at one time, but there were three or four hundred on our list who would show up to things but didn't want to have, didn't want to pay any money and didn't want to be on the list for membership. There was a newsletter every month. We wrote grants. The first grant, I think we asked for \$22,000 and we got \$7,000, which was good. So we bought a typewriter to have an office, and a volleyball net, and things like that. And over the years, I think we wrote four different grants. So over time, we got \$30-35,000 for different things.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: Rented an office space in Caribou where we had—at the time, it was the only community center in the state.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: And it was right on Main Street. So it was an office, we had accumulated books and people had donated books, so we had a lending library with eight or nine hundred volumes. We had someone who volunteered to figure out the whole, you know, the Dewey decimal system and print out cards and the little pockets, those were all donated to Outright.

Johnna: Oh, cool.

Dick: So they have them here and I don't know what's going to happen, there's a little—supposed to be some discussion about getting them up out of the basement and making them available to somebody.

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: Either at the Outright center or at the Equality Center or something, but I don't know what's happening with that. Those were all donated after the Center closed. There was a meeting room, there was a phone line, we had an 800 phone line, which was staffed once a week.

Johnna: Wow. What did people call for? Just to talk?

Dick: It was information on coming out, HIV/AIDS information as well. So we had some grants to help fund that. Eventually, that became an 800 number and it was—you would call, and you didn't have to go into the community center to answer it because there was call forwarding through a service. Let's say I would volunteer Monday from 7:00-9:00, I would be at home and at five to 7:00 the phone would ring. It would be the operator, "I'm going to start forwarding calls."

Johnna: Right.

Dick: So for the next two hours, I could just do it at home. So that's how that worked.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: There was the Maine Gay Symposium. Originally Gay Symposium, Lesbian Gay Symposium, Bi Lesbian—you know, the terms kept growing. That was started in the 80s by the Wilde-Stein Club in Orono. The *Bangor Daily* called that the "homosexual hoedown." That was their editorial about, "we shouldn't have state funds for this thing." So it was held at Orono a few times, and then—what's the USM group? Wilde-Stein was at Orono... USM group then hosted the symposium on the Gorham campus.

Johnna: Oh, wow.

Dick: I think maybe Portland-Gorham. So then it started alternating every year, every spring, between Orono and Portland-Gorham. And then in the early 90s, Northern Lambda Nord said, "Well, we're going to do this." We were able to get use of the campus in Presque Isle of the university. Before that time, people had been doing it in people's homes. Extra bedrooms, on a floor, on a couch. We didn't have enough people to put people up who would come, and even if we did we didn't live close enough to Presque Isle. People lived all over.

Johnna: Right.

Dick: It was like the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: Both sides of the border. So what we did was we arranged to rent the campus and one of the residence halls, which hadn't been done before. So what we did was we created a little queer campus, a little queer community for three days. We did it on Memorial Day weekend so there was extra time for people to travel because it was so far. But everything was contained there. Everyone ate in the dining hall, you stayed in the residence hall, there was nothing outside, so there was no

distraction. Like in Portland, people would come to symposium and then they may go to the dance or they may go downtown.

Johnna: Right.

Dick: So people disappeared in the evening. But in Presque Isle, you were there all the time for three days. So we ended up—Northern Lambda hosted that I think four times in twelve years.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: And after we did it, it set a new standard, because then Orono and Portland started using the residence halls.

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: And building people there. And then it grew to where symposium was held at Unity College a couple times, College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor. There was a group called Symposium Forever which was designed to keep the conference going year after year. So there was a big instruction booklet put together with a timeline of when you had to do things, there was seed money in a bank account, and that worked well until some people who used the Southern Maine Community College campus. It wasn't the school, it was the people organizing it who just blew the whole thing. Didn't follow the instructions, spent money that wasn't there, and then it was hard to get it going again.

Johnna: Right.

Dick: I think that was the end of it.

Johnna: What year was that, do you remember?

Dick: I don't know. 2000? 2001? But it was really good. When we did it in Presque Isle, because we were an international group, we always had two keynote speakers, one Canadian, one American. And we did things as bilingual as possible, but it was mostly English-speaking people.

Johnna: Do you remember how many people came up to Presque Isle for that?

Dick: If we got 100, that was a lot.

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: People from Portland. There would be people from Portland, but we got people from the rest of the state, from Halifax, from Fredericton, from PEI. One year, we had someone from Newfoundland, which was pretty far away.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: It was about twenty percent Canadians who showed up.

Johnna: Wow. So people were coming over the border to come.

Dick: Yeah. That's when crossing the border was very easy.

Johnna: Right, you didn't need a passport.

Dick: When I first moved to Van Buren, there was no Laundromat in town, so I would do my laundry in Canada every week, back and forth. All you needed was a driver's license. "Hey, how you doing? I'm going to do laundry." "Okay, go."

Johnna: Wow. That's wild.

Dick: Yeah, long before 9/11.

