

Micaiah Wert: [00:00:03] It is Wednesday, November 23, 2022. We're in the Glickman Library on USM Portland's Campus. My name is Micaiah Wert M I C A I A H W E R T. Could you say and spell your name for me?

Mike Blanchard: [00:00:18] My name is Mike Blanchard M I K E B L A N C H A R D. I use he/him pronouns and I think that's everything you asked for.

Micaiah Wert: [00:00:29] Just to remind you, is there any question you're uncomfortable with, we can just skip over them. You don't have to answer it. We can pause or stop the interview at any time. To start, what is your age or the decade you were born in ?

Mike Blanchard: [00:00:41] Okay, now you need to pause. (laughs) No, I'm 60 years old. My birthday is uh, I was born in May of 1962.

Micaiah Wert: [00:00:51] Uh what, uh you already said your pronouns, and in describing your sexuality, what words do you use? Gay, queer, homosexual?

Mike Blanchard: [00:01:01] More gay than anything else, but with the reclamation of the word queer and some of my work previously with LGBT youth, I really like the the big ten philosophy of the word queer.

Name and pronouns

Age

Sexual Identity

So that's something that I that I do utilize particularly is from a place of when I get inquiries, a place of education and advocacy, which which never really stops for us to start. And I say us, I mean me, I'm not assuming that you're part of it.

Micaiah Wert: [00:01:38] Yeah. To start, Where did you grow up or where do you consider yourself from?

Mike Blanchard: [00:01:44] I grew up in Westbrook Maine, yeah.

Micaiah Wert: [00:01:47] What was your family like? Do you have any siblings?

Mike Blanchard: [00:01:49] Um, had two older brothers, you know, it was a, you know, Westbrook in the sixties, in the seventies, blue collar Catholic mill town. Uh, very strange, very Democratic, but conservative at the same time, you know, a lot of very clear messages from a very early age that one was to someone like me was to grow up and be tough and be strong and date women and and girls were meant to be locked in the china closet until marriage. You know, there was there was just a lot of. Looking back on it, hindsight being 2020 and there was there was a lot of misogyny and disparaging comments about about gay people. Really looking at today's world that people are afraid that somehow

Place and family of origin

Societal and gender expectations

Societal beliefs about homosexuality

being open about sexuality is going to groom people into homosexuality. I was I was groomed into a heteronormative lifestyle. It was actively groomed with both word, deed and violence into that direction.

Micaiah Wert: [00:03:19] Did that, like was that derived just from your family and from your community as a whole? And how did your like as a kid, how did that affect you?

Mike Blanchard: [00:03:28] Family and community as a whole? I knew who I was before I had a word for it. That was I was a little boy who knew I who knew I liked other boys. And, you know, there was. I also know that I happened to be a very sensitive, artistic kind of child and and all that stuff was actively squelched, not only by my family, but by my community. And some of that was when I started hearing words to describe who I was. That was when I was actively bullied in, um, in fourth and fifth and sixth grade in elementary school. It's almost like kids intrinsically knew to use words like fairy and queer and faggot. So those are the first words that I heard. And I initially heard them even younger, directed at others and knew because of how they were being treated, that I needed to keep the core of who I was to myself and not share it with anyone. And then later on when I got bullied, that that was

Early queer identity

Slurs and bullying from school children

the language, that hateful language was was used towards me. So I was really taught to hate and despise who I was and to try and be the antithesis of of all of that.

Micaiah Wert: [00:04:57] Was your family religious at all? Did that kind of impact that?

Mike Blanchard: [00:05:01] Yes and no. So my my parents left the Catholic Church over their stance on birth control. My parents just felt like it was time to leave the Catholic Church. And my dad's mom, my paternal grandmother was incredibly religious and Vatican two was too radical for her (laughs). Still did her prayers in Latin. I mean, just just and she wielded her her faith like a weapon in the family. She was she was the stronger of the two. I just remember my grandfather as this very kind and gentle person. And my grandmother is this staunch religious zealot, for lack of a better term. And she used that religiosity to, to, shame my dad, her son, and and the rest of the family. And that was over something that was totally different from the other stuff that I would later hear, because I was really young when we left the church. And it wasn't till later that I started to hear the things about God and that God didn't love me, that that on top of everything else, God didn't love me. And it wasn't directly from her, it was implied, but

Family and religion

Paternal grandmother as religious ruler in family

not because of my sexuality. It was because my parents had left the church that the children were going to burn in hell and so forth and so on.

Micaiah Wert: [00:06:51] With all of that happening, like when did you first realize that you were gay? Like as a child.

Mike Blanchard: [00:07:00] I knew I was different, but I can actually point to a singular moment in second grade. Um, we were, we were having drawing and we all kind of dropped in time was great. And we ran to the front of the class to grab crayons, to draw on these big pieces of manila paper. And I reached into the crayon box and I inadvertently ended up holding hands with another boy. And and I looked at him and I looked in his eyes and I just felt this like, oh, my God, this is what this is. And he, of course, pulled his hand away. And I also knew around that time I was being normalized to boys didn't do that. You know, we had to we didn't have to. But we had a teacher who we all adored who ended up with multiple sclerosis. And we marched from Valentine Street School down Spring Street, down onto Main Street 50 plus years ago. And we sang songs to her in front of her house while she sat in the window was just this really beautiful moment. But we had to peer off and hold hands and I had to hold hands with a boy. And both of us knew it was not

Early queer identity and first realizations

Second grade accidental handholding

right to hold hands. And we kept letting go. And the teachers kept telling us to to hold hands. And neither of us wanted to was not the same boy. I probably would have tried to hold hands again (laughs), but, those two moments really stick out to me as. As, Oh, that's what that was. This is what that feels like. And this runs contrary to anything that anybody is discussing with me, you know? You know, we wrote Valentines cards to the girls in class. We didn't write any to the boys. We we did all kinds of heteronormative stuff, even as, you know, seven and eight year olds think that's where you are when you're in second grade, six, seven, eight years old. But also what was normalized was that this was not okay. You know, what I was feeling and what I felt that moment in that crayon box of wonderment of it all, the "ah-ha!" makes sense. And then he pulled his hand away and I was just like the shame of that.

