Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project

Oral History Initiative

Interview with Peter Thornhill

February 22, 2016

Interviewer: Gregory Rosenthal

Interviewee: Peter Thornhill

Date: February 22, 2016

Location: Peter Thornhill's home in Roanoke, Virginia

Total: 56:57

Transcribed by: Martha Sadler and Shannon Mace

0:00 = Early childhood in Lynchburg, Virginia (1958-early 1970s)

4:30 = experiences in the Lynchburg public schools (mid-1960s – early 1970s); growing up as a latchkey kid

9:17 = attending a private all-boys high school in Lynchburg (c. 1973-1977)

13:56 = attending Hampden-Sydney College for a year (1977-1978), then dropping out

19:00 = going back to Ferrum College for his Associate's Degree (1981)

23:13 = exploring Roanoke's gay scene (early 1980s); also, discovering a short-lived gay bar in Bedford

27:13 = Murphy's Super Disco (c. 1978-1979), a gay dance bar in Roanoke

29:52 = The Last Straw, a gay bar in Roanoke; and the gay cruising scene in Roanoke

33:34 = The Park, a dance club in Roanoke; how it has changed over time

39:16 = continuing to commute from Lynchburg to Roanoke for the gay scene in the 1980s and 1990s

43:31 = involvement in the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, a gay activist group based in Lynchburg

46:04 = HIV/AIDS in the Lynchburg and Roanoke communities

49:52 = finding a new sense of community in the twenty-first century

Sound Check

[00:00:06] GR: Alright, this is Gregory Rosenthal and I'm here with Peter Thornhill.

[00:00:10] PT: Hello. How are you?

[00:00:12] GR: Good. And today is February 22nd, 2016 and we're sitting in Peter's home in, what is this, Raleigh Court or Southwest?

[00:00:23] PR: Raleigh Court.

[00:00:24] GR: Okay, this is just a formality to make sure that the people listening to this understand the context of the conversation. And this is an interview for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project: Oral History Initiative. So Peter, if you would like to just say your name and where you grew up and delve a little bit into your early childhood.

[00:00:50] PT: I'd be happy to. Peter Thornhill. I grew up in the big city of Lynchburg, Virginia. Lynchburg is technically the buckle of the bible belt with huge influences like Jerry Falwell, and just very South, Baptist, church-going, god-fearing people. So, growing up in Lynchburg being gay was challenging... humorous... and made for the need to drive to Roanoke quite a necessity.

[00:01:31] GR: So you grew up in the ‘50s or early ‘60s?

[00:01:35] PT: I was born in '58. So, coming out was never an issue for me, I've always been out, so I don't know what that really means to “come out.” I've always been gay, never had a question of whether I wasn't gay, but living in Lynchburg was a challenging time. Jerry Falwell had a hold on the city and if you were anything other than just this right-wing Christian, black or white, you were in a different era, it was a different time.

[00:02:12] GR: So what do you mean by you always knew you were gay, and you never came out? Like, when you were three,when you were five, when you were seven? What was that like? Did you have a concept of your sexuality?

[00:02:27] PT: Absolutely. Never had the need or desire to be with a woman. It wasn't part of my makeup. I've always been gay. I knew at a young age my sexual orientation, so it wasn't a struggle to divulge it to anyone, because it was there, and everyone knew. It wasn't talked about... but I have cousins that were gay, so again the genetic—rearing versus genetic issue—you can go either way with that. So we always knew. In the church it wasn't talked about but in private it was very much discussed.

[00:03:14] GR: Your parents, did they express their awareness of that to you?

[00:03:22] PT: [Bill] Clinton's "Don't ask, don't tell" comes to mind to me. Everyone knew but you just, there were certain areas you didn't talk about with your parents. Parents were never your friends back in that age. You revered your parents. You were deathly afraid of them, and so you didn't discuss sexuality, that was absolutely taboo, whether you were gay or straight, you didn't discuss that with your parents. You discussed doing your homework but you didn't discuss your sexuality, that was just never brought up, it was very much a taboo subject. And then being raised in the church, you weren't having sex anyways, so why even discuss it. Although you *were*, you still would never discuss it.

[00:04:11] GR: What denomination were you raised?

[00:04:13] PT: Southern Baptist all the way. I taught Sunday school, and was a deacon in the church, a junior deacon back then because I was younger. But yeah, raised in the church absolutely. Sang in the choir. So yes, that whole Southern Baptist thing.

[00:04:30] GR What was school like? Did you go to public school or private?

