

Date: 2016-07-22

Interviewee: Hunter Johnston

Interviewer: Dr. Charles Hughes

Location: Rhodes College, Memphis, TN

Collection: Memphis LGBT Oral Histories

Notes: QC by Ozakh Ahmed 6/2017

[0:00]

Charles Hughes: Alright, so we are here at Rhodes College. It is July 22nd, 2016 and we are joined by Hunter Johnston. Thank you so much for coming in and being a part of this today.

Hunter Johnston: Thank you for inviting me.

Hughes: Oh yeah, our pleasure. I was wondering if we could just start... talk about your early life, where you came from, and then what your early life was like.

Johnston: Born and raised here in Memphis; raised Presbyterian. Fortunately didn't hear a lot of anti-gay sermons. It was other subjects... very much in the closet of course, I knew from an early age I was different. A lot of gay men thought I was one of very few people who was thinking the way that I was thinking. In college... realized that there might be a few more. And I was recently asked by a younger cousin, "What did you major in?" and I said "Well I really majored in staying out of Vietnam." And he said "Well, couldn't you have just told them you were queer and that would?" and I said "Yeah I could have." And this may be a concept

[1:00]

that people today don't really appreciate, but it was more frightening to come out of the closet than to admit you were a homosexual, and because that was... you might get killed in war, but if you came out of the closet you probably lost your family, your friends, and any possibility of a decent job down the road, that was like a life sentence. So, most of us wouldn't have considered coming out of the closet just to keep from going to Vietnam. Which kind of... I think kind of balances how hard it was to come out of the closet.

Hughes: Right.

Johnston: The number of years, I just, stayed in the closet, and it wasn't until '77 in Dade County Florida I was having a big to-do about an amendment down there and Anita Bryant got all on "Save Our Children!," you know. And I was like, you know... hmmm... maybe, you know, there must be a few more of us than I thought there were and, you know, it might be worth stepping

out of my closet. And for the first time I went to a gay bar... George's on Madison, which was a show bar.

[2:00]

And a lot of liberal-minded straight people would go there to see the shows, so I knew about it. And I circled the block a few times, and went in and ordered a scotch on the rocks which was my drink at the time, and they said "You must be from out of town," because it was a beer bar. And I said "Sure, I'm from out of town." You know? I realized after I'd been there for a little while, and I thought "Wow, I'm comfortable here, I'm surrounded by people like me. I don't have to pretend. I don't have to hide and needless to say I went back a few more times and that was a slow beginning but, '79, just a few years later, by then I had established a small circle of friends and someone told me that there was... a political group was forming. Some guys had come down from Maryland and were appalled at the situation in the Mid-South and they had started a group called the Tennessee Gay Coalition for Human Rights. And the second meeting was going to be at the home of a friend of mine who had just bought a house

[3:00]

and didn't have any furniture in this big old shaped living room dining room and they were all going to sit on the floor and have this meeting, and I attended and the next thing I knew I had signed on the dotted line to go to Washington D.C. that October of '79 and march in the first National March for Gay Rights. So, I went from, in just two years' time, from taking a toe out of the closet, and suddenly I'm marching down Pennsylvania Avenue and I had an appointment with my Congressman in my name which kind of threw him off because he wasn't expecting to have eight or nine gay men in suits, all employed and all college educated suddenly showing up and saying "you know we'd like to have equal rights." Robin Beard, at the time, I remember he got up after he realized why were there and opened the door to the outer office, he didn't really want to be stuck in the room with all those people. Of course he was amazed to find out he has constituents like us. I remember we met

[4:00]

with an aide to Senator Baker at the time, who was much more accepting and understanding. We didn't get to see Senator Baker, but... so that was, we thought, it was effective. Didn't make a whole lot of difference back then. As the years went on, of course we had other marches. I had to miss the 2000 march, I had reservations for a hotel, got sick, gave my reservation to a friend, and I remember I'm lying in bed coughing and the phone rings and the hotel is like "Can we really give your reservation away?" because rooms were kind of at a premium and four or five people I think piled into my room. But I did get to go on the most recent one of today, in 2009. I remember there was a man my age walking around with a big sign that said "I can't believe I have to be here again." And I thought, "Yeah I can understand that, I was here thirty years ago, I

told you I wanted equal rights and I don't really have them yet, so here I am again thirty years later marching down Pennsylvania Avenue again."

Hughes: Wow...

