

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project
Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Gerry Jennings
February 23, 2016**

Interviewer: Gregory Rosenthal
Interviewee: Gerry Jennings
Date: February 23, 2016
Location: Gerry Jennings's home, Roanoke, Virginia

Transcription prepared by Erin Hannon

Total 1:15:59

Index:

0:00 = childhood in Roanoke City and Roanoke County (1954-1968)
4:03 = experiences at Cave Spring High School (1968-1972)
9:39 = The Tradewinds and Old Southwest
13:23 = experiences in college at the University of Virginia (1972-1976)
17:06 = political and religious upbringing, before college
20:19 = experiences at UVA (1972-1976) and the two years afterwards in Roanoke
(1976-1978)
26:45 = first apartment in Old Southwest (1978)
27:46 = Murphy's and The Park (1978)
28:28 = involvement in PALS and the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, in Lynchburg (1978-early
1980s)
36:17 = the scene at The Park
39:45 = HIV / AIDS
41:21 = founding *The Blue Ridge Lambda Press* (early 1980s)
44:20 = Backstreet Café and The Last Straw
46:40 = involvement in gay organizations in Roanoke (1980s)
48:36 = Roanoke Valley Gay Alliance (1980s)
50:50 = Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Organizations (ALGO) (late 1980s)
53:59 = organizing the Pride in the Park festivals (1989 – early 1990s)
1:02:14 = attending graduate school (early 1990s)
1:03:47 = *The Blue Ridge Lambda Press* (in the 1990s)
1:05:03 = The Gay Rap Group (mid-1980s – early 1990s)
1:10:51 = changes over time, from the 1980s to today

00:00:00

[Testing sound]

00:00:12

GR: Okay so, this is Gregory Rosenthal interviewing Gerry Jennings. It's February 23, 2016. We are in Mr. Jennings's home in Raleigh Court, or is it not Raleigh Court?

00:00:25

GJ: It's kind of on the edge of Raleigh Court. It's kind of between Raleigh Court and Windsor Hills.

00:00:31

GR: Oh Windsor Hills

00:00:32

GJ: Yeah

00:00:33

GR: Okay, this is for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project Oral History Initiative, and that's that. So, Gerry, if you will, just state your name and where you grew up...

00:00:48

GJ: Okay. I'm Gerry Jennings, and I grew up here, in the Roanoke Valley. I was born in Roanoke City. Lived there until I was about eight and then moved into Roanoke County, and I lived there until college, until I moved out on my own when I was 24.

00:01:14

GR: So you were born in the '50s?

00:01:17

GJ: Uh huh

00:01:20

GR: You said you moved to the county when you were eight?

00:01:24

GJ: Uh huh

00:01:25

GR: So tell me a little bit about those first eight years in Roanoke City. Did you go to public elementary school?

00:01:34

GJ: I did. First and second grade in Roanoke City. They didn't have public kindergarten back then so I went to a private kindergarten.

00:01:50

GR: What was your home like? Siblings? What did your parents do?

00:01:56

GJ: I have one sister who's three years younger. My mom had been a teacher before I was born, and after I was born she didn't go back to work until I was maybe 14 or 15, something like that. My dad worked for the U.S. government for the Internal Revenue Service. So it was just the four of us in the family.

00:02:27

GR: Were your folks from this area?

00:02:30

GJ: Yes they were

00:02:34

GR: So what propelled you into the county? Was that a change in job or just a change in location?

00:02:43

GJ: Just a bigger, newer house. The house that we had in the city was a small kind of little Cape Cod, and we moved into a ranch that had seven rooms or something. In fact my sister still lives in the house. Our parents died and she bought my share, and so she's still there. It's only just over the hill from here, it's very close.

00:03:09

GR: What neighborhood were you in, in the city?

00:03:12

GJ: Grandin Court

00:03:17

GR: So what school district did you go to for the rest of your schooling, K-12?

00:03:25

GJ: So first and second were Grandin Court Elementary. Third was Cave Spring Elementary, then they changed the district lines so then I went to Mt. Vernon Elementary School for fourth through seventh grade. And then when I went into eighth grade that was the first year that they had what was then called an Intermediate School, or a Junior High School basically. So I went to eighth grade at the Intermediate School, and then Cave Spring Intermediate, and then ninth grade through graduation at Cave Spring High School.

00:04:03

GR: What was Cave Spring like? What was the community like? Suburban?

00:04:10

GJ: Very suburban, very middle class. There were a lot of kids too though, who were from the country, probably whose families had lived in Southwest Roanoke County for many, many years. Then there were lots of suburban kids, many whose parents had transferred here for jobs, with like GE or [the] railroad or things like that. There were 1,600 kids there at the time, and I think

there were maybe 100 black kids, and maybe two Asian kids. I mean it was a very, very white, homogeneous student body. Not to mention the teachers, they were all white too, just about.

00:05:12

GR: What year did you graduate from Cave Spring?

00:05:14

GJ: 1972

00:05:16

GR: So I'd imagine the schools were integrated sometime during your middle school?

00:05:26

GJ: Well, it was actually when I was in elementary school, because I know that—this is in Roanoke County, Roanoke County schools that I'm talking about now—there was one black kid in my sixth and seventh grade. So at that point we were integrated in some respect, I don't know if it was full, I don't know what the particulars were. Roanoke City schools, I think, integrated maybe a little bit later than that, cause I remember hearing stories about Patrick Henry High School, which I actually lived closer to, even though I was in the county I was closer to Patrick Henry than Cave Spring, but I remember hearing stories about what was going on with Patrick Henry integrating.

00:06:27

GR: So you were in high school I guess from '68 to '72?

00:06:30

GJ: Uh huh

00:06:33

GR: Those are tumultuous years in the country, what was it like in Cave Spring?

