00;00;02;28 - 00;00;20;19
Wendy Chapkis
This is July 3rd, 2003. Portland, Maine. I'm Wendy Chapkis WENDY CHAPKIS and I am interviewing James Neal. Can you spell your name, please?

00;00;20;22 - 00;00;23;28
Jim Neal
Yeah, JAMES NEAL

00;00;24;01 - 00;00;27;09
Wendy Chapkis
And do you want to be referred to as James, Jim or Jimmy?

00;00;27;11 - 00;00;28;13
Jim Neal
Jim or Jimmy is good.

00;00;28;20 - 00;00;33;11
Wendy Chapkis
Okay. Can you also tell me what pronouns you use?

00;00;33;14 - 00;00;35;23
Speaker 2
He. Him. His.

00;00;35;26 - 00;00;43;17
Wendy Chapkis
And what terms do you use to describe yourself? For example, queer, gay, bisexual, whatever.

00;00;43;19 - 00;00;45;18
Jim Neal
Queer or gay.

00;00;45;20 - 00;01;02;06
Wendy Chapkis
Okay, great. I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Please feel free to ignore or just decline to answer any of the ones that you don't feel you want to talk about. So to start off with, can you give me some basic information? How old you are?

00;01;02;08 - 00;01;04;07
Jim Neal
I'm 65.

00;01;04;09 - 00;01;10;04
Wendy Chapkis
Great. And where did you grow up? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

00;01;10;06 - 00;02;39;13
Jim Neal
So I was born and grew up in Galesburg,Illinois, which is like West Central Illinois, a town of 35,000 people, sort of claim to fame as the birthplace of Carl Sandburg and it's one of the still standing remaining sites of Lincoln-Douglas debates, but a very working class town. The railroad, freight,railroad and Amtrak are big, big employers. They were and still are. And then when I was growing up, there must have been five or six factories that made everything from rubber hoses to lawnmowers to appliances and employed anywhere from 2 to 5000 people. And they paid people well. So if you were a high school graduate or even didn't have a high school diploma, you could get a very good paying job and raise a family and it was a safe community. I grew up, you know, typical like going out in the morning and riding my bike and running all over. And coming home to eat something. It would be I'm going, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I'd be out the door before they could say, No, you're not.

00;02;39;15 - 00;02;43;01
Wendy Chapkis
So tell me a little bit about your family. Did you have two parents?

00;02;43;04 - 00;02;44;28
Jim Neal
I did. A mom and a dad. My mom and my brother. And we left my dad when we were when I was seven years old and we moved in with my grandmother.

00;03;01;23 - 00;03;05;00
Wendy Chapkis
In the same town?

00;03;05;04 - 00;03;09;02
Jim Neal
Yep. Just like on the other side of the tracks.

00;03;09;04 - 00;03;14;25
Wendy Chapkis
Is your brother older or younger?

00;03;14;28 - 00;09;25;06
Jim Neal
My brother is older. He's a year and a half older than me. And so they got a divorce. We would go over to my grandmother's. Two years later, we she built a house on the other side of the tracks back over on my dad's side of the tracks. And my grandmother sold her house and moved in with us. And we would go over to my dad's on Tuesdays after school. And on Saturdays after getting up and eating cereal and watching cartoons. So typical. But it's really funny because as a kid, I thought of my mother as a very average person. And not a revolutionary or a feminist or what have you. But she was. You know, when I in grade school,it was me and my friend Craig Johnson, we were the only kids in my class from a divorced home. And you know, I never

thought of my mother as unhappy in her marriage specifically. And she didn't marry until she was 32. Had my brother at 34 and me at 36, which in the fifties was a late start. Very unusual. And she graduated from high school and got a job. She was bookkeeper. And really liked working. And then when she you know, married my Dad and started having kids, she was a stay at home housewife.
House cleaning, cooking, not in her wheelhouse, wasn't her thing. And when we moved into my grandmother's shortly thereafter, she got a job at Arlen's department store, which was like a discount Kmart type, one of the first in the country. They actually had one here in Portland. They tore down the Union train station here to build an Arlen's department store. And it was a union, retail union. So she had, you know, good benefits. Insurance and all of that. And it's funny because in the early days she started out and she was like doing like warehouse work for them. And she was going to work at 11 or 12:00 at night and then coming home at seven or eight in the morning. And we were living with my grandmother, like in those early days, like I was coming to sleep on the couch watching Johnny Carson and I just thought my mom was like a night owl, which she was. But she was staying up because she was going to work. Like she didn't let us know that she was going to work. And she would come home and then she would be like hanging out in the house, like, just like, you know, in her housecoat or whatever. And so we thought she was like getting up and starting her day, you know, not fully dressed. Whereas in reality, she was winding down her day. And when we would head off to school, she would lay down to sleep. And then eventually she got to move to, you know, front of the house sort of Monday through Friday, 9 to 5. And work weekends. But so my mom was like, you know, doing the breadwinner role that, you know, at that day and age was typically like, you know, acted upon by the man of the house. And my grandmother did all the cooking and all the laundry. My mom had five brothers and a sister. And her sister, my aunt, who I was very, very, very close to, would come over and do all the cleaning. So it was a you know, what I've just described as not all that odd today. If you have a supportive, extended family, that will help you as a single parent. But at that day and at that time in the sixties, it was not common at all. And then twice a week, at least two or three of my uncles and their wives and kids would come over and we'd have a big family dinner, all most people have at Christmas and Thanksgiving or whatever. But that was a weekly occurrence for us, and all the kids were eating upstairs. And then the parents were eating downstairs. And so all of those cousins were like brothers and sisters. In 2000, my cousin Roxy ran the Boston Marathon. And so her sister, brother in law, mom, dad, my brother, several of my cousins all came to Boston to watch her. And so Roger and I drove down to Boston. And when the marathon was over, we were back in their hotel room and just laughing it up, carrying on, telling these like intimate, you know, stories of growing up and everything. And if you were sitting in that room you would have thought that my Uncle Ronnie and Jan were the parents of all of us because that level of familiarity was there. So it was in my
description, an idyllic childhood.

00;09;25;08 - 00;09;35;06
Wendy Chapkis
And you didn't feel singled out as the kid of a divorced family, even though there were only a couple of you?

00;09;35;09 - 00;12;09;10

Jim Neal
So here's a great story. So no, I did not. But it was truly unusual in sixth grade. They built all these new middle schools in my hometown because we were still like the baby boomer generation. So the middle schools were for fourth, fifth and sixth graders. And this would have been in 69. So our middle school was Martin Luther King School. And at the dedication, they decided to they picked out a white kid and a black kid. And it was me and my friend and neighbor, Ivy Dickerson, to stand in front of that in the hallway, in front of the Martin Luther King portrait with the principal photo opportunity for the local newspaper. And we did that. And then, of course the writers were 'so what's your name and what your parent's names.' And I said, you know, 'Carl and Jesse Neal' and the writer out loud was like, 'Mr. and Mrs. Carl Neal.' It's like I was like, 'Oh no, no, no, no. It's no, it's not that. Because they're divorced.' Pin drop. And there was all this like whispering like, 'What are we going to do?' They never mentioned the parents. They just dropped it. They didn't know how to word it. So they just dropped it. Wow. And then from a gay perspective, you know, my family was great. Like, I was, you know, six, seven years old, and asked for a Barbie for Christmas. And I got absolutely zero pushback. Never even had to ask for it twice. And not only did I get my Barbie, but I got a whole bunch of hand crocheted Barbie outfits from my neighbor across the street from my grandmother. This beautiful, like white A-line Jackie O dress that stretched right over my Barbie. Oh, yeah. And like, a pink crochet bikini. Oh, it's crazy.

00;12;09;12 - 00;12;14;25
Wendy Chapkis
Were you aware at all that this was an unusual request for a boy, or was it -

00;12;14;28 - 00;14;31;20
Jim Neal
I mean, I played with a lot of girls in the neighborhood, not exclusively. You know,I was always more the academic and my brother was more the athletic kid. So I didn't play organized sports, but I played neighborhood sports. I played baseball and football and basketball and all that in the neighborhood. But I also played with a lot of girls. And, you know, my dad jokingly called me a 'ladies man,' you know, sort of double entendre there, whatever that is, because it fit with his like, you know, wheelhouse of like ladies, man. You know? But when we moved into that new house in 1966 and I didn't stick it on the couch, my grandmother's for two years and my brother had been sleeping in twin bed. And my brother got a bedroom. I got a bedroom. And my mom and grandmother
shared a bedroom with twin beds. And they were like, 'You each get your own bedroom and you can paint it, we'll paint it, whatever color you want. 'Dogwood pink!' which is like Pepto-Bismol pink. And again, no pushback. Nope. Like, is that real? There was no: 'is that really the color you want?' No, that was it. And then, of course, you know, we were because it was my grandmother lived with us, we were, you know, the center of the extended family. You know, like you would go over to the mom's house. That was our house. And of course, all the aunts and uncles and cousins were coming over to see Aunt Jessie's new house, you know, and and here's Jimmy's room and again, nobody, none of my cousins, nobody, quote unquote, 'made fun of me,' none of my aunts, uncles like, nobody treated me like there was anything unusual about it.

00;14;31;23 - 00;14;41;21
Wendy Chapkis
Well, were there people in the community you grew up in who were known to be gay or that you knew were gay?