Micaiah Wert: [00:09:24] So this happened when you were pretty young, when did you start feeling like you need to tell people about this? Or keep it to yourself? What was your coming out experience?

Mike Blanchard: [00:09:36] Oh, God. You know, it's it's hard for me to talk about this without mentioning that I'm a recovering alcoholic and my my recovery from alcoholism. This is this is my my personal

Alcoholism and recovery in regards to coming out

opinion. I'm not speaking for any 12 step program or any any treatment dynamic. But in order for me to get clean and sober, I had to do a lot of reconciliation around my past. And a lot of that was around my my sexuality. So I didn't I didn't have anybody to tell. And at the time, there was a thing called social media, It was the bathroom wall in any department store. There was all kinds of you know, this would have been around 1975. I would have been 12 or 13 years old. And there was all kinds of stuff on the bathroom walls, all kinds of enticements to engage in behavior that I really wanted to engage in. What I didn't realize was as a child, I could give my permission for that behavior and I could go seek that behavior. But it wasn't capable of giving my consent to that to that behavior. So I saw something. And again, this is stuff that I know based on my recovery. It's not what I knew at the time. I saw something that said that if I went into Deering Oaks, Deering Oaks used to have a much larger building and a big bathroom, and that that if I pedaled my bike in there, that I would be desired. That was the basic gist of the language. On the on the wall or my interpretation of it, even though now in retrospect, I see that that language was very predatory and I, one day, pedaled my bike from Westbrook all the way into Portland and

Early queer messaging

Inappropriate sexualization behavior at 12/13

went in and there was a man who found me and offered to experiment with me. And so I engaged in that. And the heaping of guilt. Not only not only his power and control over me, because today I see it as a rape. Today I see it as exploitation. But as a child, I saw it as me being a willing participant in something. And on the way home, I remember just driving home, pedaling my bike home, and just tears streaming down my face that all I had ended up doing was confirming everything about how bad it was, what a horrible human being I was. And yet I spent my teenage years sometimes taking the bus into Portland, finding finding men and having them pick me up. And every once in a while, there'd be a guy that would pick me up. Different. Different groups of men. Because it was contextually. It was a different time. And you could be fired. Just just just. All someone had to do was accuse you of being gay and you could be fired. And so they were there were men who would would pick me up and take me away from Deering Oaks and then try and talk to me, try and tell me to wait till I was 18. But there was no one who was actively advocating for me. There were no youth organizations. And and cruising at that time also attracted the very ugly underbelly of child exploitation. And so there were folks who were who were there

Sexual assault, rape, and coercion in Deering Oaks Park as a young teen

Cruising grounds and potential nuturing from some older men in the area

who were more than willing to participate in that in that behavior. So I, on the one hand, did get some nurturing from this area, from a few random strangers who, you know, gave me suggestions on, you know, what I could do, which which. The answer was, wait, wait until you're older. Because there were no resources. There were no you know, nobody in the mid-seventies would say, go talk to your guidance counselor, you know, because you'd end up at Jackson Brook Institute with a diagnosable mental illness. I mean, people were still even though it wasn't in the DSM anymore, people were still sending their children to psych wards to be treated for their sexuality. And I knew that that was that was part of the the negativity of the community that I heard. My answers are brief at 45 minutes, So if you need to condense what I'm saying right now.

Micaiah Wert: [00:14:29] No, it's alright, keep going. So with all of that happening, kind of like experimenting. How old were you when you, like, felt comfortable saying that you were gay? I know you were talking about your recovery and everything, so it might be a little loop-around.

Mike Blanchard: [00:14:47] 50? (laughs) No, I, uh, I actually came out to my best friend in 1983. I had fallen in love with my best friend. He was this

Queer as a diagnosable mental illness at the time

big, strong guy, you know, I hung with hung with the rough crowd. I was I was definitely my alcoholism was really attaining another level of of I was in my early early twenties. '83 I would have been 20-21. Yeah, it was February of '83, so I would have been 20 years old. Yeah. I came out to my friend and the way that I came out to him was, was very telling because I couldn't I had been in love with him since I graduated from high school and we had become really close friends. And he trusted me like like nobody else. And he had told me that. So we had this level of intimacy, but he was also a hard drinker and a and a and a mean fighter. And there was some attraction to all of all of that, you know, the whole danger thing. And but that culminated in me. I, I ran away. I joined the military. I did a little less than a here in the military. My my substance use and misuse and full-fledged addiction at the time got me thrown out of the military. And and at the time I said because I knew I was looking at a lot of trouble, so I went "I'm gay." And they went, okay, goodbye (laughs). But but the story I told people when I got home was "oh, I just said that so I'd get kicked out", so I wouldn't get in trouble. You know, I had mass ships movement based on based on being out on a bench. And in wartime, that's desertion. They shoot people for that (laughs).