00:06:39

GJ: Well, I remember the first Earth Day. We had our first Earth Day, it was 1970. Several of us decided we were going to recognize it by walking to school, instead of taking the bus. So we walked. It was three miles or something like that. I remember going to a couple of war protests, and I remember we first celebrated Black History month while I was in high school. So there was that sort of stuff, but it was pretty low-key, it wasn't any big drama that I recall anyway. Probably, rather the political side of things, the bigger changes were coming about in society as far as the hippies and, you know, long hair and all that stuff. I was not really part of that. I was a goody-two-shoes.

00:07:52

GR: Were there hippies at Cave Spring?

00:07:54

GJ: Oh yeah! Sure, "the freaks" was the short hand to refer to them.

00:08:05

GR: So what kind of kid were you in those teenage years?

00:08:09

GJ: Oh I was very—I was a little goody-two-shoes. I was in the band, I was on the student newspaper, I was in the Latin club, and those were my extracurriculars. I was a pretty nerdy kid, pretty shy kid.

00:08:32

GR: Did you have any sense of your sexuality in high school?

00:08:36

GJ: Yeah, the very beginnings. I think I was probably about sixteen when I actually understood what was going on in that respect for me. But of course there was no public discussion of that topic so it was, you know, there was really no outlet that I knew of. Now of course I know now that there were some of these—what we were talking about earlier before we started recording about the Gay Alliance [of the Roanoke Valley] and the *Big Lick Gayzette*—stuff like that that was beginning to happen when I was still in high school but of course I had no knowledge of that.

00:09:22

GR: You were certainly not yet going to bars or anything like that, so it was probably hard to meet anyone who was openly gay. In retrospect, were there students at Cave Spring who were gay?

00:09:39

GJ: There certainly were, I don't know if they were acting on it at the time, but yeah, several of my friends from high school later came out. I remember one time, earlier than high school probably, when my dad worked downtown, his office was downtown, so we would go and meet him at the old S&W cafeteria, downtown for dinner pretty frequently. Of course, in the '60s there were malls, the malls were beginning, but there was still a lot of retail and activity going on downtown. So anyway, we would go down there a lot. I remember when we would drive home, we would drive up Franklin Road out of downtown and we would go by The Tradewinds. Well, I, of course didn't know anything about The Tradewinds, and I don't know what my parents said about The Tradewinds while we passed it, but I remember thinking that there was something wrong about that place because of the way that they talked about it. So they knew, I guess, what kind of place it was. As I understand it, The Tradewinds was there from the '40s, and was a gay bar even throughout that period. Have you learned something about that? So anyway, it was just interesting that I knew there was something shady about the place before I knew what it was.

00:11:28

GR: What is your memory of that space? When you were driving by on Franklin, did it have an aura of secretiveness to it? Or skeeviness? Was there something that would make your parents, you know be like “that place ain't right”?

00:11:47

GJ: Just by looking at it? I don't think so. I mean it had a big sign "Tradewinds" and I think it had a palm tree on the sign. No, I don't think there was anything particularly skeezy looking about it. Although it was kind of on the border between downtown and Old Southwest, and Old Southwest was kind of on the shady side in those years. I don't know if that had anything to do with it, but it was basically downtown. I mean it was right on the edge, you know?

00:12:23

GR: Could you elaborate on what was Old Southwest's reputation, what was it like?

00:12:32

GJ: Well, at the time I didn't know anything about it. Although my parents had friends who lived there, close friends who lived there so we would go there and visit. They lived in an apartment, upstairs in a house, and I think that they owned the house, but I don't really know. Aside from that I didn't really know anything about Old Southwest. That changed when I first moved. When I first moved out of the house I moved to Old Southwest, when I was 24. So at that point I was certainly aware of it and was involved in the neighborhood organizations and stuff.

00:13:14

GR: So take me back now to high school, you graduated in '72, what was next for you?

00:13:23

GJ: Well I went to college. I went to [the] University of Virginia in Charlottesville. I was there all four years. I majored in Psychology with no particular idea of what I was going to do when I came out.

00:13:41

GR: What was that like? What was it like in Charlottesville in those years?

00:13:45

GJ: There was a lot of stuff to be exposed to, like just about anybody who goes off to college is going to experience. In those days, I think it was maybe more true than now, in fact I'm sure it is, that somebody in that position who gets exposed to a lot more stuff that they've never even thought of. It was a little bit overwhelming for me. At first I was glad to be kind of anonymous. I think there were 16,000 students when I was there, undergrad and grad together. It's a lot bigger now. I kind of liked being anonymous, but then I never really got into a good groove there. I mean my grades were okay and all that, but my grandmother died on November 1st of my first year at UVA. I was very close to her, and I think that, for a year or so, had a pretty major impact on me.

Unfortunately I didn't take my father's advice, and when I went to UVA, I decided to room with my best friend from high school. He said, "Don't do it, because if you do that you're not going to meet as many people." And he was right. I didn't meet as many people. So, socially it was sort of you know.... I mean I had fun and everything, but it was somewhat limited I think from what it could have been if I had had a little wider circle than what I had started off with. But I liked UVA. I enjoyed it. I certainly became more politically aware and so forth. '72 was the first year I was able to vote for president. I voted for Nixon. [*chuckles*] Haven't voted for a Republican for

president since then, but by that point I was beginning to be more politically aware. Chuck Robb was in law school at UVA at the time. He was head of the Student Legal Forum. They brought in speakers, and he of course had pretty good connections, being the son-in-law of President Johnson. So they brought in all these big names in politics. The one I remember the most is Hubert Humphrey. That was an interesting part of it, to see some of these national figures speak.