Johnna: Yeah, yeah. What year was it that you started Northern Lambda Nord?

Dick: I think it was 1980. I could look, because we have all kinds of mugs.

Johnna: Oh, cool.

Dick: Tenth anniversary mug, twenty-fifth symposium mugs, things like that.

Johnna: That's awesome. So did you have a lot of people at that time in northern Maine who were calling in for HIV/AIDS information?

Dick: More and more over time, but it was never a large number. If you got two calls in a night, that was a lot.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: But it was there, because we were in the phone book. We were in the Yellow Pages, both under G for "gay" and under L for "lesbian." And that was only because the New York City queer community fought with New York Telephone to get a separate listing in the Yellow Pages under G and under L.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: And that was in the time when it was New York-New England Telephone, so it was one big region. So because New York got that, it was available anywhere in New England. So we made sure we were in the Yellow Pages.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: And then we were in the White Pages under “gay phone line,” I think.

Johnna: Wow. That seems like it must have been a big deal for people up there to have that community.

Dick: Yeah, it was. That was all there was. It was before the Internet, so people were isolated, and a lot of them, they’d move away. They moved to Bangor or Portland, they moved to Portland.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: So, but this was something. It served what it needed to do, it did what it needed to do at the time. What the society needed, what the community up north needed.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you keep in touch with anyone from that group now?

Dick: No. Not really.

Johnna: Did you after, or after it disbanded?

Dick: Oh, yeah, we still, yeah. We’d socialize. But it’s been a long time.

Johnna: Yeah. You said it lasted for twenty years?

Dick: Twenty years.

Johnna: So it’s maybe been another twenty since it ended, or around there?

Dick: Oh, yes. It’s still there on paper. There are some people in Houlton who are keeping it going with a PO Box, and occasionally they’ll have a dance or a party, but it’s not like it was.

Johnna: Yeah, that makes sense. Let’s see... You mentioned that you want to talk about religion, which you touched on a little bit earlier. Do you think that being Jewish has been significant to you in your life? You said that you’re an atheist now.

Dick: Significant in the sense that I was always other.

Johnna: Do you think it added a layer of otherness to you when you were younger and kind of closeted?

Dick: Yeah, I was different, and then being gay I was different.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: I read something once a long time ago where Jews make up four percent of the population of the country, but in civil rights movements, more like ten percent. You know, in the Black civil rights movement, they were prominent. And even today in the queer community, queer movement, there are a lot of Jews.

Johnna: Mhm. Are you involved in the Jewish community in Portland?

Dick: No.

Johnna: No.

Dick: I went to the Maine Jewish Film Festival [laughs].

Johnna: Yeah!

Dick: I saw a couple films.

Johnna: Yeah. Any good ones?

Dick: The one about Hedy Lamarr was fascinating. She was an Austrian refugee and a movie star, a beautiful, beautiful movie star.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: She escaped to England where—Samuel B. Mayer from MGM, he brought a lot of Jewish actors out of Europe to save their lives, so then he signed her and took her to the United States. He changed her last name to Lamarr, which is “the sea.” They were on a big ship, and he said, “Oh, you need a better last name.” But she was not only an actor, she was an inventor. She invented and patented... It was called frequency hopping, where she wanted to do something to help with the war effort, and the British—I don’t think America was in the war at the time, but the British were trying to torpedo German boats, and they would control them by radio frequencies, but the Germans could jam the frequency. So what she came up with is that between here and here, you may use ten frequencies, and as the torpedo is going along, you’re sending that signal, but you keep skipping from one frequency to another every couple of seconds. So the Germans would only jam one of the frequencies, but it wasn’t long enough to lose control of the torpedo.

Johnna: Wow. She sounds really smart.

Dick: Frequency skipping. And she didn’t make any money on it, they screwed her over with the patent and everything. She wanted the Navy to do something. But it’s the basis for how GPS signals, Bluetooth, secure WiFi, how those things work. It’s all based on what she had patented and invented.

Johnna: Wow. That's so cool.

Dick: So I thought that was fascinating.

Johnna: Yeah. I'll have to check that out.

Dick: Yeah. That was a good one.

Johnna: So you were up in northern Maine for the whole time that you were involved in Northern Lambda North, were you up there, or did you leave?

Dick: Yes. I was there from the late '70s until November 2016.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: And you had asked, MLGPA. During the time, I was at—MLGPA started at one of the symposiums that was held in, it was either Orono or Bangor, I don't know where, which campus. If it's Bangor, it could have been at the community college, Orono, it would have been at UMO. Dale McCormick and Betsy Sweet... Charlie Howard had been killed.

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: Dale McCormick and Betsy Sweet and maybe a couple other people had a workshop to organize a state political organization. So I was at the first meeting, and I was on the Board for, I don't know, ten, fifteen years representing the north.

Johnna: So what was that like? Can you talk about that a little bit, the work that you all did together?