[5:00]

So much to... so much to think through there... taking you back to your younger days. You said that it was really sort of Anita Bryant and the Dade County controversy that really made you aware of the prominence of the gay community, had you been aware before that, had you been aware of other gay folks? Did you have a sense of a community or did you feel that you were alone?

Johnston: I felt very much alone. I think even at an early age you have what we call "gaydar." You get a sense that somebody else might be kind of going through what you're going through, but... for the most part you... that was frightening because you were afraid if you... you certainly didn't ask someone like you know... "Hey"... you know. And I would later learn after I came out, there was a phrase called "friends of Dorothy." You could say "Are you a friend of Dorothy?" and straight people around you wouldn't know what you were talking about but that was a way of saying "Are you gay?" Of course gay wasn't a word until...to me until the 70s.

[6:00]

I mean there was queer, pervert, and other words that you didn't like, you know, so you tried to avoid it but... Yes, it was a slow awareness. In '69, in June, when Stonewall happened, I was oblivious to it. That was the summer between my freshman and sophomores years in college. I remember working that summer and it wasn't newsworthy here. I had no way of knowing about it. I mean a gay rebellion in New York City simply wasn't news in the Mid-South. In fact it wouldn't be until probably end of the '70s and talking other people like myself and they go "Did you know there was this, you know, big moment in New York City in '69?" and it was a revelation, you know, people could actually fight back and do something about it, but that had never crossed my mind until then, so I was oblivious to what was going on. And it was in the '70s like, during that

[7:00]

period getting involved with the Tennessee Gay Coalition for Human Rights. That was supposed to be a state-wide organization, and Tennessee is a very long state and we had to drive up to Nashville usually for meetings. That didn't last long. So each chapter ended up getting their own charter and we had the Memphis Gay Coalition. I was active with them for a number of years. We had a march every year from '81 on. I think it was in '94 that Dennis Kijowski came up with the idea to make it a parade which was a lot more entertaining, it was a lot more fun, but it was either a march or a parade every year. Some years it was a very short parade. I remember one

year, the short parade, I forget what year it was, but we went out of one entrance of Overton Park half a block down and went back in the other entrance. The budget was low and just couldn't have a very long parade, but there was a parade. We had, in 1980, Memphis hosted the Southeastern

[8:00]

Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men at the Rivermont, which was the flagship of Holiday Inn at the time. Barbara Greer, a noted lesbian author, came. Leah Hopkins, who was one of the early black Playboy Bunnies and a lesbian, and Leonard Matlovich came. He had been kicked out of the Air Force for being gay. As I understand it, his epitaph in the National Cemetery says that he was given a medal for killing two men and thrown out for loving one. But I had the chance to meet and rub shoulders with some of the movers and shakers. The conference was scheduled over a three day weekend and I remember Bill Johnson, who was one of the primary motivators for the Coalition, came to me and said "I need someone to be a spokesperson" and I'm like "well, you know... he goes "it's radio" and it was WDIA which was primarily an African American radio station, and I thought well, mom and dad won't be listening, so I did my radio

[9:00]

interview and then I did another radio interview and the next thing I knew they said "well, channel 3, 5, and 13 are set up over here." And suddenly I'm thinking, 'Walter Cronkite's going to be telling mom and dad that I'm out,' which they didn't know at the time. I did the interviews Friday evening, had duties at the conference, couldn't get away until Sunday afternoon. I bought a t-shirt that said that "I know you know" and I came home and the family was having a picnic and I walked in and my aunt and said "'I know you know', what?" and no one had seen me on television, but I realized that other people were going to tell them so I had to come out. My mother cried; my dad went silent. And my mother unfortunately had had some mental problems over the years so she had a psychiatrist that she was seeing and they went to see him and now he had a sop speech that he gave parents of gay children. He said "It's not your fault, it's not their fault, you should all get over it."

[10:00]

So mom and dad were, in theory, accepting, but they didn't want to talk about it. And then we had a big benefit show in which I was a part of the choreography. I wasn't much of a dancer, but it's amazing what they can teach you to do and my parents decided they were going to be supportive and come to it. And I told a friend who was the waiter and I said "Keep a beer in front of my father please; I'll pick up the tab." And at intermission I said, "How are things going out there?" He said "Oh, it's great. Your father's buying beers for the whole table; your mother's up tipping the drag queens" and I'm like "wow." I later found out that, on the way home, these two who wouldn't really talk about it- what sparked them talking about it, there was a black drag queen named Miss Peaches who was a very large woman, and mother said "You know that really

large drag queen in the purple was in the ladies room” and daddy goes “well, he was in the men’s room too” and that got them talking about it and after that they were okay with, you know, the subject, and a

[11:00]

number of my friends whose parents were not accepting, mom and dad kind of took them under their wing sometimes to say “You know you’re welcome at our house.” So I was fortunate in that a lot of others were not, and... until the end... my mother... we joked she had “lesbiandar” better than I did. I had to warn her sometimes, stop asking people directly out because you know a lot of people are not out at work.