First coming out experience

Alcoholism and connection with risky groups/behaviors

Joining and discharge from the military

I mean, that was, you know. I mean, granted, there hadn't been an execution since the forties, but I mean, it just that was something that was. You don't know. You don't miss chips movement that's thus desertion. And this is what could happen to you. So I came home, told my friends "oh, I just said that to get out because I was in trouble." And that somehow, in my mind, made it cool. But then I had been home for a little while and I came out to my friend, and the way I came out to him was I said, "Think of the worst thing you could possibly be." That was my that was that was how I had to say it. And I never said, gay, but we both knew what that meant. And I told them that I had feelings for him and that, you know, that I would never ask him to be something that he's not. But of course I was totally enmeshed in and this was he'll always be my first love. I feel I feel differently about that now than I did then. But but, you know, today I there's some some joy, some love and some forgiveness in that for both of us. In some respects, that for both of us, that was a very challenging time. And I was going to come out it, it was '83 and I was going to start telling people, "yes, this is who I am." And Charlie, however, was beaten to death and and thrown off a bridge in Bangor, Maine. I've yet to be able to find this in the paper, but I remember

Repression of identity through the military

Falling in love with best friend and coming out to him

Planning to publicly come out

Charlie Howard murder

reading at the time that part of the autopsy was that his injuries were so bad that even if he did know how to swim, he wouldn't have been able to. I mean, they savagely kicked him and beat him on that bridge. And that's a piece that I think I hear that he was assaulted and thrown off the bridge. And I'm like, no, he was like broken ribs and stomped and kicked and and, you know, brutalized. And of course, what was thrown in there was these youth had the gay panic defense. So I did a right turn. I got back involved with the sport of swimming, became a coach, and again made that decision to become a "mans man" and be really tough and chase women and drink beer and do all that facade. But at the same time, I was I had this other life, this Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde life, where I was going out. And I started talking with gay men because I was older. Now, there were some things that were happening, but also the AIDS epidemic began. So again, it was, you know, "don't touch me, don't touch me, faggot. I don't want to get AIDS", you know, so so I really to encapsulate this a little more, I really didn't come out until I got clean and sober. I got clean and sober in 1989 and I started talking to people about it. It became a "treatment issue." And I say that with air quotes because, you know, I, I knew I needed to reconcile that. I needed to

Repression of identity again for safety

"Double life", "mans man" and queer person

Aids epidemic

Sobriety in 1989

know how to be queer without having a drink in my hand. And so that was getting sober and coming out, kind of worked in concert with each other in a positive way for that.

Micaiah Wert: [00:20:17] Once you got sober, what was the best reaction you got once you were able to tell people?

Mike Blanchard: [00:20:26] So the times had changed a little bit. It was late. I got sober and on Halloween of 1989, and so I've been sober 33 years. Nobody is more surprised to me that that's the case. But I started to meet some people in recovery who were out, who were confident, who were able to say that they were gay with their head up. They were able to say it in a way that was proud. And I started talking to those folks, but it was it was kind of comical looking back on it now, because what I would do is I wouldn't talk with them around a group of people. I would wait till they were alone and ask to speak to them. And I would and I would talk with them and then I would do the whole don't talk to me in public. Like I was still I was treating the coming out process, like the cruising process. I was I was just really like, like so drenched in homophobia that, that I, I wanted to step past it. But it wasn't until 1992 that I actually came out and came out proudly.

33 years sober

Internalized homophobia

Public coming out in 1992

Micaiah Wert: [00:21:39] Are there still situations now where you find yourself needing to come out?

Mike Blanchard: [00:21:46] All the time. All the time. I have a wedding ring. I'm married to a man. I work in the field of recreation. I have. I work in a supportive environment, but there are still people who think that or perceived that my answer might be over the top. For instance, the people are constantly and this is the general public, not the workplace, but the general public will put an age limit on who I can say it to. And of course, with some of the legislation that's been happening country wide, what it does is it gives people and nationally, it gives people internalized homophobia a chance to kind of flourish. So I'll give you a couple of examples. One day I was lifeguarding and standing by the hot tub and lifeguard in the pool. And this this older guy said, "Oh, your wife." And I said, "What do you mean?" He goes, "Well, your wedding ring, your wife!" and I said, "Oh, I don't have a wife." And he goes, "But your ring, your wife." And he kept insisting. And so finally I said, "I don't have a wife. I have a husband." "Well, I didn't need to know all that." So it was his it was his heteronormative insistence that came up to a place where I felt like it it was appropriate

Feeling the need to come out to the general public at work/ homophobia

Forced coercion to come out to strangers at work

and important to set a boundary. And in setting that boundary, I was looked at as the person who was being too forthcoming. You know, I've had people say to me, but shouldn't shouldn't like junior high age kids not know that you're gay. Like, wait a minute, you talk about going to hang out with your boyfriend all the time. You're you're female identified and and female assigned. And you talk about you're going to have Thanksgiving with your boyfriend and you say that to kids you give private lessons to, that are six or seven years old. What's the difference between you saying that? Me saying my husband, you know. "Well, I just think it could be misconstrued as..." As what you know. And I and I tell them I knew who I was before I had a word for it and what I had. The only thing I had access to was a bombardment of negative messages. So what's wrong with a child hearing a positive message about about homosexuality? I'm not I'm not going to describe sex acts with a child. That would be inappropriate. And I should be I should be arrested for doing that just as a heterosexual person should. But if you're a female assigned, a female identified and you want to say your husband, there's no reason why I can't say why my husband. It should be it should be an even playing field. And clearly that playing field is not even

Setting boundaries when coming out

Homosexual experinece vs. heterosexual expeience in speaking about relationships

Growing up with negative queer messaging

yet.

Micaiah Wert: [00:24:39] Well, we've started talking about your husband a little bit. Can you tell me how you met your husband?