Dick: Oh, well that was interesting. A lot of it had to focus on legislation, visibility... Just visibility was a big thing. Making people feel safe.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: I remember there was an incident in Caribou. Northern Lambda Nord was based in Caribou. The Chamber of Commerce erected these huge "Welcome to Caribou" billboards, and they were soliciting donations from community organizations—I guess it was \$100 or more—and you could put your logo on the bottom of the billboard with the time and location of your meetings. So Lambda submitted the money and wanted this and they sent the check back.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: That was how homophobic it was.

Johnna: What year was that? Do you remember?

Dick: Oh... Probably late '80s, because we also participated in the Caribou Winter Carnival snow sculpture competition. One year we did that, and we had a lot in a visible intersection in front, near the police station, and we built this big—I don't know what you'd call it—it was probably about fifteen feet square and fifteen feet tall, and we carved it all out so you could walk inside and stand up in the middle, and we spray painted names of famous lesbians and gay men on the inside. It had a big heart on the top, and it said "NLN." And they wouldn't judge it. They wouldn't include it in the judging.

Johnna: Wow. Did you experience a lot of homophobia living in a rural area?

Dick: Oh, yeah. Early on, it was... People threw garbage at my house a couple times. But I always called the police, and the police wouldn't do anything.

Johnna: Really?

Dick: State troopers, because it was outside of town.

Johnna: Yeah. Wow. Do you think that that changed at all over the years?

Dick: Oh, yeah, because after a while the Chamber was soliciting us for donations.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: And we'd make sure we would join. Lambda had enough money, too, where we joined all the Chambers in the county. So that's Caribou, Presque Isle, Fort Fairfield, Houlton, Madawaska, Van Buren, six, so that we'd be on their book and be on their membership rolls.

Johnna: Wow. Yeah. Do you remember what the feeling was when Charlie Howard was murdered? Were you, were people nervous? That was not far from you, right?

Dick: Oh, that was still 180 miles away.

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: The County is another world. But it did affect people.

Johnna: Yeah. What was the feeling?

Dick: Sure, I don't know.

Johnna: What were you feeling?

Dick: Oh, well, just sad and aware how terrible something like that could happen to someone in Bangor. The hate that was demonstrated by that, the intolerance.

Johnna: Yeah. So what eventually drew you away from northern Maine? What made you move?

Dick: Oh, well, it was after I retired, and it was just becoming too isolated up there. Most of the people I knew lived in what I called southern Maine, which is the southern half from Bangor south. People don't consider Bangor southern Maine, but anything was southern there. I had been going to Gay Men Together, which was a twice yearly men's retreat near Augusta meeting people who all lived down here, so I said, "Well, I want to move down here." And eventually I did, but it took a long time,

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: Yeah, it became... There was not much left up there, no social life. And after Loring Air Base closed, people just were moving away. And Caribou was dying.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: They lost, the Pizza Hut closed. That's how much.

Johnna: You said you were a closeted teacher. Were you closeted the whole time you were teaching, or did you eventually come out?

Dick: I taught for two years, and people knew, but I didn't come out.

Johnna: Okay, yeah.

Dick: But it was known.

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: *Fifi*, which is French for faggot. They spoke French in Van Buren, so on the streets, so I heard that.

Johnna: Hmm. How did you feel about that?

Dick: Well, it was okay. I was [laughs].

Johnna: So you moved to southern Maine. Has that been a big change for you?

Dick: Oh, yeah. Things are better here.

Johnna: As far as...?

Dick: As far as social life, as far as availability of things. Little, everyday things that you would want to buy that you couldn't buy up north because there wasn't a store that had it, or they didn't have a good selection, so I would keep a piece of paper by my phone, my Bangor shopping list. You know, a shower curtain liner, something like that. Stuff you couldn't get up there. So I'd go, you know, Bed Bath & Beyond, there aren't any up there. There's a Walmart, the Sears closed, the Kmart closed, the economy up there—there's an outmigration, which is still happening. It's just too bad, because it's beautiful. The economy is terrible.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you have a gay community in Portland that you spend time with?

Dick: I've been getting—well, I've had friends from the past, and I've been reacquainting myself with acquaintances. But I've been involved in SAGE. I'm on the Programming Committee, so I meet with them, I go to the meeting every month, and I went to an Elder Symposium in Salem with seven other SAGE people last Friday, it was for the day.

Johnna: What happened there?

Dick: It was geared more towards providers for elderly people in nursing homes and home care things, how they can make queer elders more comfortable.

Johnna: In nursing homes or in—

Dick: In places like that.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: So I don't know how effective it was. They've done this a few times, so... And there was a good film there called... It was about aging. I'll think of it... *Silent*, oh, *Gen Silent*, the Silent Generation?

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: *Gen Silent*, and it's about several lesbian and gay couples who are retired, they're over 70, and what their lives are like, and how many of them, if they go into a nursing home they go back into the closet, because they're afraid of what the other people will say. This is where this conference is good. Try to get the people who work there more aware and accepting and welcoming of the gay clientele who are there.