00:17:06

GR: I'm interested in your political awakening, because you said back in Cave Spring that you went to some anti-war demonstrations, Earth Day, and so on. At that time did you feel that you understood your political values, that they had formed yet? Or was that more "hey, people are going to this thing and you want to tag along?"

00:17:31

GJ: Well, it was some of that yeah. I had a couple of close friends who were really into the anti-war stuff. So I tagged along with them to some extent, but no, my political ideas were not well formed at all. I think that my thoughts at the time about Nixon and [Senator George] McGovern were just that the things McGovern was saying just didn't seem realistic to me, but that was about the entire depth of my understanding about it.

00:18:19

GR: What kind of values did your parents have and raise you with? Was it a religious household? Were your parents politically aligned in any direction?

00:18:30

GJ: It was not a religious household. My mother—that's funny I was thinking about this last night—my mother, a lot of times on Sunday mornings would say "Well we really ought to go to church today" but then, you know, she would just sit there with the rest of us. She didn't push it. I think she just felt the social obligation. We belonged to a church, a Presbyterian church, well first to a Baptist church then a Presbyterian Church, but we didn't go much at all. They never mentioned religion other than that. Didn't say grace. Very, very nonreligious kind of upbringing. And they were southern people, and you know, their ideas about race were not hateful, but were not enlightened, at all. Of course in those years, a lot of the changes that were happening as far as race relations were playing out in television with TV characters, guests on talk shows, and that kind of stuff. So we had some debates in the house about that. My mom and dad kind of thought that some of that was being forced on society. But as I said, they were not hateful, at all, as far as race went or anything for that matter.

00:20:14

GR: And you didn't have any conversations about sexuality, before leaving home?

00:20:19

GJ: No, no I didn't. In fact I hadn't come out to anybody until my one friend Kathy, who was a very close friend in high school and again at UVA, she was the first person I ever came out to and she was very accepting. Then there was one other young woman who I was very close to. She was kind of pressuring me because she wanted us to be dating, she wanted to be involved and of course I wasn't interested in that. Although we did have sex twice, as it turned out, after I

moved out of my parents' house. But I wanted to move out of my house, into my own place, before I told her because I thought it would be very upsetting for me if she didn't take it well. And she did. She did take it pretty well at least overtly. So anyway, I was out of the house at 24 and in an apartment. I was also coming out kind of socially at that point, in November of 1978.

00:21:54

GR: Now you lived in the dorms at UVA?

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GJ: First year I did. They didn't have dorm space for anyone but first year students. They had a little bit for upperclassmen, but very few, very little space for upperclassmen. And I wanted to stay on the grounds, in a dorm, but I didn't get picked in the lottery to do that. So I had an apartment the rest of the three years.

00:22:24

GR: And then when you graduated, you moved back to Roanoke, you were saying, and you lived at home for a little bit longer...

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GJ: Yeah, for about two more years. I stayed in Charlottesville through the summer after graduating in 1976 because we had the apartment through August. I had a job there I worked as a clerk in the Miller & Rhoads Department Store in downtown Charlottesville. I worked at the Miller and Rhoads here during breaks and during summers through college. So I did that up there full time for that summer.

00:23:04

GR: Was there any kind of gay student group at UVA?

00:23:08

GJ: There was.

00:23:09

GR: Were you involved?

00:23:10

GJ: No no, no. There was a Gay Student Union, but I wouldn't have touched it with a ten-foot pole. [*chuckles*] It just didn't seem like an option, even somehow. I mean, I knew what they were about, and I knew what was really going with me, but I just was not ready to deal with that at all. I had a couple of come-ons from guys who were friends of mine who turned out to be gay later, but I just kind of ignored it or brushed it aside. I just wasn't ready.

00:23:53

GR: That first female friend that you came out to, that was at UVA or that was after?

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GJ: That was after we were at UVA. I think she too had wanted something more than friendship, but it didn't happen.

00:24:12

GR: So when you moved back to Cave Spring in '76, I guess, or late '76?

00:24:19

GJ: Yeah, September '76.

00:24:22

GR: Moved back home, so then what were you up to at that time? Did you go into Roanoke and explore the social world of the bars?

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GJ: No. No, I didn't do that until two years later. No, I was working and living at home. I was going out to some bars, but not gay bars. Still, really didn't have any knowledge about that at that point.

00:25:03

GR: So tell me about this moment when you decided to move out and get your own place in Old Southwest, what was that moment in your life about? What was that change about?

00:25:15

GJ: Well I think at the time it just kind of felt like the natural thing to do. There wasn't any problem living at home. Mom and dad had finished the basement, so I was in a bedroom in the basement, so I had a bath down there and I had kind of my own space. But it just seemed like the natural progression. But I was tying the timing of coming out to this one "girlfriend" to when I moved out. So I had, I guess, thinking back on it now, some kind of timetable in my head of moving forward once I had moved out.

00:26:17

GR: So you're basically telling this woman "This is not going to work out the way you think" and also this is an opportunity for you to come out, be more authentic in your own identity, your own life, and the way to do that was to get an apartment and move forward in your life?

00:26:41

GJ: Yeah

00:26:42

GR: So do you remember where you lived in Old Southwest?

00:26:45

GJ: Yeah

00:26:46

GR: What street?

00:26:48

GJ: I was on Franklin Road, in an apartment. Not very close to The Tradewinds, a few blocks up from Tradewinds, which had nothing to do with getting that apartment. It was a nice apartment, it was four rooms. It was \$125 a month, including heat. The building was owned by the church two doors down. There were six units in the building and I was on the first floor.

00:27:23

GR: This was 1978?

00:27:28

GJ: Yeah, it was 1978

00:27:35

GR: So, I take it you got involved with some of the gay organizations and stuff pretty shortly or...