Mike Blanchard: [00:24:47] Um, (laughs) In a gay bar (laughs). Which is funny because, you know, I met him in a gay bar is is a multi chapter novella of the disasters, which were my relationship history before I met my husband, you know. But we we saw each other and there was instantly there was there was something there. You know, it's like the crayon box all over again. It was just "ah!" And so I stayed away because I've met plenty of guys in the bar and a gay bar at 9 p.m. who seem fine. But by 11:30(p.m) It's obvious that they don't know how to be queer without a drink in their hand and three or four drinks in them. And and I just don't want that. You know, there's a there's a running joke about, the, I might get in trouble here, but the Blackstone's handshake, which I'm going to do it in this direction. So I'm going to turn this way. And this is the Blackstone handshake. You walk up to someone, you tweek in their nipples and say, "hey, how's it going?" (laughs) Yes, that's the that's the you know, and and so I didn't I knew I didn't want any of that. And so I watched him for a while. I watched him I made sure that because he had a beer and I was

Introduction to husband

Gay bar (Blackstones)

Blackstones handshake

like, I don't want to I want to go out and say hi to someone who's a train wreck again, you know? So I waited a while and then he and I went up and talked to him and I said that I was going to get another soda. And he said, "Oh, great, I hate beer. I just got a beer because my friend said I should have a beer when I'm in here." So we were talking he's talking a diet soda. I'm having a I'm having a water seltzer with lime. And I looked down and we were holding hands and it was like we had always been holding hands. It was just it really was magic. And and he's like, nothing I ever chased and everything I could have hoped for, which we could do a whole day's worth of interviews on, on, on, on my relationship, history and codependency and, you know, chasing danger and all that stuff. And Rod is just none of those things. He's just a sweet, endearing, kind, you know, loving, loving man. His family has accepted me. He was not out to his mom when we met, which now we laugh about because because Rod is someone who he's never he's never pretended to be anything but who he is because he's never pretended to be anything. He's he's always been who he is. It was just never talked about. And there are some his family is originally from the Philippines and there are some cultural indications there about that stuff and what we talk about. But I say we but

Natural and comfortable relationship

Family and cultural differences with husband, Filipino culture

what what his family talks about and what they don't talk about but. You know, his mom is Filipino and Catholic and that's really, really conservative. But another for her immersion in her culture is you love your son first, you love your child. That's just the way it is. Not every not every person. I can't I'm not Filipino. I can't speak for all Filipinos, but I can. I know that she has communicated to me that despite her religious teachings, it would be a sin for her to not to stop loving her child, that that that would be a sin upon her. So she has has a moral view of of our life. And it's based on religion. But there's no there's no mistreatment there. It's it's it's all respect based.

Micaiah Wert: [00:29:05] That's great. Um. Did you as a younger person when you were going through all of these like harder relationships you kind of touched on, did you ever imagine that you would get married?

Mike Blanchard: [00:29:24] Not not married, so to speak. I know that that you know, our community. I keep saying our community. I'm sorry.

Micaiah Wert: [00:29:39] No. Yeah, that's great.

Mike Blanchard: [00:29:40] The queer community and this is my perception, being a member of

the community. This is I can't speak for the queer community, but we spent so much time trying to say, we're just like you. We're just as good as you were. You know, one of one of our catchphrases in the early nineties was We are your, you know, your father's, we are your mothers, we are your uncles, we are your aunts, we are your parents, we are your teachers. Look how binary we are (laughs) , but "we're just like you. Please let us be part of the club." That's really who we were. And by extension, um, very, very transphobic. There was, there was no room for, for our wonderful, courageous trans advocates. I didn't realize at the time that what I was receiving was such a such a whitewashed history, a whitewashed and binary history of of LGBTQ history at the time. But being so naive, I was like, Sign me up, you know? Yeah, we are. We are your uncles. We are your aunts, you know, we're your coaches. What your teachers, we're just like you. We're just as good as you. That was our that was our mantra. And really, that came from a place of, I believe, internalized shame. Working with LGBT youth, One of the things I've seen from them and and I cite somebody, Sherry Wolf, who wrote 'Sexuality and Socialism' it's a great book. My God, it's a great book. But I saw her speak at a conference and and I'm, age-wise, I'm a peer of Sherry Wolf. And she

Early 90s queer activism catchphrases

Whitewashed and binary queer history

'Sexuality and Socialism' by Sherry Wolf

stood up front and made the declaration to her peers that what we needed to do was get out of the way and let youth lead. Because we were raised with with there's something intrinsically wrong with us and we're trying to be just as good as you. And and that was important work at the time. But it's it's it's kind of aged out and it's left some people it's left some people behind. We've tried so hard to normalize sexuality that that's created a place where I think she talked about Maslow's hierarchy of needs a little bit when she said this. If I remember right, but she said, LGBTQ youth. Now look and say there's something wrong with society. It's not it's not there's something wrong with me. There's something wrong with society. And society needs to change and that they aren't settling and that we need to trust LGBTQ queer youth. We need to. That's the other reason I like "queer", just because it's easier than alphabet soup. But we need to. We need to trust queer youth and get out of the way and let them lead. And, you know, I'm I'm a big believer in that because there were things like I, I had been out about ten years and it was around 2000, I think 2004. I was at a party with a group of people and I said something just incredibly, incredibly insensitive and transphobic. And for the first time I saw that. I saw the collective

Necessary LGBTQ youth at the forefront of current movements

Previous transgression against the trans community and learning and reconciliation

conscience of the room go, " Oh", excuse me. And so the next day I reached out to a friend of mine and said. This is what I did. I realized it was wrong. And I realized it's connected to a whole bunch of other thinking and thoughts that I need. I need to strip down. And I need your help with that. And the beauty of that was, despite that, really, really mean spirited, I could call it a mistake, but it was it was just a really mean spirited and hurtful remark towards the trans community. What I found was a community that was very loving and very accepting and "oh, you want to own that? You want to do something different? Come on in, honey." You know, and that was that was just that. Again, that speaks to what I heard years later from Sherry Wolfe, which was I just needed to get out of the way and let some other people lead. You know, and that's something that I try to I try to be aware of, like my cis privilege, my white privilege, my it it's it's more than just this doesn't come from me. This comes from folks like Ally Henny. I hope I'm seeing her name right. She's somebody I follow online and she talks about how homophobia has its roots and white supremacy and transphobia has its roots and white supremacy. And it's meant by design to keep two groups separated. So that because the fact of the matter is, if we really united, if we really you

Ally Henny as an influencer

know, if I really took a step back and got out of the way and said, this is this is your space and you lead to folks of another community of color. If I if I did that, then that's where the real power in the movement, I say with air quotes again, that's where the real power in the movement would come from. And so I've been trying this this latest part of my journey has been about understanding where my privilege is and where I need to just show up and sit my ass down and be supportive and not be the not be the person sucking all the air out of the room, you know.