Johnna: Yeah, that seems really important.

Dick: Yeah.

Johnna: So...

Dick: So I marched in the Pride parade with SAGE last year.

Johnna: Oh, really?

Dick: Yeah, it was fun. Next year I want to sit on the sidelines and watch the parade.

Johnna: [Laughs] It's pretty hot walking down the street.

Dick: Yeah.

Johnna: For sure. So you've been involved with SAGE since you moved to Portland?

Dick: Yeah, for one year.

Johnna: One year. It seems like for the last forty years, you've been involved in organizing or activism in some way.

Dick: In some way.

Johnna: Is that important to you?

Dick: Yeah. I did get burned out, but this is easier here because I'm a volunteer on a committee, so I can sit on my hands if I don't want to volunteer for something [laughs]. Whereas early on in the early years, I was one of the Board members doing things, traveling to MLGPA meetings.

Johnna: Yeah. How long were you with MLGPA for?

Dick: I'd say more than ten years. And the meetings were, there was always an argument. Well, a lot of argument. I always made a point of pointing out that if you're going to have a meeting that's going to include everyone from around the state it has to be more centralized, Augusta. And it can't be on a Thursday evening. It has to be when you can drive down and back or stay overnight if you have to, which I had to sometimes.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: But when I got off the Board, there was someone that took my place but didn't last long from the County. And then they just went back to providing, accommodating people who live from Bangor south, because there wasn't anyone north of Bangor who was getting involved in anything. The population shrank, the number of activists was reduced. So I don't blame them, that's what it is. But SAGE, I think SAGE has one or two people working up in Presque Isle. It's not

like the chapters in Bangor or Augusta or Portland, where they're doing a monthly meal.

Johnna: Right. Do you notice any differences in the LGBT community now as opposed to when you first came out when you were 27 in Boston?

Dick: Oh, yes. Things are more open, people can hold hands. The younger generation seem to take it in stride, like this is just normal. And the gender fluidity, that whole thing. It's very different. It's better growing up now. Ellen is on TV. You, know, there wasn't anything like that before.

Johnna: Right, you couldn't see—

Dick: It wasn't even spoken about. It was illegal.

Johnna: Yeah. When you were in New York, that was in the '50s, '60s, and it wasn't even talked about?

Dick: No.

Johnna: You said in the beginning that you were a stereotypical gay boy. What did you mean by that?

Dick: Oh, the stereotype of being alone and being quiet and not playing sports. But I wasn't encouraged to do that. If I had been, I probably would have played sports, but my father didn't...

Johnna: He didn't push you.

Dick: No, he was a 1950s dad who didn't do much with his kids.

Johnna: Yeah. What sort of things were you into doing?

Dick: Oh, well I played by myself or with Linda Smith, who lived around the block. You know, a sissy boy. Hang out with some friends down the street, Phil [inaudible] and some other people. We'd play in the street. This was when it was not uncommon for you to come home—I was a latchkey kid, my mother taught school and my father was away—I'd let myself in the house, and then I'd go back outside and the kids of the neighborhood would be playing in the street. Non-directed play, which is disappearing. Things are too structured. Kids don't have a chance to figure it out for themselves.

Johnna: Yeah, things are definitely different now.

Dick: Yeah. You know, Red Light Green Light, did you ever play Red Light Green Light?

Johnna: Oh, definitely [laughs].

Dick: [Inaudible] you're up against a tree.

Johnna: Definitely. Did you have any gay role models when you were younger, or people that you sort of looked up to?

Dick: Role model? No, there weren't any at the time, and I didn't know them.

Johnna: What about when you were coming out?

Dick: Oh... I don't think of anyone as a role model, no. I was still just figuring myself out and not too aware of the world.

Johnna: Did you have any friends that were gay before you came out?

Dick: No.

Johnna: No. So you sort of came out all on your own?

Dick: I was the only one in the world.

Johnna: [Laughs] Did it feel that way when you first came out?

Dick: Well, I knew that there were more because living in Boston there was "Best Men's or Gay Bar" so I knew there were people there.

Johnna: Right, yeah. But you didn't know any?

Dick: But I was very slow to make friends. I don't approach people. I'm quiet.

Johnna: Yeah, but eventually you started a whole community group, so...

Dick: Yeah, out of necessity.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: I needed some socialization.

Johnna: Yeah. How has your life changed as you've gotten older?

Dick: Well, over time, of course, I'm much more comfortable with myself. I don't come out to people, per se, but I don't deny that I am if something happens. You know, public displays of affection are not out of the question.

Johnna: You have a partner now?

Dick: No. I'm living with a man who was my partner years ago. We split up, and shortly after we split up he was injured on the job, so he's disabled. He has a brain injury. He's at rehab this afternoon. Three times a week he goes. So I'm his legal guardian and conservator, so beyond that I'm trying to date and find new, a new partner.