[00:04:33] PT: Oh, school was fun. I attended public school until 8th grade and then decided on my own, I was a very forward child—they called you fast if you were anything but the norm back then, you were fast. So I was a fast child. I think they call it precocious these days—… But I said to my Mom, "I am not going to public school. I will do anything, but I will not to go to public school." So I applied to a private school, Virginia Episcopal School...for boys...a little humor there… and I decided I wanted to go to public school no more, I wanted to go to private school. I actually went to public school for one day in 9th grade, Dunbar High School, because my scholarship to VES [Virginia Episcopal School] had not come through yet and public school started before private school, and so I went to public school, waiting for my scholarship to come through, literally praying it would come through. And I will never forget, I had a 7th period because I was an accelerated student, and the gym teacher told the whole class, I will never forget this day, "I don't want to catch you fucking in the showers." Not just to me, but to the entire class. I got home that day and I told my mom, "I'm not going back, I'm just not doing it." And a couple days later the letter came, [saying] "You're accepted, your scholarship is intact," and so I went to private school.

[00:06:14] GR: And so when you were in the Lynchburg public schools, up until the first day of 9th grade, did you experience bullying? Or did you feel like people accepted you?

[00:06:28] PT: Well it's always different, and, I heard several times in my childhood, "So what are you?" and I just finally reserved to the fact of saying, "I'm human." So in this kind of a mixed-culture atmosphere you were somewhat shunned by the African American community because you were light skinned and then you weren't white so you kind of... it was an odd place to fit in or not fit in. My mother worked for extremely wealthy people so I was raised in the projects in Lynchburg called Dearington. It was the first projects for low-income housing so there I was, this black kid in the ghetto having indoor tennis lessons because my mom worked for the people who owned the indoor tennis facility. So I had a very mixed childhood. All of my friends went to public school but I went to private school so I didn't see them for eight hours a day, except on weekends, so TV [television] was my friend. I learned to speak, learned to understand, through television. Mom worked nine to nine, Monday through Friday, and nine to five on Saturday, so my brother and I were latchkey kids. We never said, "Where's Mom? Where's Mom?" Mom was working, it wasn't an option. Mom worked her butt off. And so, we watched television and that was our rearing a lot because Mom was working. So that was my early childhood. [It] was TV. "Dark Shadows" was one of my favorites.

[00:08:18] GR: Yeah, in the '60s.

[00:08:19] PT: Oh absolutely! Angelique [*laughter*]. I loved her.

[00:08:25] GR: I was thinking, when you were in the public schools, elementary school and middle school, you were probably there right around the time of integration. Did that happen when you were there?

[00:08:34] PT: Yes, sixth grade. It happened in Lynchburg and we heard these wild stories from Boston, killings and things and we're thinking "what are they doing?" It was just another day for us in Lynchburg. The white kids came to our school, Dearington Elementary. And so that was the first integration, in sixth grade. And then Junior High was like an everyday occurrence, we got bussed, because the junior high was across town in the white section. But you know, I was president of that school, Lakewood Junior High, for many years. [*Laughs*]

[00:09:17] GR: So tell me about the private high school you went to... that would have been in the '70s?

[00:09:21] PT: Exactly, there were about 350 students, of which two were African American out of the entire student body. So the identity thing still just was never really there. I was all-state in track, all-state in tennis, letterman. And some of the guys who knew that I was gay, it bothered some of them, because you know "there's the gay guy, and he's beating our asses and he's winning medals and trophies and we're not"... so there were a few who got a little upset. There was some racism as well. I remember one guy said one day, "So what are you doing here?" And never once did I ever say what my parents didn't do. I said "my mother's a maid, my father's a janitor," and I was extremely proud of that because "hey, here I am, deal with me." And I think it was a matter of pride that I did so well in sports. I was determined to be number one. And sometimes I was, so it helped.

[00:10:35] GR: Would you say you were out in high school? Or what did it mean, or like you keep saying you knew you were gay, [so] what did that mean to know you were gay? Was it a place where you could have a relationship with another man?

[00:10:50] PT: "Relationship" I think is a little too severe of a word. In your teens, you didn't have a relationship, you had... I'll just say you had a release. But you never had a boyfriend. I was too young for that to happen. I wouldn't have known what that was. But were there encounters? Absolutely. To say there weren't would be not the truth. You had 350 boys in their pubescent years, of course it's going to happen. Was it talked about? People knew what was going on, but you never really discussed it. Did it happen? Absolutely.

[00:11:34] GR: This school was in Lynchburg?

[00:11:35] PT: Yes.

[00:11:37] GR: So it was a day school, it wasn't a boarding school...

[00:11:38] PT: It was boarding and day school, yes.

[00:11:41] GR: And your experience was both? Or one?