00;14;41;24 - 00;25;56;00
Jim Neal
Yes. And that's really the sad, challenging part. So there were two in my experience. There were two people – one that were I perceived as gay, and the other was notoriously known as being gay. And the one guy was married to a woman and he and his wife owned a ballroom/dance studio and he had obviously dyed platinum hair and so and the way he carried himself, I perceived as like, there's something different about him, you know,but I didn't know what it was, but it was different. I mean, I think maybe to
a certain degree it was like, okay, he's different and I'm different, but I also not that, you know. And then the other person was this staff writer for the local newspaper, the sports, and the local radio station. I'm going to butcher his last name. It was Jim Swicord or whatever. The radio show was like on sports and so he covered all of the local junior high school sports. And he was this like skinny, creepy, wormy guy. Not attractive at all in my mind. And just, if I was to picture a creepy guy, that's what I would picture. And well-respected in our community. I mean, everybody was about the local public school sports and all of that big deal, you know. And there was plenty of money to fund it all back in those days. And all the kids, all the jocks in school knew that he covered all the stories and he showed up in the locker room and he cruised all of those kids. And if he could get a blowjob, give a blowjob, that was going on, and everybody knew about it. Well, I don't know about the adults. All the kids know about it. They all talked about it. So how the coaches didn't know that was going on, I can't imagine. But I think he was probably married, maybe had kids. I don't know. You know, on the surface was a straight man. But a real predator, you know, And then in sixth grade, I had this teacher who taught English, Mr. Fox. And that was the year we moved into the Martin Luther King School. And they had redesigned the weight class that up until then you had a teacher and you were in that teacher's class all day long. Now, we were in a pod for fourth grade, part of pod for fifth pod for sixth grade. We had a homeroom. My homeroom was taught math, and then we moved to a classroom next door for science, English, whatever. And Mr. Fox taught English, and he was this kind of burly bear type man, really hairy. Not all that unattractive, but not attractive either. And he and another teacher, like, partnered up and helped produce school plays that I was always involved in - usually as the art director, but then I had a bit role. My strength was in the art part of it. And in each and every class he had one or two teacher's pets and they were always attractive boys. You know, one of the other things they were doing that was differently is that instead of the teacher having their desk in front of the class, it was oriented like that, he had his desk in the back of the class in a sort of like in a corner. And he would, you know,start out, doing a lecture or you know, we would interact and then we would start an assignment and start working on it. And then he would call me back to his desk. And he did this: call me back to his desk. And so I would be standing there, he'd be sitting at his desk. So if you're thinking of a sixth grader and he's sitting, he's at eye level with my crotch and he would be like cruising me. Like I knew I was being cruised, and I don't want to dig into details, but I had also been through a level of sexual abuse and incest. So I think that gave me an awareness of what this

stuff is, you know. And then he would like invite those boys to come sit on his lap. And so I remember like thinking what's more uncomfortable having to sit
on his lap. But if you're sitting on his lap, you don't have to stand there and be cruised. You know. Yeah. And nobody, none of us were going home and saying 'Mr. Fox is making me uncomfortable.' He got away with it with everybody. And then he would invite us, a whole bunch of us would go to the local pool at what was known as the research hospital. Which I'm going, to let me finish this story and I'll circle back to the research hospital. So we would go to the hospital and he would have all these young boys. And the parents were like 'You're going to the pool with, you know, Mr. Fox? Dandy.' And we'd be swimming in the pool and everything, and he'd be swimming around with his black horn rimmed glasses in the pool... You know where I'm going with all this. And then we would like, dress and undress in the locker room, and it would,I mean, he was like subtle, you know, subtle enough to get away with it. But we knew what was going on. And then he would also invite us to, you know, a local basketball game at Knox College in Galesburg, where I ended up going, to a school basketball game. And it was me and my friend Jimmy Young. And when the game was over, he I think he invited us out for ice cream. And then invited us over to his house. And I was not going to his house. Like I just knew. I was 12 years old. I knew, 'no, I'm not going to your house. No, I can't. My my mom's expecting me home by this time. I can't.
She's really, this is a hard and fast rule.' I can't remember if Jimmy
Young went or not. Yeah, so that was my. That's what I thought Gay men were like. So while I had this family that totally, I want to say, didn't just accept but embraced my difference, I had this other experience that was telling me that the difference that I would grow into would be really creepy. So circling just very quickly, I'm all over the map. Research Hospital. There was this book that was published the Year of Stonewall turning 50. So, what was that? 2019? And several one of them was a lesbian writer that wrote *Lavender Menace*. I think that's the title of the book. And then there was a panel discussion at the Free Library in Philly that I went to. And the gentleman that owns Philadelphia Gay News was there. He was part of the panel discussion. And then this other guy who I don't know where he lives now, but as a young adult or a kid or whatever, he was in Chicago and was a gay kid and was getting in trouble.
And I think - I don't want to share too many details because I'm just drawing from memory, but because he was a troubled kid and identified as gay, they sent him to the research hospital in Galesburg to be deprogrammed. So that's one of the things that was going on at that hospital. I don't know why that Hospital was created in the first place, but certainly my Grandmother was there when she had like Alzheimer's. And, you know, there weren't a lot of nursing homes back then. And if there were, they weren't equipped to deal with anybody with like medical challenges. But yeah.

00;25;56;05 - 00;26;07;10
Wendy Chapkis
Well, moving on to high school and then college, were there other kids that you knew who were different?

00;26;07;13 - 00;36;31;00
Jim Neal
Yeah. So my friend Craig Johnson, that I've known since first grade. He was he was. I, in spite of what I've been telling you, through school, people never perceived me as gay. I was never

made fun of or teased or singled out or anything like that. You know, I was a smart kid. I was in a lot of you know, I was in chorus and art club and all this. So I had a lot of friends, fairly popular, really accepted. Craig was a thin, skinny kid and was by physical appearance, you know, more easily perceived as being gay or different. And then in junior high I became close friends with my friend Mike Bond and Johan evolved. The four of us are still very good friends today. Craig actually died a week ago, which kind of breaks my heart, he had been sick for the last 20 years. And so in ninth grade, Craig and Mike and Johan all identified as gay, they knew they were gay, they were good with it and it was all good. And at that time, you know, we joked that I should have had the t shirt 'Everybody knows I'm queer but me.' I tell myself that because of my history with, you know, being molested as a kid and the experience with Mr. Fox, that made me very uncomfortable, like, I just couldn't accept it. I just couldn't really go there. I knew it was jappening, knew that's what I was, but just somehow hoped that it was going to change or something. We had another friend that was a year older and had a driver's license, and Craig had two older brothers and his middle brother Steve lived in a small town in a trailer like outside of Galesburg and had a whole bunch of gay friends. And like Steve knew that we were all queer kids. And so he invited us to come out to his trailer and hang out with him and his friends. I can't remember the name of our friend with the driver's license, but the five of us would drive out there, not a school night, but on a Friday night or a Saturday night. 1973. Okay. Bette Midler's first album, Barry White, The Three Degrees, all of that going. And there was always like four or five gay guys and they were all getting ready to go to the gay bar, which would have been either in the Quad Cities 45 minutes north or Peoria 45 minutes south. And they're doing their hair. They're putting on makeup, eyeliner, mascara, though. I mean, this is what it was like. If you think of like glam rock. That's where we are. And camping it up and their drinking and smoking pot. And you know if we wanted to have a drink or smoke pot, we could. I didn't. I mean, I was like, soda pop, straight, narrow. They were like, nobody was trying to, like, had an ulterior motive here. They just wanted to provide us with an experience and give us a window into this is what your life can become. This is what you can do. And they were like, they all had jobs and they were going to college and they were probably, I'm going to say like 23, 24, give or take a year. One guy had been in the military and was going to school on the GI Bill. God, I really had a crush on him too. But you know, none of that
was going on. So here was this really, really safe experience. And in contrast to what I had experienced and what gay men would be. Here was like, wow, these guys are happy. They're living full lives and they're doing fun things and they're supporting each other. And there's they're being supportive. They're good people, you know? By the time we were 16, we were driven to those gay bars because at that time, you know, in Illinois 18 was drinking age, and there was no Moms Against Drunk Drivers. And so nobody was carding you at a bar like you're a young, attractive 16 year old. Come into the gay bar. You're good for business and you know, we were good kids. I mean, we were drinking and smoking pot
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and we were going to these gay bars that none of us picked guys up. And we just had fun. And I mean, we danced on the dance floor and we, you know, mixed in, mingled with strangers. But we all went to back to Galesburg. We never used the boys room. We always used the girls room. We figured that out right away. That's where it was safe. You don't you don't go to the restroom all alone. You always grab one of your friends.
I mean, we knew what was what, we were playing it safe and I remember one time we did get invited to a party. It was in this big Victorian house in the Quad Cities. And somebody got on

like a microphone or whatever. And it's like ‘Hey, everybody.’ And like disco music. It's like, ‘Hey everybody, Hi, welcome to the party and blah, blah, blah. There's a bathroom on this floor and a bathroom on this floor and like, ups upstairs in the bedroom to the left or whatever you know, you can hang out, we've got tubs of Crisco and blah, blah, blah.’ And we were like, I mean, I just remember as soon as they said, ‘Crisco’, we are like ‘bathroom now.’ And we all get into the bathroom. It's like, we got to get out of here. I mean, and again, not that there's anything wrong with that. It's just it was not our scene and we were all about like being safe, you know, And so we left. But then, you know, at one point, my friend Johan moved to Chicago probably when he was like 18 or 19. And so you know, we were going to actually we may have had an older friend that moved there before Johan did because we were going to Chicago. And I remember going into - oh god, what's the name of this leather bar in Chicago? - But we were, you know,going into a leather bar, this is pre- AIDS. And the bar was like, shaped like a horseshoe. And you would like, just do circles and cruise and be cruised. And then, you know, downstairs they had, you know like a dungeon with like, you know, jail cells and slings and you could do whatever you wanted and drink in the middle of it. And like the restroom had like a big long trough to pee in with a little angled mirror so you could see everything that was going on. My God, like, I'm just thinking, wow. 17 or 18 years old. It's just like, wow, I got out of there alive. And and because, this like, runs through my life, like everything happens for a reason. And what could be bad could end up being a good thing. Because of my childhood experience and I was okay, so I was going to all these gay bars. I wasn't closeted. And and because of that experience, and if I hadn't had that experience, I would have been just out and about and acting upon my sexuality, I think, and probably would have ended up HIV positive and a very good chance dead. I was that generation, so it kind of saved me.

00;36;31;20 - 00;36;39;09
Wendy Chapkis
Were you all friends still? You were all in a tight unit; you weren't breaking off and some of you going and having sex.

00;36;39;11 – 00;37;03;00
Jim Neal
The other guys were. You know, I mean, you know, with some discretion. But you know, none of us ended up HIV positive. So we somehow were saved.

00;37;03;04 - 00;37;07;15
Wendy Chapkis
So during that time, were you also going to college? You mentioned Knox College.