Johnna: Yeah. Where are some places that you go to meet people in Portland?

Dick: Oh, I meet them through the SAGE things or online.

Johnna: Mhm. Do you go out to any bars in Portland, or...?

Dick: I haven't been to Blackstone's since I've been back.

Johnna: No.

Dick: That's the only one—

Johnna: Did you used to go there when you visited Portland?

Dick: When I was visiting Portland, I would always go.

Johnna: Do you remember what it was like when you first went to Blackstone's?

Dick: I don't know if it's changed much, but it was small. I would know a few people from symposium or other things, or from Gay Men Together. I'd usually order a beer and sit by the pool table and grab one of the local weeklies, watch the pool game. That was it. And then leave.

Johnna: [Laughs] Sort of just observe?

Dick: Yeah, yeah.

Johnna: Yeah. So I sort of sidetracked you there. You said you feel more comfortable now letting people know that you're gay?

Dick: I don't have an issue with it.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: The rainbow flag goes up during Pride Week on the front of the house.

Johnna: Awesome.

Dick: I have a sticker on the car.

Johnna: I saw your sticker, yeah. I had a feeling I was at the right house when I saw the sticker. Is this a good neighborhood, do you feel like it's a safe neighborhood for you?

Dick: Oh, yeah. There's a lesbian couple across the street.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: So, it's Portland, so Portland is different.

Johnna: Pretty different than living way up in the County.

Dick: Yes. Presque Isle, per se, is not bad because it's the biggest city there. But it's tiny, it's only 10,000 people. You still have a lot of the right-wing Christian congregations up there.

Johnna: Yeah. That makes sense. Hmm...you covered a lot of these before I even had to ask them. It's like you already knew what I was going to ask. Is there anything that's come up that you think might be important to talk about?

Dick: Oh, I should mention Diane Ellzey as another influence. In the survey, I think I put Dale McCormick down. Diane Ellzey, because she said to me once the importance of self-love.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: And she was an activist for a long time. She still is.

Johnna: Why did that resonate with you so much when she talked about self-love?

Dick: Just, it was just a positive reinforcement that I should be okay with myself.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you think you—

Dick: I was still coming out.

Johnna: Yeah. You had some internalized homophobia before that?

Dick: Oh, sure.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: I'm sure there's still some there, but not much.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you think as you've gotten older, you've sort of settled into...?

Dick: Oh yeah. I'm this way because this is just how I am.

Johnna: Yeah, yeah. Well, if you want I can—you can refresh your memory and look at what you wrote down and see if there's anything I forgot to ask you.

Dick: Places, public figures, political activists, important news story, Albany, Montreal... Oh, after undergraduate school I tried to move to Montreal. This was with a Jewish group. They were setting up a house, an experimental house for men and for women living in the area to have to keep the place strictly kosher so that any Jews could come in. I think it was three and three, but one of the girls' father didn't want her moving in with some strange guys. It got real complicated and then I had trouble getting the whole immigration thing, that fell apart, and that's when I moved to Boston.

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: Then for grad school. Quebec City, I spent two summers there taking French immersion, that was great.

Johnna: Were you out when you were living in Quebec, or no?

Dick: Yes.

Johnna: What was that like?

Dick: Oh, that was fine, it was comfortable, because Quebec—Gaybec.

Johnna: [Laughs] Is that what it's called?

Dick: Well, people joke about Gaybec in Quebec City. And during their Pride Festival there was a rainbow flag flying above City Hall. This was long before you could see it like that in the US.

Johnna: What year was that?

Dick: This was in the late '80s. You know, Canada is much more ahead of us. Oh, Atlantic Canada. Because Northern Lambda Nord was an international group, we were part of MLGPA network, but we were also part of the Atlantic GLBT Network groups in Moncton and Fredericton and Halifax and on the north shore, the north shore of New Brunswick. So they would have an annual conference and we would go there, too. And we hosted that once, an Atlantic regional conference. We hosted it up, and we did it in different places. We had one day where we were at the Acadian Village in Van Buren, which is a reconstruction. One day we were in Caribou, one day we were someplace else. Much smaller than the symposium, but could have been thirty people. But that was it. Susan Farnsworth, an attorney in Augusta, I mention her because she was with the symposium forever.

Johnna: Okay.

Dick: Canadian.

Johnna: Okay, were you friends with her, or you knew her through the group?

Dick: No, I was friends with her. When I had my own business, there was one incident when there was a guy who was an electrician...somebody. He came over to get an estimate, and he never came back and he was never in touch with me again, and I figured because he was a homophobe. You find this out through other people. But then there was... I was a print broker, so I would design things, graphic design stuff, and use local vendors to do my printing. Well, there's one that I used most of the time, Cecil Walton, who went to the Baptist Church. We never talked politics, we never talked religion, it was strictly a business relationship and it was fine.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: You know, I was out. Everybody knew. And then there was the guy who lived next door—no, he owned the building next door, but he was also a contractor that I used at the house to fix things. Religious, a Trump person, but we didn't talk politics or religion and it was a business thing. He had the building next door, and I had a Yes On 1 and he had a No On 1 sign, whatever the referendum was, we were the opposite.