00:27:46

GJ: Well, I didn't find anything in Roanoke to get involved in. I mean, I knew about the bars, and I went to—at the time I first came out, I didn't know anything about the Tradewinds or the Horoscope, which I don't know if the Horoscope was still open at that point or not—but the bar that I went to first was called Murphy's and I went there in November of '78, maybe—I don't know how many times—maybe two or three. Then the Park opened in December, and then nobody ever went back to Murphy's, I don't think.

00:28:28 At that time, I didn't know of any organizations in Roanoke. So I first heard about organizations in Lynchburg. Well, one organization called PALS, which was Positive Alternative Life Styles. It was a support group basically. So every other Sunday I would go drive to Lynchburg. For I don't know, a year or two, maybe three, that was the organizational involvement I had. From that we started the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, which was sort of intended to be the political side of things. We had a telephone help line for a long time, and we did the beginnings of some political activism. I remember doing a radio show one time in Lynchburg, anonymously, with someone else. I talked about being gay on this radio show. They had some parties that were fundraisers. There was one particular house in Lynchburg on Harrison Street.¹ Have you heard about this?

00:29:46

GR: Yes

00:29:47

GJ: My good friend, who I shouldn't name although I know he'd be delighted if I did, owned that house, and it was a big you know classical kind of house, a Victorian house. So he would host lots of parties there. So that was a lot of fun. Then at some point, I'm not sure when, early

¹ 319 Harrison Street.

'80s I guess, that's when there was some stuff happening in Roanoke. It gradually moved away from Lynchburg to the groups here.

00:30:32

GR: It's interesting to me that you were commuting to Lynchburg for this gay community because I think that people have a sense of Roanoke as being a kind of hub, and Lynchburg would be a more conservative place, and certainly Jerry Falwell and all those people were based there. Now tell me about the PALS group, which I guess you're saying was a sort of predecessor to Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance?

00:31:01

GJ: Yes

00:31:02

GR: So that PALS was in someone's home?

00:31:03

GJ: Uh huh

00:31:04

GR: Was it mostly men, can you tell me a little about it?

00:31:11

GJ: It was men and women. It rotated from just really two or three people's homes, I think. There would be 30-40 people there. Sometimes we would have a topic and the people running it would kind of put together the program sometimes. It was Sunday afternoons. I think it was the first and third Sunday or something like that. So yeah, that was my first step into that kind of group.

00:31:54

GR: Do you remember how you found out about it?

00:31:56

GJ: Yes, a co-worker of mine, at the time, was seeing some guy from Lynchburg and he told him about it.

00:32:07

GR: Were there other Roanokers going out there?

00:32:09

GJ: Uh huh

00:32:11

GR: It was really catching people from...

00:32:12

GJ: Well there were a few. There weren't many from Roanoke at first. Only this friend from work and the guy he was seeing, and like I said he lived in Lynchburg anyway, so it might of just been the two of us there at the very beginning. There really weren't that many Roanokers that went later on. There were a few. Especially after the political group started, the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance. I remember that I would usually drive and there would usually be four of us in the car going to meetings. Those meetings would be like on Wednesdays at 6:30 or something so we'd hit the road right after work. My memory is that it was every week, but I don't think it was every week, I think it must have been every couple weeks, for a long time like a couple or three years we did this.

00:33:11

GR: The Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, which you're saying was founded in Lynchburg, would you say it was founded in that house on Harrison Street?

00:33:21

GJ: Yep

00:33:22

GR: Early '80s like 81?

00:33:26

GJ: Uh huh. I've got the newsletters, some of the PALS—I don't think I have all of the PALS newsletters, but I have some of them, and then that's what evolved into the Blue Ridge Lambda Press, the Pink Pages newsletter.

00:33:41

GR: What was your involvement in the shift towards the political organization? Were you a part of that?

00:33:46

GJ: Oh yeah, I was one of the few that was making that happen. It was all under—this has been true of my involvement all through the years, I was very behind the scenes as far as the public viewpoint or the perspective of somebody in the public. Although my name was in the newsletter in the Lambda press newsletter. But I never did TV or press or anything like that using my name.

00:34:26

GR: What were the political issues at that time, early '80s? When you were going to PALS meetings, what were the issues that you felt like "hey we need to do something different"? What propelled the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance into fruition?

00:34:50

GJ: I think primarily it was just to dispel the negative impressions that were out in the culture about being gay. I think that was the main thing. We did do some candidate surveys. I think even in those early years we did, but half the time we didn't get responses. One of the things that was on our minds was that it was actually illegal to serve gay people in a bar, for many years, until I don't know, the early '90s. When Mary Sue Terry was attorney general there was a court ruling

that opposed that and as I recall she declined to appeal it or declined to support the appeal. So that was one thing that we were pretty taken aback by. It was messing with our social life, or potentially it was.

00:36:06

GR: Would you say at that time when you were involved with PALS and Blue Ridge Lambda Press, where were the key social places? I guess Murphy's [had] closed down...

00:36:17

GJ: The Park was the only one I really went to. There were two or three other places that were open at some point. I don't know when The Last Straw, Backstreet—I don't know when those opened really because I never went to them for a long time. I did eventually go to them some. But for whatever reason, I kept my social, nightlife activity to The Park. Now there were some other bars that opened and closed along the way and I did go to those some, but that was mostly later in the '80s and '90s I think.

00:37:02

GR: Maybe it was the dance scene at The Park was that your scene?

00:37:06

GJ: Well I did dance back then, yeah. I mean it was where the most people were. You know back then it was almost all men, it was almost all gay. There would be hundreds of people in there. You know, it was a very exciting place to be.

00:37:27

GR: I do want to go back to Lynchburg and the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance but a question about The Park because you said in December of '78 when it opened up you were like "this is the place," so what was The Park like at that time? What are your memories of what it used to be?