Hughes: Excellent... Was wondering, you know George’s, was such an important place and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the environment was like, what the shows were like, you know talking about that a little bit more.

Johnston: Sure. The original George’s was a bar that... George managed a bar called The Door on Madison. I think there’s a barbecue shop there today. He took over and it became George’s. It had a number of different names, for a while it George’s Crisco Disco and different other nicknames: George’s Truck Stop and

[12:00]

Drag Show. There were really three rooms, he expanded over the years, there was like ... there were big open walls between them, a long bar as you came in and then there was a section with tables with a large stage and then a dance floor on the far side. The shows had a lot of production value, they wouldn’t be just one performer a lot of times, they would do a little skit or sometimes it was a theme and it was almost like a little soap opera production where one song led into another and it had a theme to it. At one time there was a swing kind of like Moulin Rouge that swang out over the audience. You can buy, like in those days I think it was three dollars a beer bust and you could drink very watered down battery acid draft beer all night long, which, you know, the taste buds would eventually become numb to but you could have a good time, so... Eventually he bought a place down on Marshall and moved the bar

[13:00]

down there and he had two bars on either side, one was the French Connection that was a restaurant and it had a piano. He had always wanted to have a piano bar, but never could keep a good piano player in there. The food was good. And the other side was The Barracks which was strictly... this was the Disco Era so it was like a disco bar. But George’s on Marshall in particular, a lot of very famous performers there. Working with the Coalition, we would have benefit shows to raise money for Pride or whatever, and frequently we would get pulled in to be backup dancers, and I, hard to believe these days, but I was actually a male backup dancer for the

likes of Veronica York and Michelle Marie and people like that. A guy that I went to high school with went to Houston early on, Laura Lee Love- Lonnie- because in Memphis you couldn't be out as good as you could in Houston. But he eventually came back to Memphis and performed in a lot of the shows here. It was...

[14:00]

Well... It was... The phrase was, back then, the only place for the gay community were "the bars, the baths, and the bushes." Now Memphis only briefly had a bathhouse in the, I guess it was the mid to late '80s. But that was just about the time that AIDS was rearing its head, so it didn't last long, and we have the bars and there were the bushes, there were notorious cruise areas like Court Square and Overton Park, but primarily, the bars were the only social outlet where you could feel safe being around and being yourself. That's why having the French Connection as a restaurant, you could actually go in and have a meal with someone; you didn't have to pretend you were just friends having dinner. Unfortunately, it was always a very late night crowd.

Hughes: Right.

Johnston: If you still went out on beer busts- Sunday afternoons, though George's had an afternoon of beer events... beer busts

[15:00]

slash tea dance, so you could get in, get drunk, have some fun, and get home in time to get a good night's sleep before going to work on Monday.

Hughes: Right. Excellent. Other than the shows at George's, and you spoke a little bit about this, but, you know, one thing that kind of keeps coming up when you talk about Memphis Gay history in this period is the importance of the drag shows and drag culture and the balls. I was wondering if you could just talk a bit more about that because it seems like it was such a crucial thing in the community in that period.

Johnston: Well, the shows and the bars of course were entertaining. They charged a cover charge typically, and you didn't mind paying a five dollar cover charge, even back in the '70s and '80s to come in and see a good show. And with all due respect to some of the current shows, they don't compare to what we had back then. And a lot of... there was a lot of rehearsal went on. People would come in and actually rehearse production numbers. And then you mentioned the social clubs, there was GOPS, The Queen's Men,

[16:00]

Aphrodite, and other social clubs that existed that would have an annual ball, and it would always have a theme. And it was wonderful to get invited to that and then you were encouraged

to dress. I know one year it was Napoleon and Josephine or A Thousand and One Arabian Nights. There were elaborate costumes, and much like the Mardi Gras Krewes would do, there was an indoor parade of costumes that fit the theme, so that you... in those early days it wasn't so much for charity but eventually it got to where those same groups were raising money for charity, but it was one night to go out and do things. Now, back in the '60s, I know, the first Miss Gay Memphis Pageant had to be held on Halloween because it was the only night you could legally dress in another person's... in female clothing and you could claim it was a costume, but other times you could be arrested for cross-dressing, that was the infamous rule- you had to have on three pieces of clothing that belonged to your gender and