Micaiah Wert: [00:35:43] Kind of along the same idea, you mentioned you wanted to talk about the Vote No campaigns in Maine that attempted to stop the repeal of basic civil rights for LGBTQ people in the state. Could you tell me a little bit about your involvement in that?

Mike Blanchard: [00:35:57] I can. And I was (sigh), there's a couple of things I want to I want to mention about this. Ron McClinton. I met Ron McClinton in 1991. And and again, this is my perception. This doesn't mean that you need to speak to Mike's historical accuracy. And some of the is I don't even know the dates but but around the time of that, there was instead of a EqualityME, it was the MLGPA, Maine lesbian, gay political alliance, I think was

Ron McClinton in 1991

what it was called. And that sprung out of the death of Howie Choward. Charlie Howard. Howie Choward? Charlie Howard. You can edit that out, right? Good things came out of that. But as it as with any organization, as it grew and started to gain some capital, it wanted to keep that capital in a certain way. And here comes Ron, who was on the board of the MLGPA, and he started what was called the Matlivich Society. And it was a monthly meeting for, apologize for the binary at the time, but this was '91, gays lesbians and those who loved them. And so Ron would have these celebrations of gay culture and gay history. And then those are the terms we used that at that time, gay was at the forefront. You know, and I've spoken to that previously here. So I'm just going to kind of blurted out as it is without trying to alter anything. The MLGPA for some reason, saw that as a threat. And Ron, who was dying of AIDS, he was getting sicker and sicker and wanted this organization to flourish so that lesbians, gays and their allies could sit in the room and learn about queer history and learn about queer culture and learn about political issues that maybe we all weren't in alignment with. He had. He had presentations on difficult things. He started to get resistance from the MLGPA and ultimately, in the twilight of his life, received a letter

MLGPA vs EqualityME

Charlie Howard

Matlivich Society

from them. They fired him from the board. It's probably, I would assume that letter is in Ron's papers in the Glickman library. And this is one of those things I talked about it. Everybody is responsible, but no one is to blame because like at the time, Ron was such a like for me, he was gay, sober and happy, and I couldn't get those same three things. I couldn't get those three things in the same zip code, you know. So, so I really idolized and looked up to Ron and Ron was a incredible influence on my life. And yet he did something outside of the norm. And sometimes it's a good lesson for us as a community because, you know, I love Equality Maine. I love what Equality Maine does. I love the steps that Equality Maine has taken. But there have also been times where individuals in their community have felt like their stuff has been stepped on by the great under the guise of the greater good, when really it's been about oppression and every institution is guilty of oppression, whether it's USM, whether it's Equality Maine, whether it's the U.S. government, every organized institution is capable of oppression. And so I think that that's a lesson that needs to be told and learned and relearned. And that's why I wanted to bring that piece about Ron being fired by the MLGPA in the twilight of his life. The other piece is, in

Ron McClinton fired from the MLGPA

Ron McClinton as an inspiration

Current EqualityME works

'92, there was there was this ordinance in Portland. It didn't have a lot of teeth, but symbolically it meant something to us. And we were trying to you know, the city council had passed something. It at the time, Peter O'Donnell was the mayor of the city of Portland. I love Peter O'Donnell. Respect the heck out of Pete O'Donnell. Everything he does and everything he touches, he brings success to wonderful, wonderful guy. And so the city council passed this ordinance. Somebody challenged it. Her name was Crosby. I believe her place in history is exactly where she belongs (laughs). Carolyn Crosby, I think, was her name and she was saying these horrible, vitriolic things about the gay community. And we were fighting against that and, you know, making phone calls and phone banking and marching. And and I was never like, you won't find my name in that history. But I was doing things like on the Western Prom. The Western Prom was notorious for cruising at the time, and there was a lot of negative press about those homosexuals up on the Western Prom having rapid sex in the woods. And that's a piece of the story, but that's not the narrative. Because the other thing that was happening was the police were rolling through there and literally beating guys. Not even asking for ID. Not even, you know, or. Young men would roll through there

Former Mayor Peter O'Donnell

Carolyn Crosby

Crusing grounds at the Western Prom

and assault men. And these men couldn't say anything about it because to say anything about it was an act of coming out. And there was a collective of us, about ten people who just started walking up and down the street on random nights on the Western Prom. And when the cops pulled us over, what are you doing? We're walking. We will walk right up and down that street. Well, you can't be up here. Okay, show me the sign. By the way, we saw you roust those two guys who were sitting on a bench holding hands. What about that car over there with the straight couple (laughs)? Because they're really going at it. Are you going to go after them, too? You know, you're obstructing justice. Yeah, tell me how. And here go, You can arrest us because we'd love to make the papers right now. And so we were this sort of underground lamp to the feet of. And what we were doing was we were protecting our brothers. That's the way that we looked at it. You know, did I partake in behavior on the Western Prom at that time? Absolutely. But but it was about no one's fucking protecting us. And so we're putting ourself out on the front line. We're putting herself at risk, physical risk, physical harm to keep people safe. So fast forward to the night of the election. Clinton wins. You know, I think we I think we won the governor's house, too. But no, because