00:37:44

GJ: Right at the beginning or just kind of in those early years?

00:37:50

GR: Both

00:37:52

GJ: It was, you know, a very sexually charged atmosphere. I mean it was not a place where there was sexual activity going on. I mean there was probably a little bit in the bathroom stall or something, but not much. I mean that was not a real prevalent thing at all. At least not that I recall or knew of. It was just a lot of fun, you know. I mean they were open at the beginning Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and there were weeks that I would be there almost every one of those nights. And I lived really close to it. I only lived in my apartment on Franklin for about a year and a half, and then I bought a house on Marshall Avenue, which was really the urban frontier, back then. I bought this house for \$16,000, and it needed some work, but it was basically livable. Then I lived in that house for thirteen years and did eventually do a

lot of renovations in there, but it was just like, you know, five blocks from The Park or something, so you know it was very handy... That isn't why I bought the house there though. [Chuckles]

00:39:15

GR: Was The Park a place to meet people for you or did you go with a partner?

00:39:21

GJ: No I didn't go with a partner. I've not had a lot of luck in the partner department over the years. But yeah, I would go, meet a lot of people, and see friends... Yeah, it was a social hub for me, probably more than a lot of people, more than most people, more than was healthy probably.

00:39:46

GR: So back to the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, was HIV on your radar screen in the community at the time? Was that some of the organizing?

00:39:58

GJ: There wasn't a whole lot of organizing with that group around that issue. Now there was, you know, in Roanoke, there was more happening with that. I remember going to some meetings for the Roanoke AIDS Project when it first began. But, I didn't stay real involved with that aspect of things. I remember going through some process of thinking, well here I've just come out, and enjoying all this, and having a good time, and now this, you know, "the gay plague" has started. That was a pretty shocking kind of realization that somewhat gradually dawned on us. But I don't really remember that being something that we were organized around, generally.

00:41:21

GR: So how did the Blue Ridge Lambda Press start? Were you involved in starting that up?

00:41:28

GJ: Uh huh, oh yeah. I mentioned earlier that I was on the school newspaper in high school, I was the editor my senior year. So I was very involved with that, and I did some of that in college at UVA, [but] not a whole lot. I did some writing for the paper, *The Cavalier Daily*, at UVA, but then I worked in production and I just did paste up for most of my involvement with that. But that was still something that I really enjoyed. I was probably, I don't know if I was *the* person that was pushing to do the Lambda Press, but I was certainly one of the two or three that was very involved in getting that going.

I remember subscribing to—you know, like I said in those years there was just so little in print, that I knew of—but I remember subscribing to the *Gay Community News*, which was published in Boston, and so I subscribed to that in the mail, cause that was the first thing that I knew of, first such publication I knew about. So I was really eager to learn all of that and be exposed to that and then expose other people to it with the *Lambda Press*, which was of course nothing in comparison with the *Gay Community News* in Boston, which was, you know, a full-fledged kind of newspaper basically. But in our own little way it was a good starting point.

00:43:16

GR: Was it always pink pages?

00:43:20

GJ: It was!

00:43:25

GR: So many people in the community who have talked to me about the project say, “The Pink Pages.” So it’s always been pink pages?²

00:43:28

GJ: Yeah, I would not have chosen the pink pages, but somebody else’s opinion prevailed on that.

00:43:38

GR: And how often did you put it out?

00:43:40

GJ: It was, I think, every two months. Most of its life, it was every two months.

00:43:50

GR: And what is your sense of its circulation?

00:43:50

GJ: Well it wasn’t a lot. It was a few hundred. I don’t know if we ever printed as many as a thousand. We had a mailing list. We would mail it to anybody who wanted to, at no cost. And then we would distribute them in the bars.

00:44:15

GR: So you would take copies down to The Park, and The Straw, and Backstreet and places?

00:44:20

GJ: Well I didn’t go to The Straw or Backstreet much. I don’t remember going there really at all those years. Maybe the Straw a few times when I was there with some friends or something. Backstreet, I just don’t hardly ever remember being in in those years. Like I said I’m not sure when they opened even, The Straw or Backstreet. I’m guessing it was sometime in the ‘80s, the late ‘80s, but probably not. I don’t know. You probably know.

00:44:56

GR: Yeah, I think The Straw was early ‘70s.

00:45:00

GJ: Was it? Oh my gosh.

00:45:02

² *The Blue Ridge Lambda Press* was always printed on pink-colored pages. People in the community colloquially refer to it as “The Pink Pages.”

GR: It closed in the early '90s. Backstreet's been harder to pin down.

00:45:08

GJ: Well it opened later I know that.

00:45:10

GR: Maybe early '80s or something...

00:45:11

GJ: Yeah cause when I was working downtown, at lunchtime, it was some other kind of establishment there, and I remember going at lunchtime with some of my guys—the other guys at work—and we would go and have a hot dog or hamburger or whatever and shoot pool or play pinball or whatever at lunchtime in that same space. So that would have been the early '80s.

00:45:32

GR: What were you doing for work?

00:45:34

GJ: Well I ended up in social work. I didn't plan it. But when I came out of college I went to the employment commission and they said well go see these people at CETA, which was a federal employment program that stood for I think Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, CETA.³ So I went to CETA and they said "Well you qualify for a CETA job, once you're unemployed for 30 days," so they said come back in thirty days. So I did that and I ended up with a job as a Medicaid Eligibility worker for Roanoke City DSS [Department of Social Services]. So I did that. I think that was just for seven months, and then I got a social work job there, and that was what I did for the next 17 years. But like I said, it was just chance. I mean, I'd been a psychology major, so it had some connection to that sort of thing. Yeah, so that's what I was doing.