00;37;07;21 - 00;40;18;24
Jim Neal
Yeah. So I initially I went a couple of years, I went to the local Carl Sandburg College, which is like a community college. And my dad died, killed himself Labor Day. Weekend of 1977. So I was 19. So that would have been my second year of college. So like, clearly I dropped out that year or at least that semester and picked up a couple of classes the following semester or whatever. But I was smoking a ton of pot and drinking a lot. And doing all the other recreational drugs that were available. And then in 1980, I took a semester at Knox in the

spring. And then I signed up as a full time student in the fall of 80. And went to Knox in 81. I was a studio arts major. I was waiting tables at a local restaurant where all of my friends that were graduating from Knox a couple of years ahead of me were with art degrees, were taking jobs as a waiter at the same restaurant. And I just thought it seemed like a lot of money back then. And I thought 'why am I spending all this money? And I'm just going to wait tables when I'm out of here?' And I have no interest in a degree in anything else. You know? So I decided that. So I wasn't going to go back to Knox after the spring semester of 81. And I was going to come to the East Coast. I am in the middle of the country. I could go West Coast or East Coast. I never was attracted to California. And so I decided East Coast and my game plan was to come to Portland because I was going to move to Portland Labor Day.Weekend with my friend Jerry Bock. And then my dad died. So it's like, I can't go. I've got to stay here and see my mom through this. Even though they were separated, it was hard on her. And on me and my brother as well. And so my game plan was I'll come to Portland now, four years later, and visit Jerry and what was then the Portland School of Art. And I would travel down the East Coast to at least D.C. and visit, you know, the art school in Boston and RISD and, you know. Corcoran School of Design and, and DC and, and I decided, wow, if I'm going to finish school, I'm going to do it at an art school, which would be, you know, increase my, you know, employment career chances, I think.

00;40;18;26 - 00;40;22;12
Wendy Chapkis
Can I ask like, how did you know about Portland, Maine.

00;40;22;14 - 00;40;23;03
Jim Neal
Because Jerry lived here and Jerry lived here because her sister Mary had moved out here in 73 or 74. And was like 'come on out.' And maybe Jerry would come out to visit. So she knew it. And Portland was a great place to kind of land on your feet. It was really affordable, very rough around the edges, but in a really good way. I showed up here in the fall. I'd had car problems, so I didn't have a whole lot of money. And so I thought, I'm just going to, like, get a job, hang tight for the winter, and then spring or summer I can, like, resume my journey. This is 1981. And I had mentioned to you earlier about that some you know, it was a long, hard winter, I remember. And, you know, Illinois has hard winters, but they're shorter, like it's over, you know, middle of March. And that April of 1982, somewhere around the 20-something of April, we got like 24, 25 inches of snow. And I was like, what is going on? But all along everybody was like 'yeah that's winter.' I never had a winter coat. I lived my whole winter in a bulky sweater. And everybody was like, 'Oh, you know, summer in Maine is glorious.' You know, we're going through this jag right now of all this rain in Portland, and that June was all rainy, but nonetheless I stayed, it got nice and I fell in love with Portland and stayed here.

00;42;28;19 - 00;42;35;11
Wendy Chapkis
Let me just pause this for a minute.

00;42;39;25 - 00;47;38;03
Jim Neal

You know, I mentioned that, you know, my motivation for coming to Portland was you know, in terms of school, it was also while I was in Galesburg, I was dating women. I was having gay experiences mostly with friends. And, you know, those gay experiences were inherent experience. And then I would just retreat and would detach myself from that friend for a while. And they would continue to retreat. They knew I was struggling and they would reach out to me. And I was like, I had walls up. And so I kind of knew in the back of my mind that getting out of Galesburg would allow me the opportunity to figure out the gay thing. And be comfortable with it. So while I had childhood experience where my immediate family and extended family all seemed really accepting of me being different and, you know, probably gay, I had all of this internal homophobia and, you know, where does that come from? I mean, is it because I had some of those bad examples? But this is why this whole 'don't say gay' in Florida thing, I think it's just so destructive because I you cannot overstate that it's okay to be gay, that it's okay to be different, that it's okay to question your gender, your sexuality, all of those things. And especially as a kid, you know, if you want your kid to be healthy and happy and well-adjusted, like you have to get that word out there, that it's all okay. And I think my life is a really good example. I mean, nobody was like, overtly like, 'you know, Jimmy, are you gay?' You know, none of those conversations. But the sort of subtle cues that it was okay. But that's why I needed those overt conversations and reassurance. So anyway, yeah, so that shortly after I got here, I, you know, started having gay experiences. And that summer of 82, I, you know, dated a lot of people. And got a job waiting on tables down the airport. But, you know, I was like, so the school thing got back-burnered because I was just like saving up some money. And I was really enjoying working. And like delving into life as a gay man. There were gay bars at that time. There was Rumors, like the dance bar. And shortly thereafter, Cycle's opened, which was like a levi and leather type bar. And there was another bar on the corner of Spring and High Street, the Chart Room. And then there was an all-night club. The last time I was here it was, I think, Becky's Diner at the bottom of High Street on Commercial. That was the all night club. And I remember like going there and it's like, you'd like, step out of that because, you know, everybody be dancing and sweating and you'd step outside to get some fresh air. And step outside and there were docks around us. And the water from the harbor was just like 'you're not in Kansas anymore'. You know, I mean, it's clearly not the Midwest. So it was really a great freeing experience. And Portland was really a safe place to do that compared to a larger city. And yeah, so I was here.

00;47;38;23 - 00;47;41;25
Wendy Chapkis
Can I just ask, was that the period where you sort of came out to yourself or -

00;47;41;26 - 00;48;56;20
Jim Neal
Yes. I came out to myself and the restaurant I was working at closed for renovations in January of 83 and so I thought, Well, I'm just going to travel. I went out to visit a guy in San Francisco. I had a crush on. And then I flew from San Francisco to back to Galesburg. I hadn't seen my family for a year, year and a half. And while I was there, my Mom had foot surgery because I was in a hurry to get back here. So she thought, Well, I should have my surgery and you can help me recover. And I got a job at the restaurant I was working at before I moved out, moved from Galesburg and got my mom, no pun intended, back on our feet. And then in November of

83, it's like, I got to get the heck out of here. Like, if I don't leave now I'm sucked into Galesburg, which, you know, again, nothing against Galesburg, but not for me and I had stuff in a basement of a building here. Portland, I didn't know a lot back then but I came back here.

00;48;56;24 - 00;49;01;11
Wendy Chapkis
Can I ask, did you have any conversations with anybody in Galesburg about being gay?

00;49;01;14 - 00;53;51;08
Jim Neal
My closest friends, Not my family. So I came back here, got my job back at 34 Exchange and came back to work there. But I think the kitchen crew was all new, and the chef in the kitchen Was Danny Peters, who ended up opening Cotard restaurant and was a really good chef. He had just moved back. He had lived several years in Key West, and so he was the chef there. And he and Roger Mayo were roommates and good friends. And so Roger would come in to the bar and like, have a drink. And maybe meet Danny after work or whatever. Well, I ended up like going home with Danny and sleeping with Danny. And then, you know, there was I, of course, like, bumped into Roger in the hallway or whatever at some point. And, you know, as the story goes, Roger, you know, said something to Danny about, like, 'who's that guy that spent the night' or whatever? And Danny was like, 'Oh, it's some waiter that I work with.' Roger's like, 'Oh, he's cute'. And Danny, Danny's like. 'Oh, if you want him, you can have him.' And I don't take that personally because Danny was, god love him, was really like self-involved. You know, they we were all living in where you live now, where Roger lives: Parkside neighborhood. That was the gay ghetto. Rent was so cheap.And everything in Parkside was owned by Wedgewood Apartments, which was a local owned real estate, residential property owner. It was like really rough. The buildings were rather unkempt. Portland was just starting to - it was the eighties - so things were just the eighties. Things was starting to happen with, you know, Reagan in office and that eighties boom. So they were buying up these properties for dirt cheap. You know, in a level of disrepair, fixing them up and then renting them out. And their property manager was a gay man. And if you came to Portland, and you were gay and you were looking for, you know, you go out, meet people and look for a place, their office was on Park Avenue near Mellen Street. That building that's next to the parking lot. It's like, go down there. David Levy. No, not David. Anyway, go down, talk to So-And-So. He'll get you set up. And you go down there and you'd meet with them. It's like 'Okay, what do you want? A studio, One bedroom. What are you looking for?' I don't remember, like, getting tours, but whether they gave you keys or just described them, or you just rent it sight unseen and they just take your money for it, there's no security deposit. You could pay your first month's rent and then make an agreement, I'll pay the security deposit, which is like equivalent to a month's rent, which is all dirt cheap in like four installment payments. So if your rent was $200 a month, you'd pay, you know, 50 for the first four months. And then, you know, when you, you know, became a little more financially secure and you wanted a bigger place or you found you could be a roommate with, you just go down and say, hey, we're looking for a two bedroom now. And he'd move you into a two bedroom. And again, you'd like do installment payment plan for the increased security deposit. You know, you get a boyfriend, you get a bigger place. You and your boyfriend break up, you each get places. And it was all orchestrated through Wedgewood Apartments. And I believe Danny and Roger were living in a Wedgewood apartment. And and