Johnna: [Laughs] Yeah.

Dick: So, you know, you can get along with anybody.

Johnna: Yeah, sometimes. So you were living up north during the gay marriage campaign?

Dick: Yes.

Johnna: What was it like up there? What were the thoughts?

Dick: It was—some friends of mine wanted to move away, and they did, because it was so depressing. There were so many “No” signs and so many churches. Very few supportive.

Johnna: Yeah. Did it feel sort of isolating?

Dick: Oh, yeah, yeah. You felt like you were just alone. There weren't many supporters.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: And then I would come down and visit Portland and there were “Yes” signs all over the place rather than “No.”

Johnna: Yeah. I can see why eventually you might want to move to southern Maine for sure.

Dick: Yeah, it’s better here. There’s more life.

Johnna: Is there anything that I haven’t brought up that you want to talk about or that comes to mind?

Dick: I’ll think of it when you leave.

Johnna: [Laughs]

Dick: I’m trying to think, is there anything else... Northern Lambda was a big thing for a long time.

Johnna: Yeah, that sounds like that was a pretty big deal.

Dick: Yeah.

Johnna: What was it that you published in the newsletter? You said you published a newsletter. What went out in it?

Dick: Oh, it was minutes of the last meeting, and then it was news things that were happening around.

Johnna: Like community events, or...?

Dick: Community, yeah. Or things that might have been happening in Augusta or with legislation, just an information thing.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: I’d have to look at old copies and see. That was monthly.

Johnna: What was it that—why did the group come to an end?

Dick: A combination of things. The closing of Loring Air Base—there was a whole pool of what we called “wing nuts,” people who were in the Air Force, and occasionally there would be a witch hunt and they would disappear.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: You wouldn't see them again. They'd be at house parties and stuff, and then you wouldn't see them again. Men and women. And when the base closed, there was that whole pool of people who were gone. Not just from getting involved in Lambda events, but the entire community. So the things that closed, the car dealerships closed, because this was a city, basically a city of 7,000 people. The third largest community in northern Maine. You get rid of it, and all the demand for foodstuffs and everything drops. So Caribou had a whole bunch of car dealers, and anyone stationed at Loring in the middle of no place, you had to have a car. Those were one of the first things that closed. Car dealers, the moving companies—there was one left—restaurants, the airline, we used to have Delta, with big planes, and then—well, Reagan screwed it up with his deregulation, but the planes got smaller and less frequent. And then when there was no need for Loring Air Base, people coming in and out, it got even less. And the outmigration. I think the population went from about 85,000 to 65,000 in a few years.

Johnna: Wow.

Dick: And people are still moving away, because the economy is so bad.

Johnna: Yeah. So there just wasn't enough people to run the group?

Dick: Well, the group... No, the group kept going despite the Air Force closing. The Air Force closed, that was one hit. Internet came in. So there was another way to meet people. Before the Internet, you had to go to a house party or a game night.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: And after a while, it was the same people. You wouldn't meet new people.

Johnna: Right.

Dick: So the Internet made a difference there. And then we had the dances twice a year. A bar opened up in Madawaska.

Johnna: A gay bar, or just a—

Dick: A gay bar, but just one night a week. Sunday. So there was the special time when if you wanted to go dancing. That was the combination, but it was the outmigration that was the big thing.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: People moved away. And then the Internet, I think, was the second thing to kill it. So the need wasn't there anymore.

Johnna: How long after it ended that you moved away was it?

Dick: Oh, it probably ended in the early 2000s. I moved away fifteen years later.

Johnna: So what was the community like after it ended? Did you have—

Dick: I wouldn't say there was much sense of a community anymore.

Johnna: Was that hard for you?

Dick: Well, I still had people I was socializing with, but there weren't the monthly events, there was no place to go dancing, things like that.

Johnna: Yeah. That seems like it was probably a big hit for the community.

Dick: Yeah. Yeah, it was hard to do things in a rural area. But while the group was active, it was the most active group in the state with the community center and everything,

Johnna: Mhm, yeah, it sounds like it.

Dick: And all the activities.

Johnna: I hadn't heard of it before until I looked it up a little bit after you wrote it down, and I was like, very intrigued to read about it.

Dick: Yeah, we had—this woman owned a building and she let us have some space. And it was right on South Main Street, so it was a big sign on the front of the building. There were a couple other offices there, and it said "Northern Lambda Nord Lesbian Gay Community Center." And then it was written in French also.

Johnna: Wow, that's awesome.

Dick: The visibility, that was the whole thing. Putting the name out, and it was easier for it to be done in the name of a group rather than a person. A person isn't going to put their name in the newspaper, but the group does something.