[00:11:44] PT: No, I was a... they called the day students "squatters," so the boardings and the squatters. I was a day student because the boardings [were the ones who] lived there. But there were some extremely wealthy ambassador's sons, lawyers and doctors, some very wealthy kids, went there... and you had little old me, the kid from the projects. [*laughs*]

[00:12:08] GR: What were your feelings about religion at the time? Did you find... did you feel like it was in conflict with your sexuality, with your identity? Because you said you taught Sunday school...

[00:12:20] PT: Yes

[00:12:21] GR: Or did they work together for you? Or did you feel like there was a conflict between the two?

[00:12:25] PT: Never a conflict. I kept those two parts of my lives absolutely separate. And I was very good at that. I never had the inkling to say, "God is going to frown upon you because you're gay"... there were others saying it, but I was very strong, pig-headed, independent in my thoughts, that it wasn't part of my life. I of course knew who God was, he created the heavens and the earth, but he wasn't a mean god, he was an understanding and loving god. No fire and brimstone, "you're going to go to hell for anything"... [rather] "be good and treat people well and everything will fall into place." My grandmother, my dad's mom, I see her in her uniform from church. She was a very god-fearing woman, but still not fire and brimstone, we weren't raised that way.

[00:13:29] GR: So you graduated from high school in '76?

[00:13:33] PT: '77

[00:13:34] GR: '77

[00:13:35] PT: Yes, '77, yes.

[00:13:37] GR: So that was quite a time to be in Lynchburg. I think '77 was when Anita Bryant's campaign began.

[00:13:45] PT: Absolutely.

[00:13:46] GR: And [Jerry] Falwell and all those guys are really starting to get national attention. So what was that moment like when you graduated? What kind of world were you then moving into?

[00:13:56] PT: Well, I was living there until leaving an all-boy high school going to an all-boy college. I went to Hampden-Sydney for a year so.... full scholarship, great... the somewhat gifted kid, again from the ghetto, the projects, they were very very nice to me. They wanted me, or needed me, somehow kind of played at those two things, they needed black kids and "Hey, here I am!" Flunked out, lost my scholarship, because—and they actually did a study about me—it was the kid who had never left home who led a very sheltered life, and then got to college and went crazy. And I thought, " Oh, I don't have to go to class, you know I can play poker, watch the Stooges, you know, I'm a grown up now. I'm on my own." And flunked out, lost my scholarship. And my mother still has the little piece of paper from the newspaper, "Student wins scholarship," little piece of news from the *Daily Advance*. So she's kept that, still kind of goes... little guilt trip... but everything's worked out fine.

[00:15:19] GR: So you were there for a year.

[00:15:20] PT: Yes

[00:15:21] GR: '77- '78, Partied hard it sounds like...

[00:15:26] PT: Oh in my class at [high school] graduation, there were about 45 guys in my class, about half of us when to Hampden-Sydney and the other part went to UVA [University of Virginia] and W&L [Washington & Lee] and that was pretty much it. So you were pretty much almost required to go to one of those schools. And I got into JMU [James Madison University] and should have gone to JMU. I look back now and I probably would have finished at JMU if I had gone there, but no, I had to go to Hampden-Sydney. And my mother expected me to go there. So, trying to please her was part of my life as well.

[00:16:07] GR: Did it attract you as an all-boys school? Or was that just sort of an irrelevant fact?

[00:16:14] PT: It was like I never left high school. It was like, another day I woke up and I was in another physical location but it was the same kind of guys, it was no transition from high

school to college. It was like I just woke up, and “hey, I’m going to class, same guys I went to high school with right over there,” and the same type of guys: preppy, extremely well-mannered southern boys, with a lot of money. And it was just like high school.

[00:16:52] GR: What do you think would have been different at JMU?

[00:16:55] PT: A more well rounded cultural experience, different kinds of people from all over the world. So my surroundings would have been totally different. I wouldn't have been quite such an enigma at JMU as I was at Hampden-Sydney. I was still kind of looked at like, "Hmm." You know, because there weren't any African American kids there, maybe three or four? Out of the whole college of eight hundred! So you know still like, "Wow, what's he doing here?" Not from everyone, there were some very kind people who didn't even notice, didn't even care. Again, played tennis, made the tennis team and did all that, and caused some ruffles there because I was self-taught. I learned to play tennis at six years old and then had lessons because we worked for some very wealthy people. It was never a dull moment at Hampden-Sydney. There was always a party on fraternity row. I remember my first weekend drinking Green Goddammits out of a trash can [*laughs*]. Yeah, grain alcohol, lime juice, and something else. It was a very bad weekend... very bad weekend. Hung over for days.

[00:18:27] GR: What kind of career were you thinking of pursuing? Where were you thinking you were going at that point?

[00:18:34] PT: Public Relations. I am a natural talker so I thought, "Oh, I need a job in PR." Which probably meant an English degree... Journalism... something along that vein. So that's where I was initially headed. I wanted to work at the UN [United Nations], that was another dream when I was in high school.