00:46:40

GR: So you mentioned that eventually the gay organizing moved back to Roanoke, or something happened in Roanoke? I'm not sure when ALGO formed, the Alliance of Lesbian and Gay Organizations, was that in the '80s?

00:46:57

GJ: Maybe the late '80s. I'm not sure exactly. I've probably got some documents though that would tell us that.

00:47:09

GR: So would you say that through most of the '80s you were continuing to go down to Lynchburg to work with the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance?

00:47:18

³ The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was a 1973 federal law that provided job training for public sector employment.

GJ: I don't know, maybe most of the '80s. I'm not sure exactly, but at some point we brought it to Roanoke. The *Lambda Press* publication we brought to Roanoke and it was taken over by the Roanoke Valley Gay Alliance or the Roanoke Valley Gay and Lesbian Alliance, I think it had different names. So that was kind of who published it through the time that I was involved with it.

00:47:51

GR: Did the Lambda Alliance continue on in Lynchburg? Did the Press separate? Did the Alliance sort of dissolve in Lynchburg?

00:47:57

GJ: I think eventually it did. But I think they kept—the gay helpline for instance—they kept that for some years after. I don't know how many. That was located in the house on Harrison Street throughout its time as far as I know. Now that guy moved away in I think it was...1986 when he moved. So I'm not sure after that what happened.

00:48:36

GR: So you were eventually back in Roanoke, working on the press in Roanoke. I don't really know anything about the Roanoke Valley Gay and Lesbian Alliance at that time here, so there was a group that was providing a home for the press, what else can you say about that gay and lesbian group?

00:48:54

GJ: Well that was becoming more political. We did candidate surveys. We had... a name that I am gonna say out loud cause I'm sure you know of this fellow, Sam Garrison, who is deceased.⁴ Sam was very public and he was kind of the public face of that group, or the most public face of that group, I should say.

Then there were some issues that came up. At one point the police did a major crackdown on soliciting. So the group made a lot of noise at City Council and they sort of pulled back from that. I can't remember the specifics of it I think there was a new anti-soliciting ordinance or something that they eventually repealed, I guess, I'm not sure exactly, like I said.

And we did candidate interviews. We interviewed some candidates. I remember interviewing David Bowers, and Jim Trout, who was a City Councilman for a number of years who's deceased now, and a few others.⁵ Group interview kind of things. So that was primarily what we did.

⁴ Sam Garrison was born in Roanoke in 1942. In 1969, at age 27, he became the youngest Commonwealth's Attorney in the history of Virginia. In 1971, he moved to Washington, D.C., and in 1974 he defended President Nixon in his impeachment hearings. Garrison returned to Roanoke in the late 1970s / early 1980s and subsequently came out. He passed away in 2007.

⁵ David Bowers was the mayor of Roanoke in 1992-2000 and again in 2008-2016. Jim Trout was a City Councilor in Roanoke in 1968-1976, in 1982-1990, and again in 1996-2000.

We did some stuff in Richmond. I never went lobbying in Richmond, but I think some of our members did. We didn't have many members, we're talking like six or eight or ten people, it was never a big group.

00:50:49

GR: Was it mostly men?

00:50:50

GJ: Yeah. It was really all men. The lesbians were very separate. As I said earlier, they didn't go to The Park. I don't know where they went. I know they had a group called First Fridays that was a social group. I think that went on for a number of years. I don't remember anything about where they met or what the logistics of that were.

We tried to get some of them to be involved, and we were never really very successful. I think that was the reason that the ALGO group [the Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Organizations] came about, because we wanted to try and build our numbers and gain strength. But that didn't last too many years either I don't think. I think they were probably the nominal sponsors of the Pride event for part of the time. I know that they awarded the...I can't remember...just the ALGO Service Award or something it was called. I got that one year.⁶ I have a plaque. It's on the wall in my office back here. [*chuckles*]

00:52:18

GR: Tell me about Sam. When did you meet Sam Garrison? I mean I'll never be able to know him, what I heard was that he was a very firebrand, and it sounds like you worked alongside him for many many years. So how did you meet him and what was his role in the community?

00:52:42

GJ: Well I don't remember how I first met him. He was at that time—you've probably heard some of his background—when I met him he had been disbarred and he had been in prison for embezzling from a client, a law client, so he had fallen as far as you can fall. He was kind of newly out himself, I think, but with great gusto. He became kind of a fitness junkie, he ran, he jogged and jogged and jogged. He was real thin from that. He was very healthy looking, and he was healthy as far as I know. I remember Sam was the one who pushed for us to do a Pride the first time. I was kind of skeptical that we could make that happen in a place like Roanoke, but he, you know he was gung-ho, and of course he proved to be right on that, here thirty years later or whatever.

00:53:59

GR: Well tell me about that, that was 1989 I think, the first Pride in the Park? In Wasena, right?

00:54:09

GJ: Yeah, but I thought it was a little earlier than that cause I think we just had the thirtieth. Maybe I'm not right about that though...

⁶ According to an informal history written by Charlotte Eakin, Gerry Jennings received the ALGO Service Award in 1995. See Charlotte Eakin, "PRIDE History," c. 2006, <http://www.roanokepride.org/history.html> (Accessed March 24, 2016).

00:54:19

GR: Well we could easily go online and look. It was definitely late '80s.

00:54:23

GR: Okay, yeah.

00:54:25

GR: So what was the idea? Of course Pride is now its own organization and carries on. What was the idea behind having a Pride in the Park? I don't know if it was called that the first time?

00:54:39

GJ: It was. It was called Pride in the Park. Well you know, most of us had been to Washington DC in particular to the Pride up there, which was well established, and was a huge event on a large scale, and we knew that other smaller cities were beginning to do it. So you know, it seemed like the next step I guess for that to happen here.

00:55:10

GR: What did you plan? What were the components of the festival?