Johnna: Yeah, for sure. That's awesome. Let me see if there's anything I missed here, and you can think if you have anything else to add. I think you might have answered all my questions. Although if you think of anything else, you can always...

Dick: I can email.

Johnna: You can always email, or you can have me come back over and I'll record it again.

Dick: [Laughs]

Johnna: And we can add it to it.

Dick: I think we covered a lot of stuff. Hmm... I'm trying to think of anything else that Lambda had in their resources. The lending library was the big thing. And when the group lost the building, the community center, we moved it to Van Buren. This guy had a big, big house, and he let us use part of the first floor, so that's where we would have our meetings.

Johnna: Oh, wow.

Dick: And that's where the library was. And the office.

Johnna: What were the ages of people in the group? Was it a wide range, or mostly younger?

Dick: They got older as the group in time [laughs].

Johnna: [Laughs]

Dick: It started with thirties, forties, fifties, and then it was forties, fifties. The oldest guy was in his seventies. And there were some younger ones, I don't think too many in their twenties.

Johnna: But it sounds like a pretty wide range.

Dick: Oh, yes, yes, the only game in town. Men and women.

Johnna: Yeah. It doesn't seem like now that there's so much of that sort of intermingling among younger and older queer people.

Dick: That's what SAGE is trying to do, making an effort. I know they've been, they invited the Outright people to come. They even had—no, I think it was with the trans group. They said, "We do a movie once a month, we're going to have some trans films, what do you suggest?" So they showed the film, but no trans people showed up.

Johnna: No one from the group came?

Dick: No one from the trans support group. Trying to do it with younger people. One of the dinners had a number of younger people there, so that was good. And I think the visibility of SAGE, their tagline is "We refuse to be invisible."

Johnna: Yeah. Visibility seems like an important aspect.

Dick: Yeah, you know, in so many different ways. For all the different kinds of groups, whatever letter you use.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: I'm leaning more now to just "queer" because it encompasses everything, and you don't want to leave a letter out.

Johnna: [Laughs] Yeah.

Dick: It used to be gay and lesbian, and then it became lesbian gay, just like Dykes on Bikes was always the first in the Pride Parade in San Francisco, for the visibility. You know, LGBT—I don't know what the Q is. Queer? Or questioning?

Johnna: I think it's queer, but I'm not totally sure.

Dick: And then I is intersex, and there's some other.

Johnna: Yeah, there's a lot of letters to keep track of.

Dick: Yeah. The woman Sampson—what's her first name?—from the archives, uses LGBTQ and then not "other," she uses a word...

Johnna: Just plus, maybe?

Dick: Plus, plus! Yeah.

Johnna: Yeah, I've seen that before, just a little plus sign.

Dick: Yeah, and queer is... Some people object to that, because it was used against us. But you hear "queer studies," you know, "queer radio shows," what's wrong...

Johnna: Yeah, I definitely—

Dick: You don't leave anybody out, except for people who would not even consider themselves to be queer.

Johnna: Right.

Dick: Straight.

Johnna: [Laughs] Then that's fine, they don't need to be involved in that.

Dick: And the thing with pronouns now, too. That's all started, you know, more expansion of recognizing people's differences. That's a big change. And I think

it's that the young people are much more accepting of people's differences. They've grown up with... Well, after Stonewall.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: You know, they didn't have to hide in the closet. They're coming out as teenagers in school. Not all the schools, some places.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: So there's a gradual sea change.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you remember what was going on when you heard about Stonewall? Where you were?

Dick: No, I don't think I was out yet.

Johnna: No.

Dick: '69... No. I didn't hear about it until after the fact as a history lesson.

Johnna: Wow. Yeah. Do you remember when you heard about it? Was it a long time after you had come out?

Dick: Probably a long time, yeah.

Johnna: Wow, that's interesting.

Dick: As a historical moment. And the stories about what happened, you know, relating it to Judy Garland's death and that it was the drag queens who fought back.

Johnna: Yeah. That's very interesting, because you said you came out in '75 was it? Around there?

Dick: '77, '78. '77 or so. Yeah, and I wasn't aware.

Johnna: Yeah. Very interesting. But you were living in Boston at that time?

Dick: I was living in Boston when I came out, yeah.

Johnna: Alright. I'll give you a moment to think if there's anything else that's come up that you'd like to add, because I don't want to turn the recorder off too soon.

Dick: Let's see... Van Buren, Boston... No. Much of my life was spent in Aroostook County. Thirty years. But it's nice down here where you'll see businesses have a rainbow flag in the window.

Johnna: Yeah. Does it feel like you can be more relaxed, or...?

Dick: Oh, sure.

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: Sure, because people—I wouldn't be the first gay person for someone to meet.

Johnna: Mhm.

Dick: They know others, or they have relatives, or...

Johnna: Yeah. Which goes back to visibility, like you were talking about.

Dick: Yeah, yeah. Now, it's not like that in the rest of Maine.

Johnna: Yeah, Portland is a little haven for that.