[00:19:00] GR: So what happened when you dropped out of Hampden-Sydney, what was the next… ? At that point, I know you told me before and we can get to that about going to The Park, which would have been right around that time. When you were in high school or maybe that first year of college, had you ever driven into Roanoke to be a part of the social scene there or was that not yet on your radar screen?

[00:19:27] PT: Only after high school. It was a lot of freedom there. You know, being 18 [years old] and out of high school that summer was a big awakening because I was an adult, I was out of high school. Graduated, wow! So I could pretty much do whatever I wanted to do. Not really, I was living at home still, so I couldn't do what I wanted to do. It was a dream. My mother was still, "My house, my rules and you'll do as I say." And she still thinks that to this day, and she's 80 [years old]. [*laughs*] So after Hampden-Sydney I took a semester off, worked some odd jobs, I think at a clothing store called Leggett. Now it's Belk, but back then it was Leggett. And then went back to Ferrum [College] and graduated with an Associates [degree], went back to school. Wasn't going to do it, but I had a very dear friend who said, "You need to go back to school. You really need to buckle down and go back to school." So I did, got my associates two years later.

[00:20:40] GR: Do you remember when that was? Was that 1980? '79?

[00:20:45] PT: College was '81.

[00:20:46] GR: '81?

[00:20:48] PT: Right.

[00:20:51] GR: So you said, when you were still living at your mom's house after graduating from high school, and I guess after Hampden-Sydney, too, did you move back home?

[00:21:02] PT: Exactly, yes. While I was at Ferrum I lived at home, too. I went to college that first semester at Ferrum being in the boonies in Franklin County, I went home and said, "Mom, I've gotta have a car. There's no way I can survive down there in the sticks without a car." So I got this '69 Chevrolet Bel Aire four-door, gold, black interior, AM radio... no air conditioning! I will never forget that car, and that was my first car. A lady my mom worked for sold it to mom for a dollar. Ms. McClinton. Mom worked for her, and her husband was a doctor.

And I want to back track a little, growing up with my mom, who she worked for, some of the most benevolent people, just kind and generous. We would get hand me downs because they were re-doing their summer house, so there we were in the ghetto with this beautiful furniture because they were very generous to my mother, and they still are. So my brother and I didn't want for anything, and we were very privileged considering that my mother was a maid. And so that helped shape our childhood too, because people were very kind to us. So we didn't see racism, it just wasn't part of our lives, other that the occasional… and that, a lot came from the black community. "What are you?" was a wild question for my brother and I. We'd just go, "What do you mean? Our parents are black. What do you mean what are you?" Just had to do a little backtrack there, to the upbringing.

[00:23:13] So then after Ferrum, was my first real job at a restaurant. Hence the drive back and forth to Roanoke four nights a week. I had a boyfriend back then who was bar crazy, so we'd go to Roanoke... Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, every week we made the trek on [Route] 460... knew it well... every week. Because Lynchburg didn't have bars. We would joke, "Roanoke people are heathens, they have bars. We don't have bars in Lynchburg," you know. So we had to go where the nightlife was, because there was no gay life in Lynchburg. And we enjoyed it, it was a lot of fun to make that trek, wasn't fun coming home at two or three o'clock in the morning [*laughs*] that was a long drive back after a few beers in the Bel Aire. So it was a different time. In the interim of all the drives back and forth, a little bar opened in Bedford. Did you know that? Some guys came down from New York City, and opened a little bar in Bedford. It was "bring your own booze," it lasted about six months, maybe a year. The locals went up in arms and literally closed it down. They protested, and it closed. But we thought, "We don't have to drive all the way to Roanoke now! We can drive 20 miles to Bedford and go to a bar!" Didn't last long. I can't even remember the name of the place, but it didn't last long.

[00:24:51] GR: And your boyfriend was also from Lynchburg? Or also lived in Lynchburg?

[00:24:56] PT: Yes, He lived in Lynchburg, as well. Actually he lived in Madison Heights, which is hog town, which is right above Lynchburg. It's a little area called Madison Heights, but still Amherst County, Lynchburg, yeah very close.

[00:25:13] GR: So you were in your twenties at that time, like early '80s...

[00:25:18] PT: Yes, loving life...and skinny [*laughs*] and I had hair! [*laughs*] Life was crazy.

[00:25:28] GR: Did you and another man ever go to bars in Lynchburg? Did you ever try that or did you know that that was a "no go"? Or were there places that you could go that were maybe mixed?