then I met and then I you know I think I bumped into Roger one morning or afternoon at a payphone outside the Mellen Street market. And Roger's like 'Oh, hey, hey, how are you? Are you doing? You want to come over and smoke a joint or whatever?' And it's like, 'sure!' So I went over and then he couldn't get rid me. I spent every night I possibly could over there. And and then Roger eventually moved to another apartment, and I had my own place like a block or two blocks away. But I was spending every night at Roger's place that he moved onto as a single man. It was a one bedroom. It was it was small. It was like there was no hallway. It was like you walked into the living room and the living room ran into the kitchen and the bedroom and bathroom. You know, the bathroom was off the kitchen and the bedroom was just off the kitchen. You know, it was just three rooms spinning on an axis. And so it really wasn't big enough for two people. But I wasn't really living there. I just sleep in there most of the time. And then we decided that I may as well move in. I remember going into like there was like a pantry closet.c The first thing I did was like, Oh, I'm going to get into that closet and paint it. Like, feel the space. And because I was, I had to fit my stuff in there. And Roger's friend Linda came over. It's like, 'Jimmy's feeling the space in the closet, sure know how to pick them.' So I moved in there. Oh, my God. It was rocky. We fought and fought and fought. It wasn't enough space. And it was Roger's place. I had invaded it. By invitation. But nonetheless. And I had started working. I quit my job at 34 Exchange restaurant. The owner, like, jokingly pulled a gun on me. And this is, so this is like how crazy stuff used to be that. Like, it just wasn't on anybody's radar. Pulled a gun on me in the kitchen in the middle of a shift. Bang! Oh, so funny. And I was like, you know, there was time when my Dad threatened to kill our family with a gun. Which ended up being the that he killed himself with. And I just thought... I left. I walked out of there and never came back. I just did temp work all over the map for six months and then I landed a job at the Museum of Art, entry level position as a janitor. And my friend Kate.Rumery was a receptionist there, which is how I found out about it. And they loved me, you know, because I was an art student in art history, and that was, you know, it wasn't like, Oh, 'I want to be a janitor,' it was like, you know, connected to the art. The I.M. Pei building, had opened in May of 83. This was February of 84. So they were still in their first year. Lots of growing pains, but it was this building museum that had put themselves on the map, you know, with some notoriety beyond Portland and having to be part of it. And I was working there. And that June, my mom a stroke and really lost her ability to speak or write, which was like just like a death sentence, because my mom was like super chatty, you know. And my aunts and uncles were like, you know, 'Hey, don't worry about it, Jimmy.' Like, 'Come visit when you can. But there's plenty of us here. We're helping to take care of her'. I would call her on the phone and just say, 'you don't have to talk back. Let me just tell you this is what's going on with me.' And I can hear her crying on the other end because she wanted to talk so badly. And then that November - I've always said that if I were to write a memoir, it would be titled Ronald Reagan's Reelection Killed My Mother - my mother had a stroke the night of Ronald Reagan's re-election of 1984. My mom was totally apolitical, so it really had nothing. It just sounds good, you know? But I had to work. My my uncle called me that night and said, 'you know, Jimmy, your mom's had another stroke trying to figure out what to do. Are we going to put her on life support or not?' But she and I'm like 1200 miles away. How am I supposed to make a decision? And my brother's, like, not comfortable in hospitals, so I don't even know if he went in to see her. But I was like, Yeah, go ahead and put her on life support. So I went in to work the next day and said, I need to leave. And it was a minimum wage job. They loaned me money for airfare and I flew out to Illinois. I got there, went straight to the hospital, my with my brother,

went in to see my mom and she was really in a coma and my grandmother was still alive. So I'm talking to her. And while I'm talking to her, I'm like rubbing your arms in her legs because I didn't know if she could hear or perceive at all. She couldn't see. But I thought maybe she could feel so. I'm talking to her and in my head trying to process am I going to be a cheerleader? 'Come on, Mom, you can be, you're going to survive.' Or am I going to give her permission to go? And she had been struggling for six months. I always give Kurt Douglas a great deal of credit because he had a stroke a few years later and put himself out there and went to all the award shows and his speech was affected. And she really stigmatized the after effects of a stroke. And my mom was embarrassed. You know, she thought, 'Oh, people will think I'm like disabled or, you know, mentally challenged because I can't speak.' You know, she was, you know, reading, writing and arithmetic. And so I made the critical decision to give her permission to go. And while I'm talking to her about this and that and the other things and telling her about like, 'it's Jimmy, I'm here,' she started to cry. That's how I knew she could hear me. And so I said, 'Mom. It's okay to go. Don't worry about grandma. I will take care of her'. And I left. And I went to the waiting room where my brother was and stopped at the nurses station and said 'We're going home for the night. We're like a five or ten minute drive. So if anything changes, you can call us. We'll come right back.' And before my brother and I had got our coats on, the nurse called on the intercom and 'Neal brothers. Please don't leave.' And the nurse came in and she was like white, like a ghost. And she looked at me and she said, 'What did you say? What just happened in there? Your mom is gone.' And she said, 'I checked her vitals moments before you went in there and everything was stable.' And so she had clearly just waited for me and and needed somebody to say, it's okay. So I came back. I stayed for a month through Thanksgiving and work was great. I mean, what was your typical five days of bereavement for immediate family? And I was calling work and checking in with them, you know, called my mom is now died. 'Take what time you need.' And I called him and it's just like I don't know what to do. Like, my grandmother was upset for obvious reasons, and I'm not really comfortable like, 'okay, the funeral's over - bye grandma.' And they're like, Jim, you stay there.' I mean, to this day, if anybody asks me in an interview, usually like, you know, 'what's a good boss?' 'Jane Becker, associate director at the Museum of Art.' She was a lesbian. The director at the time was John Halvorson. Gay man. Several other gay people working there and all on all levels of responsibility. And Jane said to me, 'Jimmy, you stay out there as long as you want to and don't worry about your pay. You'll continue to be paid.' So I stayed through Thanksgiving and then came back. And when I came back, I got into counseling and Roger and I just getting on and I just didn't have the will to fight. And Roger didn't have the will to fight with me. I mean, that's that's the only thing that changed, you know? I mean, our relationship was still, you know, we were unskilled partners, immature on a lot of levels. I was at that point 26 and Roger is 30. Yeah. So that was like we turned a corner there. And then a few months later we moved in together. We want a two bedroom apartment. And so, you know, now my what was supposed to be path through Portland had now become alive. I had a job at an art museum. I was in a relationship. I was really.building a life as an adult, a responsible, mature, maturing adult. And Portland was like changing and evolving and it was growing and it was it was exciting. I mean, I, I was, you know, when I left hometown and again I described it earlier as this idyllic place to grow up. But by the seventies the factories were closing and moving to the southern U.S. or Mexico. Nonunion. And businesses were closing. The Carl Sandburg mall opened and killed downtown, which was like your quintessential Main Street. I mean, I remember somebody made buttons that said, you know, 'last one out turn off the

lights.' And so to be in a ommunity that was on the up, it wasn't dying, it was growing, it was thriving. And you know the Performing Arts Center had just opened. The museum had just expanded. There was all this art and culture going on here that was so accessible in a big town, small city. Yeah. So I stayed. And, you know, went home to visit every now and then. So while I this growing up I had this experience going to gay bars and being around gay men, so when I did come out of the closet, I was, there was no shell shock. I was like, I was gay before I was gay, you know. But I wasn't political, like, you know Harvey Milk being assassinated, not on my radar. Anita Bryant campaigning against gays, not on my radar. You know, I mean, I was in the closet. It didn't affect me. You know, wasn't in the news in Galesburg. But Roger was like, plugged in. I mean, I don't think he was necessarily like you know, participating actively, but was informed. And always had a copy of The Advocate, which at the time was like the gay newspaper. It was nationwide distribution. It started out as a I think of California, you know, L.A. thing. And it was a newspaper. It was like the Village Voice kind of format with ads in the back, classified ads, because there was no Grindr, there was no Manhunt. None of that. Like you wanted to find date. You want to find an escort. It would be in the classifieds at the Advocate, and it was separated by state. You go to the classifieds and it's like Massachusetts, Maine, you know, California, New York, whatever. And boy it was like a window of what was going on. So Roger found out that there was this March on Washington October of 87, which would be the second one. There was one I don't know what year - I don't know what year the first march on Washington was for gay and lesbian rights. But this was going to be the second one. At this point were steeped in the AIDS crisis, living with a President that couldn't even say the word AIDS. Wasn't funneling any money towards the crisis. We were just dying off. And it was euthanasia. I mean, it was just it you know, 'so we're losing some some fags and some drug addicts, like a gift from heaven,' you know. And so part of that three day protest weekend included a mass wedding ceremony in front of the IRS building, you know, to protest the lack of, you know, marriage rights and all of the, you know, legal benefits that come with that. So Roger proposed to me with, I think, like a ring from a gumball machine or something. I don't know. It didn't matter. You know, it was the gesture. And somewhere there's a picture of it. But I, of course, said yes. And we drove down. We stopped in New York City. We drove down with our friend Steve Gorman, stopped in New York City at his uncle's house, spent the night there, and then drove on to D.C. and got married. And let me just say at this point, I had worked at the museum for three years, a total liberal bastion culture with lots of gay people, as I had described before living there. I've working there and they all knew I was going to Washington to get married, and they all knew Roger. Nothing. Nothing like, 'Oh, you're get married. Great!' Didn't care. Nobody said or did anything; there was no congratulations. Nothing, nothing. And, you know, in contrast, you know - so fast forward to 2013 and I'm at the Museum of Art and there's a whole in between all of that. And, you know, Roger and I had been split for 13 years and I met this great guy from, Philly. And I was moving to Philly with Ray, my now husband, and we moved him down the 1st of August. And then I came back to Portland to wrap things up and pack up my stuff. And then I would move down the 1st of October and. There was a whole thing going down in this North town suburb of Philadelphia, where a county was going rogue and issuing marriage licenses to same sex couples. I didn't know this because it was like, you know, Philly news. Ray was following it, knew about it. So on our drive down, we spent the night and then he said, 'What do you say we stop in North Town and get a marriage license?' And I was like 'Sure.' So we did. And so we moved right down there and I came back and it's like.

‘I'm engaged, I'm getting married.’ And this is before the Supreme Court ruling. Oh, my God. They pulled out all the stops. I mean, it was my second marriage. You know, I'm in my fifties. Oh, they do a shower. They insisted I get registered at Macy's and all these other places because they wanted to shower me with gifts. And I got all like it was I mean, it was just like, wow.

01;14;10;03 - 01;14;12;01
Wendy Chapkis
So what changed?