Marching at the Western Prom for resistance

Bill Clinton wins presidential election

governor doesn't happen in presidential elections. It happens two years. But but all things perceptually, all these liberal aligned that night and Bill Clinton won and life was going to be different and it was going to be grand. And some things have really happened and Vote No passed, which kept the city council ordinance in place. It didn't get overturned. And then Peter O'Donnell took the stage in the city of Portland. And he came out. He came out that night, and everybody was, like (claps) applauding and clapping. And I realize now, in retrospect, what I felt was envy and jealousy, because here was this guy under the lights, being my perception, coddled and nurtured for coming out. Where was my fucking party? (laughs) You know, I was really upset. I'm up on the I'm up on the Western Prom facing beatings, you know, and now you're coming out under the lights now that everything has switched. I did not see the courage that it took for Peter to come out at that time, which it did. I did not see the that you know, the strength that it took for him to come out, which it which it did. What I saw from the back of the room was, was this guy taking advantage of a moment of radical acceptance and and riding that wave, you know, while the rest of us were still suffering in the backwash, I don't see it that that way today. I reached out to Peter

Peter O'Donnell's public coming out

Jealously and anger with Mayor O'Donnell

and asked him about talking about this in this interview and got no response from him. And I'm sad about that because I took great pains to tell him how much I respected him, how much I respected what he did, and what my feelings were. Conversely, from the back of the room in that time frame and that that's not how I feel anymore. But I believe that it's important to tell that story. It's important to talk about. That's how I felt in that moment at that time, because it's not about Peter, it's about the authenticity of the story. And he chose not to respond. I mean, I did some really deep thinking about this and decided to tell the story anyway, because it's not about Peter, it's about Mike's place in queer history and Mike's perceptions and all of it belongs. Even if there's conflict, even if there's disagreements, even if there's strife, it it all belongs. So that's why I brought it here that.

Micaiah Wert: [00:46:09] You were mentioning some of the you're , uh, walking through the Western Prom, uh, what other street level activism have you been a part of, protest or demonstrations?

Mike Blanchard: [00:46:22] I started to get involved with ACT UP. I'm not surprised that you're running out of memory. I'm so wordy. I started to get involved with ACT UP at the

Failed conatact with Peter O'Donnell prior to interview

Mike's place in queer history

Involvement with ACT UP

time, and there was some radical stuff that really was. ACT UP was a necessary byproduct of the genocide that was happening during the during the AIDS crisis. In ACT UP, Portland was doing some things that I wanted to be a part of because they were doing die-ins in front of City Hall, they were doing street theater, and I started going to some ACT UP meetings and folks were running out of patience. Folks were feeling like, I mean, God, the AIDS project. You see, somebody can have a caseload of 45 on Friday and come in on Monday and have a caseload of 30. I mean, it was just, people were people were dying so quickly, so ruthlessly and being mistreated on the way out. Not every hospital would accept people. I mean, it was just it was just an awful, awful time. And there were people that started speaking of violence. And at that point, I had to step away. I, I made the choice to step away. I understood why they wanted to do what they wanted to do. And when I say violence, there was no talk of assassination or bombings or killings. But there was there was we were they were going from street theater to vandalism. And for me, I saw a progression in that, that I didn't think I could shut off if I reopened that valve. I knew how to be very violent from my from my active drinking history. I knew when people tried to gay-bash me, you know,

ACT UP during the AIDS crisis

ACT UP's beginning into violence and vandalism
Mike becomes less involved

how to how to stand my ground,
to put my fist up and say,
"you're going to get dinner,
but I'm going to get a sandwich
out of the deal." "You know,
you're going to have to tell
your mama that some faggot gave
you a black eye." You know, I
knew how to do all that stuff.
I did not want to go back into
that role because, quite
frankly, I was afraid I
wouldn't be able to step out of
it and that it would escalate
into something more harmful. So
that was that was my experience
with with ACT UP was was that
like I said, they were going
from street theater to acts of
violence, acts of vandalism.
And I just I just couldn't be a
part of that. And when I see
that stuff, I never like I
remember marching in gay pride
parades where there were more
boos, boos than cheers, where
there were people, really vocal
groups of people actively
heckling and disparaging us as
we were marching on Congress
Street. I was not part of the
uh, protest down by the Bush
compound. I was not part of
that. I was not like I saw what
ACT UP was doing and thought
that was very courageous and
wanted to get involved and
ended up sponsoring a guy who
was arrested. He had a nervous
breakdown during the during the
protests, during one of the
protests down there. And the
police arrested him. At the
time when people were at the
Bush compound or down in
Kennebunk protesting, the state

Mike's violent past and fear of
resurfacing due to this kind of
activism

Intense pride parades

Bush complex protests

police were filming people with cameras as a direct intimidation tactic. That terrified me, you know? Oh, my God, I'm going to be on camera. I can't do that. So even though I was someone, like I say, who was in the background gnashing my teeth at Peter O'Donnell coming out before the cameras, I also had some some pretty legitimate fear of being exposed, you know, something that I that I don't have today. I know a lot of this I ended up talking around the circles and tying stuff back in.

Micaiah Wert: [00:50:49] No, that's okay, yeah, you had briefly mentioned the Clinton administration. You mentioned on your sheet you wanted to talk about some of those promises made by the Clinton Administration.

Mike Blanchard: [00:50:59] And the betrayal, and the absolute betrayal. And again, looking at the context of the time, like, you know, President Clinton ran on this platform of gays in the military. You know, so many Democrats have run on this kind of stuff. I mean I mean, gay rights had been part of the Democratic platform since the Carter administration. Even if they were, we're going to do this, we're going to this, and "we're comfortable with gays." (laughs) We're not going to talk about it, but we're comfortable with it. You know, and and the other side of that same coin, because, you know,

The betrayal of the Clinton administration

this conservatism movement to religiosity and traditional family values, which are all dog whistles for discrimination, you know, Clinton said he was going to do some stuff and then he he lost the midterms and he needed to back out. And, you know. Choices need to be made and compromises need to be made. But part of the compromises was he threw my community under the bus. He signed the Defense of Marriage Act, the Defense of Fucking Marriage Act from the guy who got a blowjob in the Oval Office from an intern. You know? (laughs) that just astounds me. And the fact that he wasn't impeached for that, you know, he really should have should have been impeached. I think a lot of the troubles that we have today in our country and on a lack of accountability can be traced back to that. Congress voted to impeach him. The Senate should have fucking kicked him out. You don't. That's not what the Oval Office is for. It's the Oval Office, not the Oral Office. God, I sound like a conservative now, don't I? Oh, my God. Did I just say that? Was that a dog whistle? (laughs) But, you know, it just, you know. How dare you? How dare you take my sexual behavior and treat it as a disposable item? God, I didn't realize I was still this pissed at him. But, you know, to treat my sexual being and my behavior as a disposable item while you