[00:25:43] PT: Not one. The nightlife in Lynchburg just did not exist. Our whole lives centered around going to Roanoke. We knew we could dance, we could kiss, we could be a couple and not have to worry about anything. It was a gay bar. Imagine that, a GAY bar. So nightlife in Lynchburg may have existed, but I don't remember. I couldn't tell you a bar or anything in Lynchburg at that time, I didn't do that, I worked... but then it was always, "What are we going to wear to the bar tonight?" And that was a big question all the time, because you had to be fashionable. So that was a big part of our lives every day, "What are you going to wear to the bar tonight? Are we going? What time are we going to leave?" So that was our lives.

[00:26:32] GR: So how did you, if you recall, how did you become aware that was a gay community in Roanoke? How did that get on your radar screen the first time?

[00:26:40] PT: We had heard stories. They were like, "You know where this bar is? You know where this bar is?" Cause other friends had gone, a little bit older, and they had gone to these bars, because they went to Tradewinds. That was before my time, but they had gone to the Tradewinds. We had heard about it and then that closed and Murphy's opened and... The Last Straw. So that's where we really started to go out were those two places, especially Murphy's because Murphy's was a dance bar.

[00:27:13] GR: Tell me about Murphy's...

[00:27:14] PT: Oh it was fun. You'd walk in and there was a huge sign on the front door and it was the ABC laws: "You can't serve no homosexuals, drug addicts, prostitutes..." and it was right there at the door when you walked in. And we'd dance and Donna Summer was the deal. And the owner of Murphy's... we'd be cuddled up a little bit, and he would shine a light on you, a flashlight, and he'd say, "You can do it in your car, but you're not gonna do it in here." So we'd be hugging or maybe a kiss, but nothing past that. And so every night it would close... Last Straw, Donna Summer would play, I'm sorry "Last Dance" by Donna Summer would play, and you knew when he played that song Murphy's was closing. And so the song would go off and he'd flip the lights up and it would be dead silence, and you knew, "Out." It was time to go home. I don't remember any alcohol being served there, I don't remember that part of it at all... definitely no food... maybe sodas, but I don't remember any alcohol then... but he had an ABC license. Maybe he had beers, I just don't remember that part... I know we danced a lot. It was our pressure valve, we used to just dance and sing, you know being gay fully at that time meant

having fun. It wasn't that much about sexuality, it was about having fun and just dancing and singing our full heads off, you know? And not caring, just having fun.

[00:28:59] GR: What was the crowd like at Murphy's? Were there other black gay men? Was it mostly white? Were there lesbians? Were there straight people? Did it tend towards a kind of demographic group?

[00:29:12] PT: Not really that many straight people...I don't remember... Mixed couples, absolutely, because we were a mixed couple, nothing's changed [*laughs*]. Todd was Caucasian, and so... yeah, lesbians and gay men... Transgender? No, I don't remember any transgender individuals... Drag Queens? Absolutely, but no transgender... I don't remember any transgender...

[00:29:52] GR: And what about The Straw? What was the appeal of The Last Straw compared to Murphy's?

[00:29:58] PT: [*laughs*] Well, The Last Straw had the jukebox... and that long bar... and that's where the questioning straight boys would go... so that was a lot of fun, you know playing with them and so that was a whole different atmosphere, it was a cruise bar. Murphy's was a dance bar and Last Straw was a cruise bar, that's where you would go pick up a straight boy and it was funner than hell. It was a whole different clientele. It'd be a little rough sometimes, but fun.

[00:30:43] GR: Talking about—you brought up cruising—You know we've talked with other people in the project, the Oral History Project, about Elmwood park, Bullitt Avenue as a place where people would meet up. Did you have any sense of that world?

[00:30:59] PT : Absolutely, absolutely. You know it was almost—not everyone did it, some of us did. It released pressure. It was a place to go have fun, and no questions asked, just totally anonymous sexual encounters. Consenting adults. Was it risky as hell? Absolutely, you could get arrested. No more so than now... you can still get arrested of course today, that hasn't changed. But we had fun, you know, it was a part of the gay life. We didn't have places to meet other than, you know, some seedy place or The Last Straw, which could get seedy at times. But it depends on what kind of mood you were into. You know, were you in the mood to go dance or in the mood to go cruise? Sometimes the same thing in both nights. But you did it anyways, you had fun.

[00:32:14] GR: So you mentioned the police. Did you ever see ABC folks come by any of the bars? Or like at Bullitt Avenue or a place like that, were you ever aware of the undercover police? Or was that more, in your own experience, you knew that that happened and people talked about it and said be cautious...

[00:32:37] PT: Yes, I never saw any ABC agents at The Park or Murphy's or the Last Straw. They may have been there and if they were there, everyone was warned. We very much took care of each other. So any harm of that nature that would come to one of us, we all banded together and were determined to not let those influences deter from our mission, which was to be ourselves in a safe environment. And I keep saying have fun, but that was really what we did,

and we just danced and sang and hugged each other and just carried on, you know? And it was just part of who we were.