00:55:16

GJ: Well, it was as you mentioned in Wasena Park. It was very modest. We had volleyball and I think softball competitions and there was a big picnic. I think at that first one we had entertainment. We had a small stage that was brought in. I don't know about the first year but I know in the early years we had a variety of entertainment. We had some drag, but not all drag. We were all interested in not having all drag. [*chuckles*]. We had this singing duo called Romanovsky and Phillips, a couple of gay guys who toured around nationally, we had these—I can't remember, I think they were from DC, and I can't remember their name off the top of my head—they did country dancing and so they would do these little routines, you know, and they had their cowboy hats and tight jeans, and so it was very appealing that way. They were fun. Gosh, I think we had—the names are really escaping me—but anyway, we had a variety of entertainment like that in those early years. I guess similar to what they do now. We didn't have pop stars, but you know, we had a few national acts that we could afford.

00:57:08

GR: Were you all pretty pleased with the turnout? Did you feel like it was successful? Did you have fears about how the city would feel about it? How the police would feel about it?

00:57:22

GJ: Well yeah. Not so much the city because, of course, we had to get the city's cooperation from the beginning to hold it in the city park. The biggest concern was the press. Because we didn't want the press there, or we didn't want them filming there. There was a lot of talk in those early couple or three years about, you know, would people come if they thought the press was going to be there? Or would they come if they thought the TV was going to be there? I remember seeing some of the coverage where they would only shoot people from behind, at a distance, or only shoot people from the waist down, kind of walking or dancing or whatever, you know. Over

the years of course, that concern just went away, for the most part, over many years actually it took for that concern to go away.

00:58:20

GR: I imagine people were afraid of being outed.

00:58:22

GJ: Oh yeah, absolutely. I think one of the benefits of Wasena was that it is kind of remote in a way. You may or may not have noticed it now—of course the Greenway goes right through it now where we had the event—but there are a couple of picnic shelters that are still there and that was kind of the basecamp for it, and the stage was kind of on the other side of that from the river and the ball fields and stuff were right there. It wasn't the easiest thing to just drive by and spy who was there. I don't remember if we had the road blocked off or not. I think we probably did, except for people to park. So it was a good spot from that standpoint, it kind of lent some privacy to it.

00:59:28

GR: You know on the other hand I'm thinking people have told me that in the '90s that Wasena was a cruising area and that the undercover police would come through. I don't know if that was the same part of the park in terms of location...

00:59:43

GJ: Probably the same stretch because where the Greenway goes now the road went then, and in fact part of the Greenway is still what was the road. The road went right by the river, it kind of swerves around away from the river a little bit more but yeah, it was a loop that cruisers could make to go do that...And I think that it had that reputation for many years and maybe even still to a degree.

01:00:18

GR: Yeah I just wonder if when you chose Wasena for the Pride in the Park if that was sort of a space that the gay community sort of knew of, or was it more just "let's find a semi-remote, beautiful space to..."

01:00:37

GJ: You know what, I don't remember. I don't remember that entering into the discussion. It may have, but I just don't know. It didn't after a few years, it moved to Highland Park. One year it moved to Highland Park because there was a hurricane and a flood and so it got canceled in Wasena. That year actually—I think that year the whole thing got cancelled or postponed at least and then two weeks later—it was like an indoor Pride event. I don't really remember... I remember there being controversy about it, but I don't remember how it played out. Then, I think, after that happened, after it got flooded out, that was when it moved to Highland. It stayed there for a number of years before going to Elmwood. So increasingly more visibility. You

know, from Wasena to Highland, [and Highland] was more visible than Wasena, and then Elmwood of course more than Highland.⁷

01:01:43

GR: So, I think we're right at about an hour. How long did you remain involved in these organizations? Now we're talking about into the '90s, were you still involved with *The Blue Ridge Lambda Press*, the Pride organizing, which I guess ALGO was the official group doing that, how long did you remain involved in these different aspects?

01:02:14

GJ: I got out of most of it in '90 or '91 because I started graduate school and I was working full time. So I was pulling back from things at that point, and I never really got involved in things after that. When I finished [graduate school] in '93 I didn't get involved after that.

01:02:43

GR: What did you study? Where was that?

01:02:44

GJ: Social work. I have an MSW. I have a VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University] degree, but at the time Radford didn't have an MSW program nor did any of the schools around here, so they had a remote program. All of my classes were on the Radford campus. The only time I set foot on VCU's campus was for the graduation ceremony. So I finished that in the fall of '93 and the ceremony was actually '94 spring graduation.

01:03:22

GR: So I know that with Pride in the mid to late '90s Roanoke Pride formed its own non-profit and moved in that direction or something...

01:03:36

GJ: I'm not sure. I would think—What did you say again?

01:03:42

GR: Mid to late '90s?

01:03:45

GJ: Oh that's probably about right.

01:03:47

GR: And *The Blue Ridge Lambda Press*, that kept going and going? Was there an organization behind that moving into the '90s?

01:03:58

⁷ According to Charlotte Eakin's history, Pride in the Park was held in Wasena Park from 1989-1995; Highland Park from 1996-2003; and Elmwood Park from 2004 to the present. See Charlotte Eakin, "PRIDE History," c. 2006, <http://www.roanokepride.org/history.html> (Accessed March 24, 2016).

GJ: I think it sort of became its own entity, just carried along by whoever was involved in it, at the time. I know that there were a couple of women who were quite involved with it later in the '90s, and then it just kind of petered out. There was a period of time a year or two where there was an issue every three or four months, something like that. Probably the last one was maybe 2006 or '07. But I think I have all of them, so at some point we can pinpoint that.

01:04:51

GR: I think you gave us the last few years. The ones that you donated went up to early '08. I imagine those are the last issues.