[17:00]

Typically, it was underwear, but even then- and socks didn't count. So, and of course nobody wore socks with a pair of high heel pumps, so. And we have videos of the first couple of Miss Gay Memphis Pageants, which were held at the Rivermont, which was the flagship of the Holiday Inn system, in the ballroom. But like I said, then, bless their hearts, looking back at it, they were not that pretty either. Most of them were very amateur, but it was a night to try. I think at some point almost every gay man tries doing drag, if nothing else as a dare. Rather late in life, I created a character called Norma Lee Not. The joke was that she was... once she performed, she was normally not invited back. She was kind of a Norma Desmond with a turban, and she was more funny than she was pretty. We joked that Not was her married name. Her maiden name was Easy, she was normally easy but now she's not.

[18:00]

Norma had songs that... like the 'Menstrual Tango' and 'I'm Everybody's Girl' from *Steel Pier*, which was a very short-lived Broadway play and only had one good song in it that Norma would pantomime to. I had to retire Norma, my knees couldn't keep up with her performance. And she had more clothes than I did, so...

Hughes: Alright... That's great. So, you know, you mentioned before that there was, you know, "the bars, the baths, and the bushes", but also the growth of the Coalition. Were there any other spaces or groups or things like that or places that you found that the community, maybe not even organized, but maybe just kind of come together? Were their safe places or community places like that?

Johnston: One comes... well one place comes to mind. There were a lot of bars in those days. There were women's bars and men's leather bars and drag bars, and people didn't necessarily cross over as much. You had

[19:00]

Your bar that you typically went to, there were some, like J-Wag's and The Front Page, that were open very late, if not twenty-four hours sometimes, illegally, but you could go in and still get a beer in a plastic cup and pretend you bought it before two AM. After the bars would legally close, and you weren't ready to go home, maybe on a Friday or Saturday Night, there was a place called The Cotton Gin, which was like a little breakfast restaurant place and it was on Union. I think it's in the building that's now on the Playhouse on the Square. They use it for like a rental banquet meeting space. But The Cotton Gin would fill up with people at four and five in the morning, in to get a late night breakfast. Everyone would come in from the bars, and the people that owned it, loved the business and they were fine with it. It was an extended social hour. And the park, Overton Park, also, wasn't necessarily just for cruising. In those days, you

[20:00]

Could drive through it. The lanes were open to cars and you could be driving through and suddenly you'd see a line of cars pulled off to the side, so you'd park behind the last one and walk up to the little pullover and there might be fifteen-twenty people sitting around on car trunks or hoods or whatever just socializing because it was considered... it happened during the day, or especially in the afternoon about the time people got off work, and it was just a social spot. I mean, it's a beautiful place, just out in nature so... Of course in those days the park usually had its share of hustlers, male prostitutes, and some of those were like "Gee, these guys are just sitting around talking, they're bad for business" but... I had a straight coworker who would sometimes... she had heard about it and she just liked to be around gay men so she would come out and socialize and it was fun. I remember one guy that, one of the younger hustlers had an older brother that we all thought was straight, and

[21:00]

We're sitting out there one day talking and, couldn't have the alcohol in the park, and somebody was always [INAUDIBLE] and I remember this guy turned to me and goes "So when you going to get me drunk and take me home?" And I'm like "I thought you were straight!" Turned out he wasn't. It was a social scene. We had now, every year beginning in '80, for over 20 years, our Friday night introduction to the Pride weekend in June, was a cruise on the Mississippi River on the Memphis Queen lines. That particular river cruise line was started by a man that I had gone to church with in the Presbyterian Church for years. But they were non-judgmental. As long as we had our money, they would let us rent our boats and go out and it's ironic, because some years we'd have to get the smaller boat and we'd sell out and have to turn people away. So, the next year we'd get the big show boat and then you wouldn't sell out and you'd have to-

[22:00]

you didn't make any money, because it cost you more to have the boat, so you'd go back the other way. We never quite got that worked out properly, but it was about a four hour cruise. One year we even did an extra cruise in November, which was... had a Halloween type theme with

costumes. But the River Boat cruises were a lot of fun. I was kind of known for being a wizard with bed sheets. I would paint on bed sheets and a lot of times our slogan would be painted on a big white sheet or a pastel sheet and that made an easy way to make a banner. The first year it was... our theme came from a book called "Positively Gay." And... it was an unusual font and I duplicated it and so our theme was "Positively Gay, Positively Memphis," and we were on the smaller boat and the big boat had a square dance club. And apparently we drank up all the booze and used up all the ice on our ship, so they tied the two boats together midriver to transfer

[23:00]

Ice and booze over to our boat. And as we came together, I remember the expressions on the square dancers were all like "oh hey- Oh my God! What's on that boat?"