01;14;12;04
Jim Neal
I guess. I guess I mean, the politics had changed. You know, we had moved forward by many strides. But I guess they needed this public consensus that it was okay to embrace Gay relationships and marriage and that level of commitment. And, you know, when I was in my twenties and all my, all my cousins and then eventually my second cousins were getting married, I didn't go to any of those weddings. I mean, I didn't have a whole lot of money, but I could have scraped together the funds to go to those weddings, or at least one of them or two of them, the important ones. They were all important. But in hindsight, I look at it, it's like, you know what? It wasn't important to me. And I couldn't go. I mean, this was not a conscious decision, but now I realized that I couldn't go witness those commitments, those relationships that were recognized legally and religiously, and not think about, but not me. I'm a less than. So it was more comfortable to just not go. And have to look at that, be confronted with that. So yeah, so we came back from that March on Washington which was like so powerful. I mean, the numbers are always skewed. The Park Service says, you know, 100,000 people were there and there was somewhere between a quarter of a million and a million people. Huge, huge. I mean, we covered place. Our wedding was on a Saturday and then the march was on Sunday. We were all queued up at the Ellipse by the Washington Monument. And we are marching by state. And I don't know if that was in alphabetical order or what, but we didn’t step off for the parade, the march, until like three or four in the afternoon. It was crazy. I mean, I don't think they were prepared for all that many people. So the logistics of it all were a challenge. But what a celebration, because I mean, everybody from Maine was there and we're all just like hanging out at the Ellipse. Most of the people, I didn't know, you know, I mean, I had my little gay circle of friends and my coworkers and stuff. But, you know, Penny Rich and Barb Woods that were, you know, really involved in Gay politics and back then, it was in know, MLGPA, Maine Lesbian Gay Political Alliance. Everybody was there. Diane Elze. I could think of more names but not off the top of my head. But you know, got to know all of those people well, I mean, know who they were and introduce and that sort of thing. And, you know, like ‘We just got married, you know the whole crazy thing. And came back and just felt so empowered. And the AIDS Memorial Quilt, that was its inaugural display on the mall. It covered it. Covered it. I mean, just so powerful on so many levels. Came back and we just got involved. We got involved with what was then The AIDS Project - now the Peabody Center. We were on the original fundraising committee, which was very sort of like home grown. We did a, you know, plant sale at Monument Square. And eventually there was you know, anybody that came up with a fundraising idea. And, you know, our friend Steve Gorman came up all singing, all dancing, all concerned at the prom Performing Arts Center. And we rallied all these local you

know, dance music, performing artists to do a fundraising show. And I designed the promotional poster for it. And then eventually Steve and Kim Birch and I can't think of the woman's name. I didn't really know her. They started Visual Aid, which is like this kind of a footprint that other communities were doing to raise money because no money was coming from Washington. And and of course, I always donated a work of art or to that Visual Aid. The opening was a big, you know, gala - you paid, you know, 5000 bucks for a ticket. And that was part of the fundraising. Everybody was there and some straight people were starting to show up now and support it. And then in 89, we brought the quilt to Portland, its first visit to Portland, and I submitted an illustration for the promotional poster, which they loved. And so they asked me to do that. And so I worked with the Art Directors Guild of Portland. They did the color separations and all of that. Then we ended up doing this full color promotional poster for it, which was The Quilted Heart. After that exhibition The Names Project Maine was formed and really spearheaded by my good friend David Ketchum that I'm still very close to today. It's like David's now 82, lives in Provincetown. And Deb was really involved. I think Deb got involved because she was a quilter. The Names Project started and they adopted the Quilted Heart as their logo and they produced T-shirts and sweatshirts and they traveled all over the state with a number of panels, and they would do quilting workshops and they were going into all the schools and really educating people about the AIDS crisis. And and death and dying in general, you know, And Deb was a storyteller. And so she started collecting all of these stories and facilitating kids stories. And wherever they went, they would have what was called Signature Panels. Individual panels were three by four. Yeah, three by four, the size of a grave. And then they would put together 12 panels. So it would be a 12 by 12. And those would get, I think, stitched together and eventually they could be shipped to the main repository for the quilt that could then be collectively shown nationally. They would ask me to do a signature panel and they would buy me a 12 by 12 piece of canvas. And in the middle of it, I would like paint this 4x4 or five quilted heart. And that wuld be part their display. And you could leave a message to a loved one or a thought or impression or whatever, and it would travel around for so long, and eventually it was filled up. You couldn't get another signature on it. So they called me up and 'Jim, we need another signature panel.' So I paint up another one. I eventually was buying like the basic, you know, like the basic paint colors. Pink, red, lavender and purple and white field of color with, you know, other details. But I had like quart containers of several pinks and red and purples, and then I would use two colors for all the nuances. But I was painting. I was using those colors so much I bought the quarts of it. So there must be four or six, those signature panels that traveled the state. They are now part of the AIDS Memorial quilt, you know, which is like the largest community craft art in the U.S.. So, you know, my mom died, I inherited a little bit of money and and by 89 my brother bought his half of the house that we inherited. And, you know, Roger and I were trying to figure out, should we buy a house? But at that point, like real estate prices in Portland had mushroomed because the eighties were this growth boom. So you're kind of like priced out of the real estate market at that time. And then we were like kicking around the idea of like some kind of a business or whatever. And we were thinking more retail, which is where Roger's background he was working at a local flower gift store and his parents had owned a like corner store. So he grew up doing that. And they were building new big buildings in Portland and we were looking into hosting like a newsstands next to, you know, like you would find in the lobby of, you know, a big building. And none of came to fruition. Our friend Lorrie Dohr had opened Terra Firma shoes. It was at 144 High Street; I think she, opened in 87. And she was doing good business. It

was a cute little store. And and Lorrie was just like, you know, we were kicking around like, we want to do a business. She's 'Yes, this is great, but you guys should definitely open something.' And then she was getting ready to move Terra Firma around the corner. This is the State Theater building, the Congress Square building. You can move it around the corner to 615A to a bigger store. She's expanding. She's like 'I'm moving. You can have this store.' And that was like a hole in the wall. I mean, it was like 14 by 25, 30 feet with a little loft that we could have for an office and back stock in. And the rent - $200 or $300 - is crazy. So we thought, 'wow, it works for Lorrrie. Let's do it!' I got in several promotions and was now Building Manager at the Museum of Art. We had a new director, a very nice woman, bugt a little bit like out of her realm for managing a museum of that size. It was a step up for her and she was really like out of her league. And so there was a lot of challenge there that I was growing tired of. So yeah, so we opened Drop Me a Line July 1st, 1990.

It was primarily cards, stationery, gift store. And the only thing we knew that kind of, you know, sort of set us apart. I think we underestimated that the impact of this decision is that we are going to try to find cards and gifts that would appeal to gay and lesbian population, not exclusively, but we weren't going to ignore that segment of the community. It's like, why would we? And again, like the flower store that Roger was working at, the manager was gay. Everybody knew they were gay. I was out at work like, why are we going to like own our own business and go in the closet? I don't think so. And so. Back then and again like any kind of like nude, seminude images of, you know, that had a gay lesbian sense to it, you couldn't find them. You know, there was no Internet. There two or three lines of cards that you would open tup and there would be a fully nude man in it. There was one store in Portland that sold them, but they were in a shoe box under the counter and you had to ask for them. They wouldn't be out on the counter. I mean, we put them on the rack like this is not like your dirty porn/ So there wasn't anything in terms of like imagery that appealed to lesbians. There were a couple of photo books. The first ones that came out was a book titled *Love Bites* by a woman in San Francisco. But in terms of like greeting cards or even blank cards there wasn't. I mean if we could find cards some female nudity on it, I mean we had a sense of this is not overtly hetero... it doesn't have this sense of, you know, exploitation of women's, you know, physical bodies. I remember a beautiful, beautiful picture of Madonna, like sitting like with her, you know, our calves, like under her thighs and she's topless. Curly hair and she's got a cat in her lap because she did modeling in her early days. Just too beautiful. I mean, so so anyway, those kinds of things did appeal a little bit to the lesbian community, but it was more what really appealed to the lesbian community were cards, images that really spoke of the power of women. So it was a different, more sophisticated thing. And we learned that and we were like, you know, Wendy, you came Into our store and it's just like you bought a card when you were in San Francisco. You knew I'm going to buy one for me and one I'm taking them to Drop Me a Line. They'll pay me for it. And then now we can like call up Jane Eversheds and say we got a card store in Portland. We want your stuff. Melissa Harris was another artist. I know she still produced and stuff based out of Minneapolis. Books eventually music. And Melissa Harris I don't know where she was out of. But so we found stuff that really spoke to that population.

01;31;56;03 - 01;32;20;04
Wendy Chapkis

Can I just to ask? There were other places that were gay-managed or gay had gay workers. Was there anywhere else that had like an explicit orientation toward the gay community? Were there other gay owners who were out as being gay owners of businesses or other businesses that you knew to go there to get things that were specifically from before for the gay community?

01;32;20;06 Jim Neal
No, I would have been going there at one point. I believe one of the guys that started Our Paper, which was the local gay paper, owned a bookstore. I think.

01;32;33;18 - 01;32;34;17
Wendy Chapkis
Our Books.

01;32;34;19
Jim Neal.
Our Books. I don't know the timeline on that. I never went to it. So it either predated my landing in Portland or again I was not all that political. So they weren't running ads in the local paper. You know, it was you had to know somebody who knows somebody. And then of course, there were the dirty bookstores. Those were always like, you know, served as a meeting place. I mean obviouslypeople went there to get, you know, condoms or sex toys or or, you know, watch a movie or whatever. But it was also a place where you could chat a little bit. I mean it wasn't where you'd have like a heavy conversation. You know? I mean, it's like you're not going to have that conversation at the adult bookstore. And the gay bars were where people... but in terms of like retail storefront during the light of day wasn't happening.. We were going to be that. I mean were were never going to be like a gay store. We wanted to be a store owned by gay people that acknowledge the gay community and, you know, the gay population that shopped and that wanted things particular to them and to our allies. We sold buttons that were like, you know, most of them we sold were political buttons. And then we also sold just like, you know, 'it's been lovely, but I have to scream now.' Silly buttons. Based out of Oregon, I believe we placed our first order and it was like a minimum order of $100, I think. And the button sold for $1.25. So they cost like $0.60 apiece or something. So you had to buy a lot of them. So we handpicked everything. I mean, most people would just say, sent me $100 worth of buttons. We were like reading every button and picking them out. Because we were like trying to zero in like it was like a gay camp sensibility to it, you know. And not just letting it happen by happenstance. And we got so many of them and it's like, okay, that's $75. And we were like, just flesh out the rest of the order with pink triangle buttons. The company called us up before they shipped it and said, 'We got this order and you really want like 100 pink triangle buttons?' I think so. At the March on Washington in 87, lots of pink triangles, little bit of rainbow flag thing going on. And even by 1990, I think maybe in some of the larger cities the rainbow flag was starting to usurp the pink triangle. But that was still like a powerful symbol; certainly in Maine, we were relating to that more than the rainbow at that time. We weren't buying rainbow buttons. I mean, if there were Rainbow buttons, we would have been buying them. So we were like, Oh, no, that's not to say we want those. We were the only place you could buy those.