[00:33:34] GR: So tell me about The Park. You mentioned to me previously that you were at The Park when it opened.

[00:33:38] PT: Yes, we were at Murphy's. And we'd heard there was a new bar opening. "How exciting, a new bar! Yay! Let's go, let's go!" And so we decided to just go. And there we were, and the owner said "You guys can come in, the lights aren't on yet, but you can come in." And so we went in and music was on, so you know, we danced. But the disco lights, and all the flashing lights weren't on, so that was our first encounter with The Park.

And it has changed in good ways, challenging ways, I wouldn't say bad ways, but it has evolved. It has had to, it has had to cater to a wide variety of people. All money is green, and you can't exclude a certain group of people and pay the bills. You have to broaden your horizons, broaden your base in order to keep the lights on, so it has changed in that manner, where we have less of a "gay" club, we have a more all-inclusive club now. And being an older gay male, you know going to that bar we go, "God, we feel so old," because the guys are so young, and the girls are so young, they're 21 years old. I've got kids older than that! You know, so it has changed in that manner. We're the old guys now. And some of that's nice. We have a certain status that we enjoy, because we're the old timers. There's nothing for us to prove now, we're just gonna have fun. We just go. So it has changed in that manner.

[00:35:43] GR: Did you notice any kind of cross-generational community back then in the ‘70s and ‘80s? You mentioned Tradewinds, which I get the sense that some of the older gays went there. Places like Murphy’s, The Park...was that pretty much a young, twenties crowd?

[00:36:03] PT: It was, twenties and maybe thirties, but that was the main core of those places. They were younger. I don’t remember really any of the older gay guys from that era. I see a few of them I think but as far as knowing them we just didn’t know them.

[00:36:29] GR: So how would you say The Park was different in the late ‘70s and ‘80s than it is today? You said that it’s changed, and hinted that it was gayer. What does that mean and what does it look like in the ‘70s and ‘80s for The Park to be more authentically gay? What was that like?

[00:36:51] PT: Well, you know the music was purely disco, Donna Summer, just dance music. And the clothing was absolutely different than it is now, and to me that’s not good but that’s a whole ‘nother issue, the clothing. But the music was fun, it was just loud and lots of Ping! Ping! Ping! and just electric, and people danced for hours and took a break, had a beer, and went dancing some more. You went home sweaty because you had been dancing all night. But was it as clique-y as it is now? I don’t think so. Drag has changed the bar totally too, for good and for bad. So that’s another advent of drag. The Park is a huge drag bar. I judge there, so it’s a big drag bar.

[00:38:17] GR: Was it then or there was no drag shows?

[00:38:20] PT: I don't remember there being any drag shows. There were drag queens, some of the early Miss Gay Roanokes, I still know. But outside pageants on a national level weren't there, they were all local pageants. But now the national pageants come to Roanoke which is totally different.

[00:38:44] GR: So thinking back, because we're talking about the late '70s and early '80s, how long did you do the living in Lynchburg and commuting to Roanoke for gay fun kind of thing? And did you make friends with the Roanoke gay community that were part of your life outside of the bar scene, or was it pretty much "we went there Friday, Saturday night, it was a bar scene, and then we went back home to our Lynchburg life."

[00:39:16] PT: Absolutely. The two cities, to be 45 miles apart could not be more different. Conservative Lynchburg and liberal Roanoke. So we had our gay life in Roanoke, the dance clubs, and then we went back to Lynchburg and suffered through all that craziness. Work, school, whatever we did, and then, but we thought "a few more days, I can go dance again." We would live for going back to Roanoke, back on [Route] 460. I cannot count the times I've driven 460. I couldn't imagine now. But about fifteen years ago I decided to move to Roanoke because of love. And I've been here ever since.

[00:40:13] GR: So you lived in Lynchburg through the '80s ,'90s, up until the millennium?

[00:40:16] PT: Yes, exactly. And then finally decided rather than meeting halfway in Roanoke for both of us, we'd live here. Because my partner lived about forty miles the other way, so Roanoke was half ay for both of us so this was where we met.

[00: 40:35] GR: They were out in Blacksburg or… ?

[00: 40:38] PT: Yes, exactly, in that area. So we decided that this was it, this was halfway. So instead of doing it all over and driving and driving let's just move to Roanoke. And we did.

[00:40:52] GR: How long did the bar scene appeal to you, or did you continue going there in your thirties, or how long was that a part of your life?