Conservatism's religious and traditional family values->discrimination

Clinton loses midterms

Defense of marriage act

Opinions of Clinton and impeachment

Deviant sexual behavior among

can't keep it in your pants. And this is what's happened. And it's been predominantly white men who have have sexual proclivities that were one well below the moral standard that they proclaim that they're at making judgments about my history and trying to erase my history. You know, I have no doubt that years from now, we're going to find out something about Ron DeSantis. I just I just know it because I've seen this movie before. I've seen it so many times. And at some point, something is going to happen and something's going to be disclosed. And we're you know, we're all going to sit back and go, told you, you know. So. Wow, wow. That was really. Yeah. Thank you. Do I owe a co-pay for the session or?(laughs).

Micaiah Wert: [00:54:23] It's good to let it out! (laughs) No, we're good! Is there anything else about your political activism experience that you like to talk about? [00:54:27][3.6]

Mike Blanchard: [00:54:28] Just that, uh, as of late, I've been listening to. I didn't seek out 'Sexuality and Socialism' because Sherry Wolf was somebody who was cuddly and spoke to me and reached to my experience. I, I listened because she pissed me off (laughs) and I was like, I need to pay attention to this. I need to go read her book. I also have been looking at. And

straight white men-> Harassing queer people

'Sexuality and Socialism' by Sherry Wolf

I stumble with this because I don't know if I say this stuff right, but I'm just going to make my best effort to say this. But I've been I've been looking to authors and influencers from from bipoc folks because like Kiese Laymon, Law Were, I got to get her name right. So I've got to look it up. I'm sorry. Because it would just be, just be disparaging to say across. Ally Henny. She's just. She's a. What she wrote, what she's been writing about the queer community. And I don't know that she's queer, but she sees it through that when she she keeps going back to this is this is white supremecy. It has its roots in white supremecy. And you need to pay attention to that. And my community has not done a good job of doing that kind of stuff even even recently locally with, with pride. And as folks have tried to say, you know, we need to add the other colors to the flag. We need to we need to be in this together. And people people's biggest concern is "I'm going to have to buy all new outfits because of this." (laughs) Yeah. You know, it's like screw your outfit, you know? What about our insides, you know? And some of the vitriol that certain pride venues and pride parades and pride organizations locally and nationally have had delivered to them when they've tried to make a change. That kind of stuff has made me look past I

BIPOC creators and online influences (Kiese Laymon, Ali Henny)

Suppression in the queer community due to white supremecy

Changing the pride flag to incorporate POC

don't ever want to have and I'm not incapable of it, but I don't want to ever want to have another moment like I did that night in 2004 when I said such a horrific thing about my family in the trans community and and shock, mortified and hurt people. I don't ever want to do that again. And so if there's something that's coming up against my belief systems, my my job is to look past my discomfort, take a step back, listen and absorb and reflect that. Sometimes that's what my job is. Not not to utilize my privilege to say let's let's critically think this out, but to make room for. I'm actually, I'm gonna, I highly endorse this woman. She's just. It's. That's Ally Henny's Facebook page, by the way, folks. But, you know, I. I seek these folks out because. What is it John Kennedy said about going to the moon? "We're not going to the moon because it's easy. We're going to go to the moon because it was hard." And so I need to have a bigger stake in and human rights than just my ability to get married and live with a man and make for every dollar an hour that we make on a two female couple makes \$0.75. You know, I that's that's my struggle, too. I need to I need to be cognizant of that, aware of that and hear that and not say, well, let's just think this out. Let's think this through. Is this really because of. No, I need to I need to trust the

Recounting the negative remark on the trans community from 2004

Ally Henny's Facebook

John Kennedy quote

authenticity of another oppressed group story. So that's that's where my that's the next phase. And that'll never be done because I'll always have privilege and I'll always default to that privilege. So it's a constant reckoning for me to do that kind of work.

Micaiah Wert: [00:59:13] Uh, I don't think we've touched yet on employment, something you wanted to talk about. So what kind of work have you done within your life? Like you talked about some recreation stuff?

Mike Blanchard: [00:59:25] Yes, in the field of recreation now is radically different than it was when I. I worked in aquatics 30 years ago. Of course, I worked in aquatics at that time, and it really modeled because I was not sober 30, 34, 35 years ago. I was I was not sober when I worked in aquatics. And I definitely modeled homophobia towards the population. I served adult, kids. I definitely am super guilty of that. And that's something that I'll never be able to fully reconcile like that damage has been done. It's the old adage of take a plate, throw it on the floor, it breaks, glue it back together. It's still got those scars. Those scars are still out there in the universe. And I created them and I and I own that. And I also was terrified. I also was very terrified because as I

Awareness of privilege in activism

Field of recreation work

Homophobia within the field and internally reflected

worked in aquatics and I started to come out, I started to receive some really intense homophobia. I worked for a local organization at one time. And, you know, one of my coworkers, we we were both male. We were changing in the locker room. And he made a comment about my size, the size of my endowment or lack of thereof. He said, "God, you get a little dick." And I said, "Yeah, around you." He went to leadership and said that I had sexually harassed him in the locker room. And when I tried to state my case, it was, you know, you just need to tone it down. This this kind of stuff wouldn't come at you if you weren't so open about your sexuality. Like, that was that was where that when there was that heteronormative privilege of, I'm going to abuse you and then I'm going to claim harassment when you stick up for yourself. There was an organization that I worked for that said, "We love you, we support you. You can be who you are. Just don't come out to the to the kids and don't come out to the to the families of the kids." And then on top of that, at one point, the national branch of this organization was coming through to do a tour. And a couple days before they arrived, my supervisor pulled me aside and said, "You know, National's coming through." And I said, "Yeah," "Could you just tone it down a little bit while they're here?" And I'm like