Hughes: That's great... Do you remember any of the other slogans that you would hang with the bed sheets?

Johnston: The second year... let's see... was "Gay Memphis, Believe It!" The conference in '80 was "Aware and Active" and it was a blue pyramid, with blue lines making a pyramid, because with Memphis being named after Memphis, Egypt, and we didn't have the big pyramid then but... Many years later when it became the Midsouth Pride Parade, it was "Liberty and Justice For All." I'm going to brag now, I built a float and I won best of show. I did human-sized statues of Lady Liberty and The Statue...and Justice holding her Scales. Her scales were actually balanced with a set of Mardi Gras beads that I had painted to match her. Lady

[24:00]

Liberty had kind of a thick neck. We joked that she had gotten into the Memphis Barbeque, but that was on a small float base.

Hughes: That's great. When you were speaking about the parks and about that stuff, you know one thing that also kind of brings to mind is... is... policing and arrests and raids, I mean, I would assume that that was a part of the experience during that period.

Johnston: Not coming out until the '70s, I didn't have to go through as many of the raids as they did earlier. I... a couple of them. There was always someone at the door, and a lot of bars had a button they could push, and the lights would come on. And you knew if the light came on, you stopped dancing and everybody sat down at a table and... because same-sex dancing was illegal. Before I came out, at the door, that George had managed, one night the vice squad

[25:00]

Came in and arrested him and several of the performers and took them downtown before a very conservative judge. But at the time, Dean Martin had done drag on national television and Flip Wilson was doing his character Geraldine and the judge threw it out. He goes "these people

aren't bothering anyone and I could see this on TV every week." So, to the police's surprise the judge was not going to carry the case through, so they slacked off like that. Now, in the parks, even if you went out there in the evenings, just for socially, if you weren't there for sexual reasons, you could typically see the vice squad. Of course, it was rather funny because you could almost always pick them out, you know "oh that's the vice squad" because they didn't... they didn't really act gay, but they were there to entrap you. And I'm sure they caught some people but, my experience was that Memphis was never

[26:00]

that bad a place. You had to be in the closet, because if you came out you would probably lose your employment. And I lost employment more than once just because somebody found out I was gay, but the police really weren't a problem as far as I was concerned. A number of bars, I'm quite sure, were making some payments under, and I mean no disregard to the police, but there was standard procedure to- in every city that- you know if you're going to sell liquor at a bar after hours you slip a few dollars here in the right spots and they won't come in and raid you.

Hughes: Right. Speaking of, you know, that you lost this employment. What were the... what were the jobs that... that you lost?

Johnston: Ironically, I was an office manager for a hotel, a major hotel. But it was a franchise, and I went to church. I was a member of the Metropolitan Community Church. Came in wanting to party on a Saturday night, didn't want to get up early on Sunday, so

[27:00]

The church met in the afternoons, and the place over on Central. And, I was coming out of Church on Sunday afternoon and apparently the owner's wife was with some friends leaving a brunch, and she actually pointed me out and said, "Oh, there's our front office manager, he's the best one we've ever had." And this got back to me later, third-hand that her friends suggested that "But that's that queer church." So Monday morning I go in and the general manager is like "I hate to do this, but you know, the wife doesn't want to have you here." And he said, "Would you like to resign?" Which looks better on a resume, So I was allowed to resign, and say that I was seeking employment elsewhere. I was fired from another hotel, which is kind of ironic because the hotel and hospitality industry has a lot of gay people working in it. But, the manager turned out to be rather conservative and she finally figured things out. And by the time you reached your thirties or your forties, if you're not married

[28:00]

You're not dating, you may be living with even just a roommate, that's not your lover, and you're not interested in going out with the people that they're trying to hook you up with. They start to put two and two together, and they're like "Okay, he's one of those." And there's no law against

it. There still isn't, unfortunately, here, you can be fired for your sexual orientation. I did have once successful event. I was working in research for Proctor & Gamble division here in Memphis, and that was in '80, when I was the spokesperson, and suddenly I'm out. You know it's like Walter Cronkite is saying, you know... I remember they ran a ticker tape under me, I had on the conference t-shirt that said "Aware and Active." Now this is '80 so we still had that '70s hair, and I guess I hadn't cream rinsed enough and I was a bit fuzzy, and there was a big black auditorium behind me with all the lights on me- it's like I had a halo almost. I was Saint Homosexual and the ticker tape went across with my name and said gay activist.