01:05:03

GJ: I think the ones I gave you were the ones I had more than one copy of because I think I still have a full set of them. I do want to mention one other thing though that hasn't come up. In maybe the mid '80s a friend and I—a good friend who has moved away too—formed the Gay Rap Group. You haven't heard of the Gay Rap Group?

The Gay Rap Group went on for many years, up until the early '90s because I also withdrew from that, at that point, so it went on for—well how many years is that? Not that many years I guess. It seems like it went on for about ten years but... It was just that just a rap group. We didn't really have programs in particular. Usually had a dozen or so people there. I think it was almost always guys, we probably had a few women, but not that many. The first meeting, the organizing meeting at that [point] was going to be at my friend's apartment, he lived out off of Hersherberger and we had a terrible snowstorm that night but we went anyway. There was a handful of us that went in the snow. Then it met twice a month in the evenings on a Thursday night maybe—I can't remember now. We met at... I want to say the Magdalene House but that's not right. It was owned by the Catholic Diocese, and it's next-door to RAM House on Campbell Avenue.⁸ Oh what's that place called? The house was presided over by two or three women, they weren't nuns, they were laypeople, but they were like nuns in every way that I knew of at least, except I knew they weren't nuns. But they were very welcoming and we would meet in one of the rooms there.

We did that for years. The group was posted in the PO Box and it was posted in the newspaper, in different places. So we would get people writing into the PO box and we would write back and tell them information. We had a lot of people over the years.

01:07:50

GR: What was it called? The Gay Rap Group?

01:07:52

GJ: Yep

01:07:53

GR: What was your motivation to found it?

⁸ RAM House—Roanoke Area Ministries—is located at 824 Campbell Avenue. Perhaps the building in question is the Our Lady of Nazareth Church Parish Hall at 822 Campbell Avenue? A local gay activist group, FAIR (Free Alliance for Individual Rights), held a party in that space in February 1978.

01:07:57

GJ: Well, just to create an alternative to the bars. I could pinpoint the year when it started but my best memory is that it was in the mid-'80s. I remember there was one fellow, who's name I don't remember, who I never met, who never came to the meetings, but every so often he would send us a bunch of stamps. [*chuckles*]. Cause he knew we were doing all of this stuff through the mail, and you know that was his contribution.

01:08:36

GR: What were the issues that you were taking up at the meetings?

01:08:42

GJ: Just what you would think. Just personal issues. You know, whatever you could think of we talked about. But not political stuff. I'm sure that came up, but it was really just talking about struggles and relationships, and frustrations...that kind of thing. I know one couple who met there who are still together, and who I'm still friends with. So that was nice.

01:09:19

GR: Yeah that's great. I hadn't heard of The Gay Rap Group. So you met for almost ten years in this Catholic Space?

01:09:28

GJ: Yeah

01:09:30

GR: Men and women?

01:09:31

GJ: I don't really remember women particularly being there. I mean we were certainly open to that, but I don't think many women came. Now there was another group a Dignity-Integrity group. You probably know Dignity-Integrity. Dignity was a gay Catholic support group and Integrity was an Episcopalian support group. I think they were a national thing. Very informal, but across the nation they were called those respectively. It was kind of a combo group that met for at least a while at—I don't know if Catholics call it the Manse?—on [Route] 419 right next to Our Lady of Nazareth. I went to one of those meetings, I think only one because I didn't have the religious angle. I remember when they started the meeting they had a prayer, and I remember waiting in the other room until the prayer was finished, instead of going in and joining the group. I think I only went to that once and I think it was sometime in the '80s, probably before The Rap Group.

01:10:51

GR: So in conclusion, what would you say are some of the big changes in the LGBTQ community over time? You were very involved in a lot of activities in the '80s and into the early '90s, what do you think is different since then? Is the community the same, you'd say, as it was then or...?

01:11:22

GJ: No it's not at all the same. I'm not convinced there really is a gay community anymore. Certainly not like there was in the '80s and '90s. Gosh, where to begin? I mean it's just different in everyway. For my generation of course, so many guys died from AIDS that that put a huge dent in my generation. I think that Roanoke was, and probably still is, a place where kids who grew up and are gay move away and don't really come back much. I mean I know that that happened in the '80s and '90s and like I said it still happens today I'm sure. I mean it happens to some extent in all sub-groups in the Roanoke Area and places like it. People move away to bigger and better things.

You know if you go to an event like Pride in the Park, these days, in the last number of years, I'll go there and see people I've never laid eyes on before. I came up in a period where if there was somebody in town who was gay, you probably would recognize them even if you didn't know them, because they would go to the bars. Now of course that was kind of a naïve, because not everybody who was gay went to the bars, but you know, probably most did.

I think that gay women are more visible than gay men and I think that probably always been true to a degree, even though the women weren't going to bars so much, here. I say more visible, and I guess what I mean is they could exist with a level of acceptance that I think gay men didn't have in those years. But now, at Pride in the Park you see more women than men and you see a lot of kids where you don't know what their persuasions are, you know.

So I think that the gay community is blending into mainstream society. It's meant huge changes. I think it's similar to what happened with integration. When integration occurred a lot of the black institutions began to decline and I think the same thing has begun to happen in the gay scene. I joke around with friends sometimes "you know, it was a lot more fun when we were oppressed," cause there was more of a scene, there was more nightlife. Now The Park is really not a gay bar anymore, not the way it was. A lot of people just don't go out and if they go out they have their small groups and they go to this place or that place. There's not really a central place now that you can go for a social scene. Which has been very disappointing for me. I guess because I over-relied on that throughout my adulthood. So that's hard. That's hard for me.

01:15:50

GR: Well thank you so much for the conversation, for sharing your story.

01:15:56

GJ: My pleasure. Enjoyed it.