[00:41:00] PT: We discovered bars outside of Roanoke. We discovered Greensboro, we discovered going to D.C., going to Richmond. And so we got to see, for all intents and purposes, we got to see real bars, who had liquor. The Park didn't have liquor, it had beer, but we wanted to drink. So going to Greensboro was only 110 miles. We'd rather go to Greensboro than go right down the street to The Park because The Park changed, something happened. And there was a change in ownership, who was leading the ship at The Park and we didn't like that, or the person who was leading it. Without calling any names, we won't go there, but we didn't feel welcome.

[00:42:03] GR: When was this?

[00: 42: 06] PT: I'd say, it would be maybe the late '90s, early 2000s. We just would rather drive to Greensboro than put up with that situation. It didn't bother us, we would just get in the car and go, just have fun. So there was a change, there was a huge change.

[00: 42: 41] GR: Where there other places that you liked to hang out in Roanoke? Murphy's was only around for a few years I think?

[00: 42:47] PT: For a few years, yes, maybe two or three, four at the most. But that was it, we didn't go out to restaurants, we didn't do that.

[00:42: 56] GR: I know that there were restaurants that gay Roanokers did hang out at, but that was not part of your… ?

[00:42:03} PT: No, because we were Lynchburg boys, so we would stop at the Hardy's on 460 on the way home. That was our restaurant, we'd do that. But as far as going out, we didn't have the money to do that, our whole financials were gas in the car to get to Roanoke and then get in The Park and have a few beers and get home. We didn't have the luxury of going out to restaurants, so we just didn't do it.

[00:43:31] GR: Where you aware of any sort of gay political stuff going on at the time or was that part of your experience, or did that ever come up in conversation?

[00:43: 42] PT: Not at all. We just weren't political. The most political I ever got, I remember, the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, we actually marched at the gay pride parade in D.C. We carried a banner, and that was about as political as I ever got, was marching in the gay pride parade.

[00:44:07] GR: Would you say you were involved with the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance?

[00:44:10] PT: Absolutely. I used to man the phones, because the gentleman who was president of the Lambda Alliance, I rented from him. And the phone was actually in the house. So it was crazy, yeah, that was part of where I lived at that time in Lynchburg, the old downtown. Harrison Street, beautiful part of Lynchburg. A lot of old houses are down there.

[00:44:42] GR: Tell us, so you were manning the phones for the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance on Harrison Street in Lynchburg, What time period do you think this was?

[00:44:51] PT: Early '80s, maybe right in between that Hampden-Sydney/ Ferrum part of my life, was the Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance, got a little newspaper and everything. A Newsletter, yeah.[1]

[00:45:06] GR: And you got involved because your Landlord was… ?

[1] *The Blue Ridge Lambda Press*, the longest running LGBTQ publication in Southwest Virginia.

[00:45:08] PT: Right, yeah because it was right there in my house and Doug said "Can you help us man the phones?" and so I said "sure," so we would sit there and read a book and the phone would ring and [we'd answer] "Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance" and there was some serious conversations from kids who didn't know what to do, where to go, or who just wanted to talk. There were some calls "My son's gay. what do I do?" We weren't trained by any means, we were just here to listen and be a sounding board.

[00:45:40] GR: So there were gays in Lynchburg that were involved in this, and you two met other gay folks at that time?

[00:45:47] PT: Right, there were definitely gay people who were a part of it, who helped to man the phones, who we used to have dinners at our house and put on fashion shows, so it was fun.

[00:46:04] GR: What about the 1980s, what about HIV and AIDS, if you feel comfortable talking about it. What were your perceptions of that around here in the community in Roanoke and Lynchburg?

[00: 46:21] PT: We weren't… we had heard about it, we didn't know any people or friends who were HIV-infected at the time, so we had heard about it but it really wasn't part of the community yet. It was happening, but we didn't really know about it. Because it hadn't hit home yet, it wasn't really a part of our lives yet.

[00: 46:52] GR: And eventually it was.

[00:46:54] PT: Eventually it was. We had friends who became HIV infected, who passed away because of HIV. So it opened our eyes and we said "it's happening, so we got to be careful." I mean you can't [not] live your life but just be careful. Yeah, we all carried condoms because we had to. We weren't all going to sit at home and knit and be saints, that wasn't who we were. We were gonna play, but we were gonna be safe. It was just part of our lives we did it. At the house there were huge bowls of condoms, because we wanted people to be safe, not live their lives in a hole, not having fun, but just be smart about it so, people did. They woke up. They realized it could happen to you, so be careful, be safe.

[00:48:02] GR: You said that at the house there was a big bowl of condoms, is there where you were living?

[00:48:05] PT: Yes, yeah.

[00:48:06] GR: It sounds like a pretty gay house within a conservative city.