Verbal and sexual abuse in the workplace

Ideas of toning down one's self due to queer identity

"Tone what down?" "You know, the whole gay thing. Could you just tone it down?" This organization nationally now instead of receiving its money from, uh religious based organizations now receives money from Bill and Melinda Gates. And so when you go to this National Recreation Organization now, they've got pride flags on there on their website. And it's all about. It's like. Yeah, because the. Because the funding streams changed and Bill and Melinda Gates did, you know, get to do that shit if you want our money. And so that's that's an important piece of the of the advocacy that needs to happen, not only from the queer community, but from from allies. But I ultimately get out of the field and got into social services because, I knew I could be queer and be a mental health worker. I didn't think I could be queer and work in aquatics. And that's changed in the last four or five, six, six years. I got back into aquatics and people now it, you know, I could be at a swim meet officiating and a high school kid would go, "Oh, you're married. What's your wife's name?" "Rod." "Oh, hey, guys. Cool. This guy's married to a guy." Like, they think it's just awesome because high school kids aren't encumbered with that societal baggage. Regardless of how we try to put it on them, they're like, Oh, that's awesome, you know? So

Change within the same oppressive company once financial donors changed

Brief switch to mental health work/field

Teens surprising acceptance of identity vs. adults from work

that's that's how things have kind of changed.

Micaiah Wert: [01:03:33] Are you still doing mental health work as well, or are you just back to just aquatics?

Mike Blanchard: [01:03:39] Just my own. No, I got out of mental health fully in 2018. I just. Again, we were talking a little bit about systemic oppression before. And it it was there was a level of systemic oppression there that I felt that was falling on the population that I served. That was an enticement for them to be violent. And I felt that no one was talking about that. I felt like I wasn't being heard. And so I stepped out. You just dove back into aquatics, pun intended.

Micaiah Wert: [01:04:12] Nice! Yeah, that's awesome. Uh, well reaching towards the end of our time. Is there anything else that you want to mention that we haven't touched on yet?

Mike Blanchard: [01:04:23] I just want to thank you for for doing this. And I hope that I hope that projects like this are ongoing. And I say that and I kind of giggle because, you know, Professor Chapkis is involved. So I know these kind of conversations are going to be ongoing, but I just think it's really, really important for the queer community to write their own history because if we don't, someone else is

Change back to work in aquatics from mental health field

Importance of this research project

going to write it for us. And going back to what I said earlier about perceptually, you know, MLGPA stuff or or my perception of somebody else's coming out, it's okay to talk about the strife. We don't need to, I have to (claps) (laughs) that little bugs walking around. (laughs) "And that's when Mike struck me." (laughs) But I just. I think there's a perception and again, this this goes to institutional oppression that we need to tell this nice story and how everybody got along and how there was there was joy and camaraderie from the captains table down into the villages and uhm history isn't like that. History is dirty and mucky and complicated and there is strife. And it's okay that there's been different perceptions on how to get this done. ACT UP going from street theater to vandalism, I don't I don't hold any judgment over that. I knew it wouldn't work for me because I was afraid of what I would do with that. It wasn't about what they were doing. And that doesn't mean that, you know, because I hear younger people talk about ACT UP now and and they say, you know, oh, yeah, well, they were violent. Let's let's just let's unpack that a little bit, because they also took a drug like AZT when people tried to farmer bro the first legitimate treatment and inordinately raise the price for it. They shut down the New York Stock

History is not what the books always say, it is dirty and personal

ACT UP's violence, but remembering why it came to that

Exchange and went, No, no, you're not going to do this. And so sometimes it's important to step forward with your heel and dig your line in the sand and step up and go, you don't get to do that violence towards us. And to meet that with with a strong show of force is not, uhm, it's important to talk about it without just just writing it off as violence and leading it out of context. So that's I guess that's will be my party wisdom, for lack of a better term.

Micaiah Wert: [01:06:59] Yeah, that was my last question was uh, is there anything you want to add for future generations of LGBTQ youth that might listen to this in the future?

Mike Blanchard: [01:07:11] I don't know that I'd want to speak to the youth as much as I'd want to reiterate what Sherry Wolf said. I'd rather say to my peers, We need to back up. We need to get out of the way. We need to sit and reflect. We need to look at our own discomfort and our own internalized homophobia. Because for the most part, though, queer youth look at it as something wrong with society. And for a long time we looked at it as, There's something wrong with us, but please, can we join in? And that's still at the root of our foundation, I believe. For for folks for my my generation, boomers, for lack of a better term, is we still have that.

Not a message to future queer youth, rather a message to older peers in the community to take a step back and let others lead

And that doesn't mean that, you know, I mean, what Marsha P Johnson did was fucking beautiful. It was absolutely beautiful. And there were folks there were folks doing that kind of stuff. So I'm I'm not saying have a seat, old people. That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is when we hear stuff from younger folks and they start to say things like BlackLivesMatter needs to be a part of part of pride. We need to listen to that. We need to not talk about critical thinking and mission drift and stuff like that. We need to listen to LG, LGBTQ youth because they got it going on and and they have a perception that part of that part of the reason they have the perception they do is because of what we built. You know, we built up their self-esteem and now they want to lead from a place of self esteem. And sometimes we fall into a trap institutionally and and generationally. We have to no, no, no, no mission drift. And we need we need to step back and let younger folks lead.

Micaiah Wert: [01:08:59] Thank you so much. Thank you.

Marsha P Johnson

BlackLivesMatter as part of pride

Build queer youth confidence and self-esteem