I think maybe there was a Student Center or a gay social at USM; they might have had pink triangle buttons. But anyway, yeah. So everybody sat up and took notice and then people were like, you know, Bob Gordon worked it w CSA around the corner and he was just like 'Why don't you guys sell like the Advocate?' He said, 'I buy it every week and I go down to Joe's Smoke Shop. Just the Smoke Shop sold it and like Manscaped and Torso and all the gay, I'm going to say soft porn magazines. I mean, they were pictorial. They weren't. I mean, if you want to think of nudity as pornography. In my world, it's not. But they sold all of that. So a lot of it. And they sold The. Advocate, which by the way was shelved with those gay nude magazines, not next to Newsweek and Time. It was with those magazines. So he was like, 'Why don't you guys carry this? Because, like, I'd buy it from you, I want to support you, not just the Smoke Shop. And I'm coming in here every week. Probably gonna to buy something else when I come in to get this.' Sort of like spot on. So we started carrying The Advocate. And by now, The Advocate had gone from being a newspaper format to a glossy magazine. A lot like Time or Newsweek. Still had the classified ads in the back. And then other magazines started to get published. I mean, I think the way the March on Washington impacted Roger and I, I think it had that impact on a whole lot of people. People got courage. People were angry because of the lack of response to the AIDS crisis. And so stuff was happening and the whole gay publishing world was exploding. I mean, the nineties, that was the heyday. I mean, there were there was – I don't know the book business anymore, but there was a very strong you know, there's a crossover there with the feminist movement and lesbian writing because one supported the other, give or take because, you know, the Lesbian Menace was not always like welcome in the feminist community. But nonetheless, there were lesbians involved in the feminist movement. And so they learned lessons from the publishing of books that promoted feminist ideals. And so you know, books that appealed to, you know, whether they are like mysteries or... I've been out of the business long enough, but there were a lot of small publishing houses that published books for women. There was Allyson out of Boston that published you know, they published John Preston's *Franny the Queen of Provincetown* and some other books, too. But it was like slim pickings. And then it all started to explode in the nineties. And, you know, next thing you know, there was Out magazine and there was Genre, there was Curb was a lesbian magazine. Oh, God. There was like several half a dozen. And from news to social entertainment. Bad Attitude was a great sort of sexual awareness. Some B.D magazine that appealed to lesbians. So it was a wide open book. And if it was being published, we were carrying it. And just to show how that industry, that genre was changing, shortly after we started carryingThe Advocate, the classifieds became a pull out. It was connected in the magazine so it wouldn't fall out, but it was simple to unstaple so you could pop it out. So now you could leave your Advocate out on the coffee table and mom and Dad could come visit, you know. Brilliant. The publishers of The Advocate had the brilliant idea of like, people are buying it for the classifieds, we're not getting rid of it. So it went from being a pull out to its own separate publication called Unzipped, and that was their classified ads. And it had a couple of like full nude pictures in it, not like Honcho or Torso that would have like, you know, it would feature like four different models with like a spread. This would be like one model of the month. So you'd get that and some written pornography, and the classified ads, and they sold it for 2.90. So instead of getting like 3.95 for The Advocate with your classifieds, you're now getting The Advocate for 2.95 or 3.95, 2.95 for Unzipped.

And then of course, that took off. And so now The Advocate, the owners of the Advocate, they published which was like a pictorial with more mature men. And then they published Freshmen which had a younger model you know in their pictorial. So but we were part, we were steeped in the middle of that whole boom. I just recently went to the memorial service for Michael Denneny, which I'm getting a little emotional about it. Who, you know, he was working for, started out working for Macmillan and mostly publishing, you know, straight stuff. But started Christopher Street Magazine, which was a literary all-out New York magazine, started that in the seventies and was doing that on the side. And then he decided that he wasn't going to hide, that he was like publishing a gay publication. And I don't know if they he ended up leaving Macmillan and went to work for St Martin's Press.Worked for them for many, many, many years and really started like seeking out and finding Gay writers. When I say gay writers, I mean more men writers than women. And that's not because he didn't want to work with women, because eventually he did a lot, but because the women's movement, as I mentioned earlier, they had started publishing their own stuff. You know, they were doing it themselves. They didn't need St. Martin's to publish their stuff. The boys didn't have their act together. They needed a Michael Denneny to shepherd that. So he started the Stonewall Inn series of like seminal gay books. He sought out Randy Schultz, who published *The Band Played On*. Randy took several years to write that and he was able to write it because Michael Denneny encouraged him and told him 'this has to be written.' And John Preston was living in Portland. And John was one of the early ones of The Advocate and he was one of the first executive directors of the Gay and Lesbian Center in Minneapolis St. Paul, which is one the first in the country. So John had been like in the middle of the gay movement, you know, more than more anybody I knew. And born and raised in Massachusetts. And had lived in New York from many years. At that time. I think The Advocate was based in New York and like so much of the art industry migrated to L.A.. And then John decided, you know, 'I'm a small town New England guy.' He moved to Portland. In fact, like one of my favorite stories. I remember when I first moved to Portland. Now, keep in mind and I told you, like my background, like there's no gay shock. I'd seen it all. In Congress Square was Portland Savings Bank and in the State Theater building. So there's some history going on there. Anyway. So that bank was there for years and years and years and, you know, it became People's Bank that became TD Bank North but back then Portland Savings Bank. And that's where my friend Kate Rummery worked. One of my oldest friends, Portland, the teller there. I sort of got a bank account there. John Preston had his bank account there and he was living up here with his slave boy that he would walk down Congress Street on a leash, on a leather leash. And he would, leash him to a street pole or whatever while he would go into the bank. And I was like Oh, oh my God. This I mean, this is like 1981, 82. Wow. I mean, even now, I mean, if that happened now, I would say, wow. You know, and but hobody cared. Nobody called him. It it was all fine. I mean, Portland was like the wild, wild West. And we were heavily influenced by - as we are today - New York and Boston. I mean, culturally, artistically, socially. I mean, stuff was going on in Portland, little old Portland, because there was so much influence from the larger cities in America that we were you know neighbors to. So John was in Portland and was writing and, you know, he was publishing a lot of pornography and awareness under another name. And I'm drawing a blank eventually. I mean, it got republished under his real name. Stuff for all those pictorial magazines as well. I mean, he was like building a life, doing what he had to do to be a writer and pay his bills. And then he started editing a series of books, *Hometowns*, about, you know, gay men in the towns that they grew up in and worked in; he published a book called *Brothers*

and Sisters about the lives of gays and lesbians and how they worked together. And he did that in companion with a Lesbian writer – I'm drawing a blank on her name. But anyway. And then, of course, published Flesh in the Word, which was call it what it is, you know, it's like this is now being marketed as erotica. It was pornography. And I'm not saying that in a bad way. But Penguin wasn't going to publish pornography, but they were going to publish erotica. And they could see that. I mean, these gay books were selling - the fiction, the nonfiction, the Band Played On. All of that was selling, you know, So they saw there was an audience there. And then, you know, they also knew that. Even though they may not have been publishing, you know, the pictorial magazines, they knew what kind of money Playboy was generating. And Larry Flynt. You know, they knew where the money go, where the money is, you know, follow the money. So they were like, yeah, let's let's do it. So they published Word and I think they published three and four after John died. Got him all over.

Drop Me a Line at 144 High Street. We just followed Lori Dorr from Terra Firma shoes. She was our retail model. She decided to move from 615A Congress Street to 611 Congress Street. And then when we opened Drop Me a Line, the word was out the 20 year lease on the State Theater as a porn theater was that they weren't going to renew it and they were going to renovate it and open it as an entertainment concert venue. So we knew the neighborhood, the building that people frequent because that neighborhood was like, you know, from Congress Street to State Street was there was the State Theater as a pornography, as a porno theater, The Fine Arts Cinema - which is, is that still Gino's now? - and there was a bookstore, an adult bookstore in the State Theater building as well. And there was the Treasure Chest at the head of Congress. And another adult bookstore, and I think there was another one. So this was like, this was our Times Square or Midnight Cowboy. Times Square. So, you know, nobody was opening a retail area. You know, 20 and 30-somethings would shop around here because they didn't care like your mass population was going to happen. But we knew that would change when the theater closed. So then they wanted it to be a dinner theater type thing. And the way the building, the State Theater building, it's the State Theater in the core of the building; all around the perimeter of it is retail stores on the first floor. And then, above and around the State Theater are all office suites above. The way the building is, the theater is dropped in the middle of the building, the way it's designed. Our storefront at 144 High Street, if they blew a hole in the back of the store, it opened into the lobby of the theater. So it was the most practical, logical place for them to put their kitchen. And we had a ten year lease. So they asked us to break our lease and we were like 'Where are we going to go? We can't afford to go someplace else.' They bought us out of that lease. They dropped our rent. And they used their maintenance crew to move us into Lorrie Dore's vacated store from Terra Firma 615A Congress Street. And so we were there. And that was just like a big enough storefront for us to generate a higher volume of business. And it was on Congress Street instead of High Street. You know, we thought, well, we're just like two doors down High Street so everybody would see us and we'd put our sidewalk sign there. You know what? We didn't think is that High Street is one direction headed down the hill and we're down the hill. So if you're at the intersection, you're not looking down the hill because the traffic is all coming from the right and we're on your left. So when we moved to Congress Street, it just changed everything.

01;54;36;16 - 01;54;56;11
Wendy Chapkis

Can you talk about besides a sandwich board and running ads in programs for events? One of the things I remember from Drop Me a Line was your windows. Can you talk a little bit about that? How you decided to do that and what that was like and what kind of windows you created.