[29:00]

So Monday morning I walked in, I have just dealt with my parents over the weekend. And they went, "Okay you need to go up to the office." My boss's boss's boss wanted me gone. And my boss didn't really want me gone because I was doing a good job. And we ended up in the Vice President for P&G who was over our division, and he's working at his desk, and fortunately for me he was from Sweden and very liberal. And he asks what was the problem, and they said "We have to get rid of him, he's a homosexual." And he goes, "Well, why are we firing him?" And they said, "Well, he's a homosexual." And he goes, "Well I got that part, but why are we firing him." And the guy is exasperated, he goes, "He's a homosexual!" And he's like, "Okay, everybody get out of here, you're wasting my time. Everybody go back to work." And we get out to the secretary's office and he went "Well, is he gone?" And my immediate supervisor went, "No, he's going back to work." So, I got saved at that point, I didn't lose my employment. But I was lucky, three other times I was

[30:00]

Fired. Well, or asked to resign. Which was... you took it, if they made that as an option, because it looked a lot better on a resume.

Hughes: Sure. Sure. You talked obviously, you talked already about becoming involved with the Memphis Gay Coalition and other things like that. What were those organizations- that one in particular- what were they like in those days? Were they big? Small? Where did they meet? You know, just tell... tell me a little bit more about the...

Johnston: The Memphis Gay Coalition... quite a few people came to the meetings sometimes, and sometimes it could be a pretty small group. I always thought it was funny, there was a core group- Bill Johnson, Rick Sullivan, and... were the ones that really got it started, and they were always at the core. Almost everybody chaired... that was in the core group, chaired at least one committee. But, everybody was on every committee because there weren't that many people. And when we had our general meetings at the public library, which at the time

[31:00]

Was over off of Peabody I believe. And they would allow us to have a public access room over there. Which was good because there was no Center at that time and people didn't have to worry about being seen going in to the library. They could say "I was just going in to get a book." And then they went into a meeting room with a gay meeting like that. But you would have a committee meeting usually in your own home. And I can remember holding one of my committee meetings, and we would come to an end and then someone would say "Okay, now I'm going to have my committee meeting" because it was the same people, different Chair maybe, but... Early on, Matthew Presley, we joked that I'm his Dutch uncle, he's my adopted nephew. Matthew was the chairman of the committee to look into the feasibility of getting a community center. It was pie in the sky. It was a pipe drain in those days, but we still were working towards it and every so often they would have a big benefit show. They had a big western one called "Gay Ho."

[32:00]

And it was... it was so funny, but it was very entertaining. And to raise money to try to come up... and we eventually, I guess it was 1990, rented a space over on Madison and had our first... and it was a little hole in the wall storefront, but we had our own space. And it was nice to have a place where you could have a potluck supper or whatever. From the early days on, the center was to be an alternative to the bars. So, there was never alcohol allowed, and certainly no drugs. In the early days, people could smoke, but that eventually was outlawed. You had to go outside to smoke. So you had an alcohol/drug free, smoke free, safe place. And originally I think we thought it might be a place for under 21's who could go, as well as people who didn't want to go into a smoky bar. It would take a while before the youth were coming in. It just still wasn't what they would consider a safe place. Plus a lot of older gay men, and we have

[33:00]

A stereotype about us, you know, that we're predators and all that, so... And we, over the years, we rented three spaces along Madison Avenue. And then it wasn't until I believe 2003, we bought the space currently over on Cooper. I was president of the Center in '94-'95 and that was in our last rented space. And the incoming president and I discussed it, Brian Pera. And every month, I had to come up with \$1200 just to keep the doors open, and that wasn't paying for programs or anything. That was just to pay rent and insurance and utilities. And he had an idea for the Outflix Film Festival, which we still have. But, how are you going to come up with the money for a program like that if you still just got to come up with money every month? And we had a benefit show in every bar in town. I mean I had pies popped in my faces and all sorts of crazy things just to raise money.