[00:48:09] PT: It was. It was like a whole, it was like a cocoon, we had our lives there and we would have parties at the house, huge house on Harrison Street, and that's where people came, was Doug's house. And we were there to entertain, I guess.

[00:48:32] GR: and it sounds like you had a sort of makeshift organizing going on with the hotline and that sort of thing. People have remarked on how during the '80s with HIV moving

through the population, people started thinking more about monogamy and less cruising and this kind of thing. It sounds like you're saying that people kept partying and going out and doing their thing but there was a consciousness about, say, safe sex.

[00:49:10] PT: Exactly. What we would say is, you can't live your life and stop it. You don't need to stop your life. Just be smart and be aware that it's not like the '70s where we didn't have those worries. We had to change. We had to adapt our lives because of it. Not stop your life just change and just adapt how you do it. And we did it.

[00:49:52] GR: We have about maybe ten minutes left, what do you think are some of the big, what would you say for you are some of the big changes over time, over the course of your lifetime in the way that you have lived your life as a gay man? How has the community changed? How has the experience of being gay changed?

[00:50:16] PT: Well, back in the early days, we had a group of friends who, we were pretty tight. It was late '70s, early '80s, there was maybe ten of us who hung out. We were pretty tight, we were good friends. And then things changed in the '80s and '90s. We didn't have that closeness anymore and now, we have a group of friends, about maybe twenty of us, who are thick as thieves, we are very close. We often have separation anxiety if we don't see each other. We are in group chats that drive everyone up the wall sometimes because it's our phones ping! ping! ping! ping! ping! because we're all talking, but we need and want to be around each other. We are somehow, we've been brought together. We don't know how it happened. It really started with four people, two couples, called the boys, and we're the boys. And if you didn't see the two of us, you didn't see the two of them, they would go, "where are the boys?" Everybody knows who they were talking about. We are the boys, and now it's about twenty of us who we had the majority here in our house this past weekend. Because we have a strong need to be close to each other. And we laugh, sometimes we fight, but no one can come between this group. We're very protective of each other, and I think something has happened to draw us back to those kinds of friendships again. We've gotten a little protective of who gets in the group, because it's a little out of hand sometimes, but we're very close. And we enjoy each other. We couldn't be more different, we are all so different, but there's something about our strongness together, and we need that closeness, so we thoroughly enjoy each other. There are women and men in our group, who enjoy being around each other, and that's a huge plus for what's happening now, with our friendships. We're inseparable, we really are, we're as thick as thieves. And we just like being around each other, sometimes too much. Give me a moment to myself, that isn't going to happen, the phone ping! ping! ping! "what are you doing?" So we're like "ahhhh…." But we wouldn't have it any other way, we enjoy it. So, that's how it's changed.

[00:53:32] GR: is your cohort an all-gay and lesbian group, or is there straight?

[00: 53: 36] PT: No, we have straight couples in our group as well, absolutely. Absolutely diverse group. And there is a comfort level that you, you're drawn together for a reason, and there is a comfort level that we have grown to that people asked us, "why do you always hug when you see each other and when you leave?" And we do, we naturally hug each other. And when we leave, when everybody's going home, we hug each other again. That's not seen, but we do, because it's just, we hug each other. And we say "drive safely, see you tomorrow," and we

do because that's who we are. We are a loving group of people and we thoroughly enjoy each other. And our straight guy friends are extremely comfortable around us. Our straight female friends are very comfortable around our lesbian friends. We're respectful of each other, we don't cross boundaries with each other, we don't do that kind of thing. We actually love each other, and it's wonderful, it's absolutely wonderful. We enjoy it.

[00:55:01] GR: That's beautiful, when you do think this community, how long ago did this begin to form?

[00:55:08] PT: It's been a long time. The boys have been the boys for eleven years or so. And then the group just started to grow, it just, it is the oddest thing. They just came into our lives and it just kept growing, and so it's about ten years it's been that way. And it's kind of leveled off now, the group is getting so big, but we welcome people in, and if you're a kind person, and we know pretty much immediately, we're very intuitive. This group's very intuitive and very protective of the group. We welcome you in, and we love you just like everybody else. But we've had some people who have tried to get into the group and we're like "ahhh uh uh nope nope" but you know, we can sense that this isn't going to work. We tell each other quickly "nope nope nope it's not gonna work," or we say "he's wonderful" or "she's wonderful," and we hug each other. So about ten years.

[00:56:20]nGR: Is there anything you would say to your Lynchburg young self now if you could, you know, go in a time machine and send a message?

[00:56:31] PT: Worry less about what are you going to wear that night to The Park, and worry more about building friendships.

[00:56:48] GR: On that note, I'd love to thank you for participating in the project.

[00:56:51] PT: Absolutely, thank you. My pleasure.