01;54;56;12 –
Jim Neal
Yeah. So I was the artist at the business. Roger built all the displays. I did all the painting and, for the most part, the window displays. And they always had a sort of gay sense to them, you know, whether, you know, level of flamboyance. And we took great pride in those windows and spent a lot of money on them. And really, I mean, both Roger and I grew up heyday of the big department store where people really put an emphasis on, you know, creating an environment and, you know, visually appealing. That was a big part of their marketing. You know, that's not so much now. I mean, if you go to New York, you know, but for most part not. But for us, we embraced that. And we always had a big Gay pride window for June. And we just thought 'We're doing it. And if we get a brick, we get a brick.' I remember one year we did. And, you know again, that philosophy of we're going to carry, you know, we're a store for everyone – but we're catering to underserved populations. That didn't just stop at the gay community. If it was feminist, if it was pagan, if it was for the Jewish community, we did it. For the African-American community we were carrying Kwanzaa cards. You know, lots of pagan stuff, lots of literature, imagery, jewelry, all of that. And all those audiences have a crossover, too. And I remember one year, we did this, it was like this multicultural holiday window. So we had Kwanzaa stuff and we had Hanukkah stuff. We had solstice stuff. And of course, Christmas. And everything in between. And there was a company that had produced oversize candles that were, they would describe them as anatomically correct, but I would have described them as anatomically gifted, I'll say no more. And they started out with a Billy Doll that was like this blond haired, blue eyed Billy Doll. You know, souped up muscles and zipped up everything. And you could buy a Billy Doll sailor. You could buy a doll in leather or, you know, whatever. And he was such a big hit. They came out with Carlos, who was a Latino guy. And then he was a hit, too. So they came out with a black doll. And what was his name?
So we thought what could be more multicultural than a black Santa? You know, now I live in Philly and they're everywhere. And so it's not a big deal. But in Portland, it's just like, do they make black Santas? Does that exist? Well, it does. It just didn't exist in Portland. And so we put the Tyson, we put the black Santa Tyson doll in the window. And he was anatomically gifted. And Roger would tighten up the shorts the Santa was wearing, like Santa shorts, not Santa pants. He would tighten up the shorts. So it was all there. You could see the outline of it. You know, while I was I love the kid's piece of it all, and the, you know, the piece de resistance, that multicultural holiday, I thought, oh my God, like who's going to be mad because we're perpetuating stereotypes about black men and are they useful for anything other than the stereotype? And I get that. I mean, that's not our intent. And you don't have to tell me that, you know, black are capable of everything that all of us are capable of. But nonetheless, I thought this could be it. So then I would go in and puff up the shorts so that you could still see this stuff going on there but it's not like quite so in your face. And then when I wasn't looking, Roger would take them up. And so we played this game, which is like a total Jim and Roger dynamic going on there. And don't you know, this 50, I want to say 'middle aged' - and it's like, oh yeah, that's younger than I am now - Black man comes in and he's like, 'You got a Santa doll here?' 'Yeah, we do.' Because I'm thinking, 'Here it comes.' He's like, 'I take it that my wife

was by here. And she said the only thing she wants for Christmas is the Santa doll you guys are carrying.' They were 100 bucks. They weren't cheap, you know, like, 'Yeah, okay.' I got in the box, brought out. It's like would be like $105 with tax. He didn't bat an eye. One year and then Lorrie Dore moved down the street and so then we moved into 611. Like we got to follow her like, hey, bet I know where our fourth store will be. We're just waiting for Lorrie to move. And so then we had two store windows because the door was in the middle of the store. It was two storefronts that the wall down the middle had been removed. And so one year we did, oh, it was like this, like glam window, like I'm a queen Christmas window. And the other one was. I'm a pissy queen Christmas window. And it was like the I'm a pissy queen Christmas window is all very kitsch, like a little poodle skirt and, you know, pink flamingos and all this sort of like camp stuff. Whereas the other one was like, you know, it was just like tasseled, an upholstered chair with a scepter on the chair and a crown. [02;02;27;07] But we had a lot of fun with the windows. And,when John Preston died in 1995, which is when I met Michael, because he came and did a eulogy, we did a whole dedicated to John because he was brilliant. You know, he did book signings at the store for us when we moved to that second location at 615 A, and business was growing and we were dabbling in gay books and gay magazines. That whole industry was growing and more and more stuff was being published. We thought, Well, now we've got room for a small book section. And John said, Call Jim Vivian, he works for Penguin. Tell him how much you've got to spend. He'll send you a core library of gay books to sell. And that's what I did. I just saw Jim Michael's memorial service. I called him up and I said, We've got $500. We want gay books. They were returnable. You know, you get a 40% discount. It's not a lot. Nobody makes money off books. They it made off magazines when the magazine industry was big and everything else, their bookstore sells bookmarks, book related gift things. If they're selling coffee or you know whatever else, they're making money off that and they're making a little bit of money. But 40% discount on books, whereas everything else, you get it 50% off. So there's 10% more that you make. And then if the books don't sell, you can return them then there's a10% restocking fee. So now you've gone from like 40% margin to 30% margin. That was good for us. People loved it. Our first book signing was with Dale Richards, who wrote a book titled *13 Lesbians Who Changed the World*, and it was a major publisher. I want to say, Carol, something. I could picture it, but she couldn't get a women's publishing house to publish it, oddly enough. But she found a major publisher; they were all ready to jump on the bandwagon. We did a book signing with Patricia Nell Warren, who, you know, wrote *The Front Runner*, which, you know, came out in the seventies. And at one point it was rumored that Barbra Streisand had bought the film rights to it. Never been made into a movie. And she I think she wrote several other books, some related to that and some not related and then took a break. And then in like 96, she published a sequel to *The Front Runner* called *Harlan's Race*, which is I believe Harlan is the Front Runner, it's a story about a gay athlete, who is mentored by a coach. And I think Harland is the gay athlete's name as a grown man who's now a coach and what have you. And so came out and she did a book signing with us. So by this time, you're not just a story that includes the gay community. You've got a reputation in town as being the place where gay authors will sign books. It has a gay book section. I mean, we - Drop Me a Line and Roger and I - were referred to as, you know, the gay Community Center, the gay Chamber of Commerce, the gay Mayors of Portland. All of those things. And that was never our intention. I mean, there was a certain naivete. It's like we just wanted to not ignore our community and we really underestimated the impact that that would have. Once the Maine Gay

Men's Chorus started and then Women in Harmony started up a year or two later. Eventually there was the Matlovich Society that you know, we partnered with them at all of our book signings because our stores were small. So if you wanted to do a book reading, you couldn't really do it in our store. I mean, everybody would be standing up. So we would partner with the society and they they'd get a room at the Holiday Inn. Or if it was a big enough draw, we would be at the Museum of Art or at the public library. We'd do a book signing there, and whether we walked back to the store and signed books or we took the books, there. But yeah, we sold tickets for everything. We sold tickets for, you know, again, this is pre-Internet, so you wouldn't be buying tickets online and you wouldn't be buying them at the door and Venmo and CashApp and you know, you wouldn't have Square to, you know, pay for them on your phone. So we sold them and how many tickets we sold - Gay Men's Chorus tickets, we sold all the tickets for Pride, the Pride dance, anything that was a ticket. We sold all of those tickets. If somebody was doing a fundraiser you know, The Great Pumpkin Ball, you know, Equality Maine, if they were the event, we were their ticket venue. If it was a fundraiser for The Peabody Center, we sold the tickets. I sold quilted heart and the money went to the Names Project. I sold red ribbon cards, purple heart, red ribbon cards. The money went to The Peabody Center. So we did all of these things. You know, Bangor Pride. We'd pack up the car and we go up there and you would have I. I can't it like we would show up at Bangor Pride and I'm just speechless. Like it was. It was like a dream come true that we showed up there. It was because they didn't have a store like ours and they were doing a Pride, but they couldn't get buttons and stickers and rainbows. And we, we, we sold it all. As more and more merchandise for the gay community came out - T-shirts, bumper stickers, keychains, buttons, decals flags – as we all became more visible and the rainbow flag really became the symbol, it got turned into, you know, good old American capitalism. And we sold it all. And we traveled the state with it. And people loved that. You know, they were like, you know, once I went to Bangor, they were like calling us. And like, Hey, our Pride festival - You're gonna be here, right? Oh, yeah, Yeah. I think it was positive energy. Somebody did the Gay and Lesbian Symposium every year and it traveled the state. It moved around each year and it was usually like a three or four day thing. And we were going to those with all of our wares and we'd have gay books. At this point, we've got gay books and all the other stuff. And we'd go and, you know, camp out for four days and go to the different workshops and stuff. But one of us would always be, you know, we have the table. So because people would like, shop it between workshops or, you know, there'd be a dance at the end of the night and one of us would be there.

02;11;20;23 - 02;11;28;08
Wendy Chapkis
You're really at the center of a whole lot of stuff that went on in in Maine around queer stuff in those years.

02;11;28;10 –
Jim Neal
Yeah, because it wasn't formalized. I mean, while there was a MLGPA that transitioned into Equality Maine and there was Maine Won't Discriminate because we were all fighting for you know, Maine's the only state that has passed gay marriage by popular vote. And I can't even remember, I can't even articulate the dynamics of equal protection laws for Maine. I mean, it

started out Portland wrote a law and then, you know, like, Falmouth and South Portland, all of the neighboring communities wrote Anti-Discrimination ordinances, you know, for housing and employment and credit and all the basic protections. And then we tried to do it in the state. And again, I can't remember if it was like it passed at the state, but governor wouldn't sign. It passed and the state governor signed it. Citizens collected enough signatures to force a referendum vote. Maybe it overturned, I don't know. And then it got passed again by the legislature here. And the governor signed it again. And then we have another referendum. It was just craziness, craziness, craziness. And then and then it finally passed. And then we did the marriage thing. And so the nature of our business retail, that was like we didn't sell anything that you needed. We sold everything you wanted, you know. [02;13;17;24] And so our business was solely dependent upon discretionary income and in those years that we had big political, we did about a third of our business in the holiday season. And those were lean years because people decided - and rightly so - I mean, unfortunately we suffered financially. We're not doing holiday presents this year. We're giving our money to Maine Won't Discriminate. And so everybody's given their $100 to Maine Won't Discriminate instead of Drop Me a Line. It all adds up and there you go. And it was like that what I just described was like several years going and it's just wasn't you know, we crept along, you know, we didn't have shuttered doors, but, you know, we were growing and growing and growing, I think like 95 was our best financial year. And we expanded in 96. And and then by 97 things started. We started struggling. We were in a bigger storefront. We had more overhead and we were distracted, you know, on a personal level with that, our own personal struggles and but, you know, we stayed in business. And we weren't young, we weren't going to the bars anymore, so we weren't necessarily attracting the newer generation. They'd find us at Gay Pride and they buy stuff, but they weren't necessarily coming back to our store the weeks out of the year. And then our generation, we were buying houses. And so again, that discretionary income was buying replacement windows and, you know, paving our driveways and down payment for our house. All those things. And so we found ourselves, you know, at a certain point you have a customer base and your customer base is expanding by word of mouth, and you no longer have to strive and scrape and scramble to cultivate new customers. But that scramble never ended for us. We were always trying to find that new customer. And again, when we opened Target wasn't here. Bed, Bath and Beyond wasn't here, HomeGoods wasn't here, Walmart wasn't here, Barnes and Noble wasn't here. We were doing the gay books. And Barnes and Noble opened up and they offered a 10%. on hardcover books and everything else. And I don't want to go so far as to say that the community wasn't loyal to us, but, you know. We tried to offer discounts but Barnes and Noble was a whole shopping experience. You go out there - well, no, it wasn't Barnes Noble - it was. Borders - you go out there and they've got books and they've got music and they've got all of that. So. You know, it was yeah, it was tough. And we kept trying, you know. We probably should have have built a website, you know, because the convenience. We could have like grown into that shopping habit that developed from the ground floor. And of course, people would come to our store in the summertime and they would be like, 'Oh my God, they don't have anything like this in Charleston, South Carolina.' We were like, 'Well, here's a business card. Call us up. If you can describe it, we can put it in a box and ship it to you.' But that's not like a website.