[34:00]

And you had to get those pocketbooks open. And Brian and I talked about it with his... my outgoing board and his incoming board. And we decided that we should give up the physical

space. We would remain an entity, but if we needed space we would just rent it temporarily. And for about two or three years there that was the case. And then ultimately, we bought... we joked that our back was against the wall, but we owned the wall. And of course the day we moved into the current center, we had already outrun it. And we still have high hopes we're going to move into a bigger space someday. But it was comforting to know that we had our own space, no one could take it away from us. And you had more pride in keeping it up if it's your space. And I'm proud to say that over the years the programs have expanded. And having your own space, too, helps you get grants to do programs. People look at you and go "Oh, you went through the trouble to buy a building, yeah we'll help you out."

Hughes: Right...right.

[35:00]

The... back in the... particularly, sort of in the '70s, when you were getting involved with this, and these fundraisers would happen, what would they be fundraisers for? You talk later about how you're raising money for, you know, but early on, what with the benefits being such an important part, what were they raising money for?

Johnston: Pre... Civil Rights, as much, and Pre-Aids, I can remember the East End Ballroom, was a large facility kind of in behind the milk company in Overton Square, and it had been a number of things over the years. Rick Morgan either rented it or owned it at the time. We put on a benefit show for Muscular Dystrophy. Jerry Lewis had this big telethon every Labor Day weekend. We held a benefit show and it was one of those where it was... it had a theme. They came out... a group came out at first, and they did a 'Nothing Dirty's Going On' from

[36:00]

Best Little Whore House. I and another guy were dressed as police officers and as the girls were singing their songs as hookers in the front, we would pop out of plants and from under the stage, trap doors and things, and we would do the chorus, "nothing dirty's going on." And then at the end, we blew whistles, and we arrested them all and we hauled them off stage. And they had on smoking jackets as the ladies, and they took off the smoking jackets and they had on bras and scrub pants. And they all came on holding a black pole. And they did 'Cell Block Tango' from Chicago. And then, they carried on from there, ultimately it ended up with them doing 'It's a Hard Knock Life' from Annie. So it always had a theme and a lot of production numbers, I came out as Rudy Vallee in the show to do... twelve gorgeous girls and only eleven costumes or something like that. And Vincent Astor was in a skin leotard.

[37:00]

And supposedly nude. And as he came out as the last girl, people kept having to hold big Sally Rand fans and plants in front of him to keep anybody from seeing. And it was all humorous and

fun. The neat thing about it was, we raised over \$2,000 in a few hours. And when we went to give our money, we were the second largest contributor in Memphis, second only to the Memphis Fire Department, which had been raising money all year long to give to the telethon. Now I was not part of it, but the year before they had done a similar show. And when they went down to the local CBS affiliate to give their money, they wouldn't accept it, because it was from us. And someone got on the phone, called Vegas, and actually got hold of Jerry Lewis who called back and read the CBS affiliate one side down the other and says, "if the money is green or silver or whatever," he goes, "I don't care who's donating it, you take it." So, the

[38:00]

Next year when we did it, the receiving end was an all white marathon in Memphis, it was at the fairgrounds. And we were actually invited up on stage, this was after primetime. I'm sure they waited, they didn't want us up there but, but our show had gone on late too. So we were invited to actually come up on stage and present our money, because like I said, we were the second largest contributor that year.

Hughes: Wow.

Johnston: Early on, Aphrodite was a women's organization. And it still exists today. It outlasted the other organizations that were social clubs, they were the earliest ones to start raising money for AIDS research and to help people who were at the gay cancer in those days. But they helped, we had a carnival crew, part of the Memphis Cotton Carnival, for raising money for a children's hospital, so... I think our community has always been noted for trying to help others. And of course, there have been times

[39:00]

When we had to help ourselves because no one else was going to.

Hughes: Right... Well... Speaking of which, I mean, could you talk some about when the AIDS epidemic really emerged in Memphis, what that was like.

Johnston: Right. Of course, early on nobody knew what caused it. I had a dear friend, who had moved to California. And he had been in the Air Force, and then he went to California. And he was one of the earliest victims of, by the time they were calling it AIDS, it was Gay Cancer whatever. Being a veteran, he was at the VA Hospital here. And I remember going down to visit him, he threw up and I went to call a nurse, and I couldn't get anyone to even come in the room. They were all afraid. Nobody knew how it was transferred or anything. I had to get them to give me a bucket and a mop and I had to clean it up because they were afraid to come in and deal with it. It was scary. We didn't really know what caused it or how it was

[40:00]

Transmitted. The bathhouse, which had had a short life, closed because everybody was afraid. There was a lot of pressure outside our community to close it. They didn't want one of those places. But even our community was getting kind of afraid to go in there. If I may digress...