Dick: Portland, yes. It's progressive. It may be like that in some midcoast places, but you go to Rumford or Lincoln, you know, small town, mill towns, lumber towns...

Johnna: Yeah.

Dick: But it's surprising how—I think of people who live up in the County, a town like St. Agatha where some of the prominent people are gay. It's not necessarily spoken of, but everybody knows. John Martin from the legislature. Everybody knew he was gay before anything. I don't know if he's ever come out. He's from Fort Kent. And Mike Michaud, that was another one, people knew.

Johnna: Yeah. Do you think that those areas are just sort of slower to progress than bigger cities?

Dick: In one sense they are, because it's a small town and everybody knows everybody else, but they have cable and satellite TV. They know what's going on every place. They may not like it, they may not think it happens in their town. You know, I saw the movie last night *Love, Simon*. Have you heard of that?

Johnna: I did hear of it.

Dick: It was very good. It was a little silly at times, but it was well done. There were a lot of good issues that they dealt with and how they dealt with them. It was pretty much an upper-class white community, but I said to my friend, you know, "It's a start." It's where they're starting. Maybe the next film will be a little more representative of more kinds of gay people.

Johnna: Yeah, yeah.

Dick: But it wasn't the 1980s or '70s where gay people were drag queens or bull dykes and at the end of the movie, they die.

Johnna: Right.

Dick: This was a love story, just like—

Johnna: It's like a teen love story, right?

Dick: Yeah, yeah. And it's high school, too. It would be good for high school kids to see, because this kid was ostracized until he turned around and he wrote and said, "Look, this is the way I am. I'm tired of hiding." You know, all those things. And it helped other people to come out, not about being gay, but about maybe being bullied or whatever for different issues. So it had a whole effect, snowball effect.

Johnna: Yeah, I'll have to go see it.

Dick: Yeah, it was good.

Johnna: Thank you so much for your time today. I appreciate you sharing your story with me.

Dick: Thank you for doing this.

Johnna: It was so interesting to hear about it. I had never heard about Northern Lambda Nord before, so it's been really great for me to hear about it.

Dick: Older people know about it.

END OF FIRST RECORDING

START OF SECOND RECORDING

Johnna: Alright.

Dick: We held an MLGPA weekend retreat at my house in New Sweden, and there must have been easily fifteen people there, the Board members and some other interesting people. And the thing that I remember the most was how the women slept outside in tents and the men stayed in the house [laughs].

Johnna: [Laughs]

Dick: Pretty much. Because Barb Wood was the smart person. At the top of the hill, there was a clearing, and everybody put their tents in this clearing, it was nice and

flat. She put hers on the other side of a tree, because she realized that the sun was going to come up in the morning and she was in the shadow, and all these other women were up early because the sun was baking on the tents, and they were up and she was still nice and cool.

Johnna: [Laughs]

Dick: I remember that. It was funny.

Johnna: That is really funny. That's a good story.

Dick: There was a photo of the group that was taken on the porch of my house that was used maybe three or four years ago in an invitation from EqualityMaine.

Johnna: That's awesome.

Dick: There's a white dog, which was my dog. Dale McCormick, Susan—I think Susan Farnsworth was there—Barb Wood, me... I'll have to find that and see who else I recognize.

Johnna: Yeah, for sure.

Dick: I'm sure that's in the archives.

Johnna: Yeah, probably. There's so much great stuff in the archives. It sounds like you have a lot of great memorabilia.

Dick: They have all of the Northern Lambda files.

Johnna: Yeah, I looked through some of them.

Dick: The minutes of the meetings, the newsletters, and the same with symposium. All the booklets.

Johnna: Yeah. That's pretty cool.

Dick: I hear they're going to try to put it on... Aren't they going to show a film they have of when they filmed...not *Star Gays*...*Gay Side Story*.

Johnna: Oh, okay.

Dick: It's when symposium was in Portland. Two or three years in a row, Diane Ellzey and some other people did a spoof on—twice it was musicals, and once it was a play. They did *Gay Side Story*, where they changed the lyrics of the songs, and it was gay couples getting together. They did *Oklahomo*!

Johnna: [Laughs]

Dick: It was [singing] “Oklahomo da da da da da!” They did that one. And then they did a spoof on *Star Wars*, it was called *Star Gays*, where Luke Skywalker was a woman and Princess Leia was a woman and she was going to rescue her.

Johnna: That’s awesome. And you said they’re going to show one of those films?

Dick: They have the *Gay Side Story* on an old videotape.

Johnna: Oh, wow.

Dick: So during Pride this week. And they’re trying to get the people who were in that originally to come and be there for that.

Johnna: That’s awesome, that will be so cool.

Dick: Yeah, so that would be good. And I’m sure they have the programs from all the other stuff.

Johnna: Yeah. Wow, that will be great to see. I’m definitely going to have to check that out. I’m glad you had that one last story.

END OF SECOND RECORDING