02;18;06;02 - 02;18;10;11
Wendy Chapkis

So what year did the store finally close?

02;18;10;13
Jim Neal
2006. In 2004, we moved to Market Street across from Post Office Park because we felt like we were trying to expand that customer base. And we thought, Oh, if we're in the Old Port we will gain those tourists and a new audience. And id didn't really work like that. It's funny, like human behavior, because Market Street is one block away from Exchange Street. They shop Exchange Street but they don't go to Market Street And then here's the thing because we thought we'll just gain all of our customers in the Old Port and we'd keep everyone that we had in Congress Square. Like in Manhattan, to walk six blocks, it's a big nothing. In Portland, you've gone from Congress Square downtown district to Monument Square neighborhood to the Old Port. It's three neighborhoods away. Not going there. I mean, we didn't lose them, lose them. They would shop, you know, three or four times a year instead of weekly or monthly. And we had grown tired. We've grown tired. I was 48, Roger was 52. We've been doing it for 16 years. We kind of knew what we needed to do. We needed a website. We to embrace social media. I mean, like Facebook. Instagram wasn't around yet. Facebook started. Facebook had not turned into the advertising platform that it is, but it was starting to. But nobody imagined that would turn into what it is. But it's like, Yeah, we knew what we need to do. But we just don't have the energy. We're older. We're, we're tired. And while it gave us a paycheck all of those years, it didn't finance any kind of retirement savings. And we were like, we've got to shift gears here and think about our retirement years. And so we closed the store in June of 2006. I decided to go back to school because when we started, Drop Me a Line, if I wanted to apply for a job, you search the want ads and you mailed your resume. And now it had all gone digital through the computer. I was managing, you know, I was using QuickBooks and we were maintaining an email list. But my computer skills were pretty basic. And I thought, Wow, I'm going to have to go out and find a job. And it's going to come down to me and another candidate. And all things being equal, they have a college degree. I don't. That could be the deciding factor. And plus I really thought, Wow, I moved ouy here 19, 25 years ago to finish school. I guess I'm going to do that. So I took a community class that summer to beef up my computer skills. And boy, I, I really kind of surprised myself. Like I came up with a game plan that was spot on. I got my computer skills up to speed. I went to SMCC that fall, took one or two classes to just acclimate, took a fall load in the spring, went to summer school classes. Took and them. Transferred to USM. I'm a USM graduate, a USM alumni. Put together a Life Learning credit application. Boy did I figure out what a checkered past my transfer transcripts really documented. It was like failures and A's and incompletes and it's like, yeah, I was really struggling that first go around with my sexuality and my family stuff. And drug use, you know. I mean, while I wouldn't say I was necessarily a drug abuser, that certainly didn't lend itself to a successful, you know, educational pursuit. Yes, I graduated from USM in May of 2009. Didn't know if I'd get a job because the housing market had collapsed that fall. I took a Banking and Economics class in the fall of 08 and the professor was just like 'I've been handing out the same handout for ten or 20 years and I've changed it three times this week. Here's the new rules.' It was crazy. I mean, what a time to learn that. But of course, everybody graduated. It's like, where are we going to get a job? Well, in 2004, the museum asked me to come back part time because a guy was leaving for open heart surgery and they thought, if we get Jim in here, he's

already got security clearances. He knows the work. He's just like right up to speed. And I said, I can do it. These are the hours that I can work; if you can work around my schedule because I had the store. And they did. And then that gentleman, Rick back came back after he healed from his surgery. And they didn't want let me go so they said, We want to keep you on part time. So I kept doing that and working at the store. And then the week we closed the store, a full-time maintenance person quit. So I was going have to have a job. So I took it. And so I worked full time and went to school full time and took summer school classes. I just wanted to get it done. The museum was really good. I would take classes for Monday-Thursday and they would adjust my schedule. And then my classes the next semester were Monday, Wednesday, and they changed my days off. And at one point I had a class on the Saturday, so whatever, they worked with me. My only days off were holidays and breaks from school and I graduated summa cum laude. I had to prove to myself that I was going to. And you gave me the best, some of the best - I mean, I knew more professors at USM than I knew students because I was a nontraditional student. And all of my friends who were teaching at USM, you know – What advise do you have for me? Like 'Don't miss class; do all the readings; turn everything in on time. You'll do fine.' And that was my mantra to get me through. And then the building decided to retire like that week that I was in finals. And he said, I recommend that you just offer the position to Jim. And they held on to that because they wanted me to focus on my finals. So I got through my finals and the week of my graduation they pulled me into the office and said, 'Patrick is retiring and we want you to step in as our interim building manager and certainly hope that you will apply for the permanent position.'

02;26;55;25 - 02;26;59;05
Wendy Chapkis
Well, part of this interview is about how wonderful the Museum of Art has been to you. Jim, we're out of time, so I'm going to have to end. But before I do, I wanted to ask it, when people are listening to this interview, younger people, over the years, and you look back over the experience that you've had in your life, is there something in particular that you see as a profound change between then and now that you that you could talk a little bit about or something that you think that young people should listening to this interview should know?

02;27;38;24
Jim Neal
Just keep working. You know, the battle doesn't stop. I mean, we can see right now, with the political climate, you know, the transgender community has been perceived as the easy target because, you know, somebody has decided that. They are the most misunderstood. I mean, back when I was coming of age, we misunderstood them. You know, the transgender community was marginalized by the gay and lesbian community. You know, they led the Stonewall riots. They were the ones that, you know, if you could assimilate, you know, you could, you didn't have to fight. But if you were an effeminate man or a masculine woman, you couldn't pass. And so you were either going to have to change your behavior or your appearance, and slip under the radar. Or you were going to have to be willing to go to battle. And they did. Those effeminate men and those butch lesbians were the ones that dug their heels in and said 'No, I'm going to do that. So now, you know, I mean, the political climate has enabled all of those big ads to feel comfortable in voicing their opinions. And, if you think that the pushback

is going to stop with the transgender community, you're fooling yourself. Because once they feel like 'We've squashed them. Now we're empowered. Let's go after the gays and lesbians.' And, you know, like gay marriage isn't legal. We can get married now because the Supreme Court ruled. But the Supreme Court also made abortion legal. And in the, what was it, 25 years, 30 years that abortion was legal by a Supreme Court ruling, we never managed to pass a federal law. And I would imagine some people thought, 'Well, we don't need to pass a federal law, we're safe.' And it seemed like we were. And, you know, there's a certain complacency and comfort that you get and lying in the shadows, waiting and just waiting for, I don't want to say, you know, his name that will not be spoken, just has to come along and say it's okay to say sick things. It's okay to hate people. And then people get empowered and stuff starts happening. Do something. Just do something. I mean, you know, when ACT-UP was happening I was running the store; I wasn't doing ACT-UP. I mean, you know, before the store, I went to all the gay, you know, marches in Maine, in Portland. We were part of the, you know, fundraising for the AIDS Project in the early days. And, you know, but once we became business owners, we were working 24/7. And so what we did was create a presence of visibility. We did our part, which was no more important than the people that showed up for all of the ACT-UP protests. I wasn't knocking on doors during Maine Won't Discriminate. I mean, I look back and I think, well, maybe I should have had the energy to do that, you know, but could have should have. You know, other people had the energy. It was a success. We made it. But we made it because everybody took a piece of the challenge and did a piece. So just do something. Don't get complacent. Be visible. And surround yourself with people that encourage that and give you the courage to do those things, challenge you and push you to get out of your comfort zone. You know, a lot of times you have to be cornered. You know, I never talked about this and I know we're short on time, but I never formally out to my family until 1988 when my appendix ruptured and I was sick for ten days. And finally got, after going to the doctor Quick Care three times, was rushed to the hospital, thrown into emergency surgery because I was like, I had sepsis at that point and I was in the hospital for ten days recovering from it. And the doctors said 'Not to be dramatic, but you had hours to live, you could have died.' And I just thought, wow, I'd never been in the hospital my entire life. And while I was recovering, I thought, Oh, my God, Roger and I have been together for four years. We've been married for a year. Nobody knows who Roger is. And if I had died, they would be like 'What's up with this guy? What's going on with him?' And he had would have no rights. And even like stuff that my family probably wouldn't want, they maybe would have taken just because who else gets it? So I spent my recovery time writing coming out letters to my family. And the first one I wrote was to my Aunt Dean, my mom's only sister, who did all the house cleaning when I was growing up. And I just like, 'Hey, there's no way to dance around this. Here it is. I'm gay. I have a partner. We've been together X number of years. You know, we're in love, we're committed to each other, blah, blah, blah. And, you know, think back to my childhood, big surprise. But I understand if you're if you struggle with this, I hope you can find somebody to talk to. I certainly struggled with it before I came to, accept it.' That letter sent through the post. I had her letter in my hand no more than five or six calendar days from the day I dropped hers in the mail. And I must have t hat letter somewhere. It was just like, 'Dear Jimmy, I got your very revealing letter. And I'm happy that you love yourself. And I'm happy that you found somebody to share your life with.'

And from that on, I was just like I don't give a damn what anybody else, any other friend or family, you know thinks or says, because I've got Dean in my court and that's good enough for

me. And nobody in my family cared about it; they were all very accepting. And some of them were like, Really? And I'm like, Yeah, really! Let's, like, can we do a quick review? Remember that bedroom of mine? So anyway, like, you know, gain the courage, do what you think, you can’t do.

02;35;58;19 - 02;36;00;23
Wendy Chapkis
What a beautiful way to end. Thank you Jimmy.