Hughes: Please do.

Johnston: I would like to tell you. George that owned George's owned the bathhouse. And it was a wonderful place actually. It was, of course there was a lot of cruising and sex did go on, but there was an excellent steam room, there was a sauna, there was a huge hot tub. And you could either just rent a locker or you could get a private room, for like six hours or twelve hours or whatever. And I remember going down after work on a cold winter night, and luxuriating in the steam room, going, "Ah, this is so nice. And it's, you know, zero outside, and it's hot and wet in here." And George telling me, he goes, "Now you are coming back Halloween." And I went, "George, you want me to come to a place where people wear nothing on the one night when we all dress, you know, in costume."

[41:00]

"The thing is there's going to be free food, there's going to be free drinks, and entertainment..." And I said, "Okay." So, being crazy I got a black towel and a string of white pot beads and I went as Coco Chanel, but I remembered there weren't many people there that night, because that was a night to go to like the show bars and stuff. And George had one of the early big projection... it was a back projection TVs and there was a wonderful movie called Diva. It was in French with subtitles. But the set director was from Memphis and George watched it. It had a wonderful aria in it from La Wally. And which to this day I think is my favorite aria. But I remember sitting there in my black towel and my pot beads on the sofa watching this excellent movie in the bathhouse, thinking, "This is such a strange combination," you know what a place to come and watch a movie, you know, on a night when everybody else is, you know, wearing all these wild costumes.

[42:00]

But I said, down the road we realized that AIDS was probably something that our community was going to have to come together and help ourselves. And a lot of gratitude needs to go to Aphrodite, because early on, the women, who weren't as susceptible getting it were the first ones to come out and start holding fundraisers. There was a nationwide touring thing. And the name of the show escapes me, but they would put it on, and all the money that you raised in your city would stay in your city. And we had a group called, AIDEAC, Aid to End Aids, that later became Friends for Life, but a lot of benefit shows were held for them, because that became the focus of fundraising because it was necessary.

Hughes: Right... And thinking of the fundraising, you know, it may seem obvious, but what were... when raising money

[43:00]

To support those who were living with... you know... sort of... where would the money go, right?

Johnston: Oh well you mean, where would the money go?

Hughes: Well, also well whatever you were going to say too... I was just thinking about the fundraising.

Johnston: Well, I was going to say, that we would drag out the old war house drag.

Hughes: Oh yeah, there you go... right.

Johnston: I mean... you know, a drag show can be very... and you can do classic drag or you can do modern. And of course there are all of the wonderful drag names themselves. I mean, we had... I had a lady in Houston walk up to me one night and tell me she was Porcelana Bidet. And of course, making up your drag name was always... There was always... for a while there was a joke that you took your first pet and your mother's maiden name. And when I was going to choose my drag name, I couldn't do that because I couldn't say it with a straight face, because my first pet was named Rusty and my mother's maiden name was Cox. And I said, I don't think a drag name like Rusty Cox was really appropriate.

[44:00]

And when I was first dared to do drag, I didn't even have a wig. I had a turban, so I became Norma. Then later I was made part of the Lee Love family. So it was Norma Lee, and then I joked that she was Norma Lee Not. Like I said, a lot of them had wonderful... Sofonda Peters was more than one but she was a rather rotund lady. Lots of great names. There was a wonderful one up in Nashville called Shalita Buffay. There was a Hispanic one out from Colorado and she was called Lotta Stolen Goods.

Hughes: That's fantastic.

Johnston: The money, of course Aid to End Aids and Friends for Life, there was free HIV testing when they finally came up with the test for that. Food pantries to help people, because a lot of people didn't have family support. If you got sick. And they eventually opened, I believe it was called Aloysius House, which was

[45:00]

Like a rooming house that later became an apartment building for people living with AIDS who didn't have any place else to go. And a lot of times, if you got ill you didn't go on disability right away. It took a while to get all that processed and it's bad enough being that sick, much less being on the street and being that sick. So our community did come together, and I think we did a very good job. There was a house similar to Aloysius House in Jackson, Mississippi and their

policy there was that those who were not as sick waited on the ones who were sicker, and then eventually as you got sicker, others coming in waited on you, because we had to take care of ourselves.

Hughes: Right. Thinking about your many trips to Washington and your involvement in the national political scene as well, were there other who would go with you

[46:00]

From Memphis? Were you kind of the Memphis representative? Or how did that work?

Johnston: Oh well I was a lot of... In '79, I'd say it was a group. We were coordinating a lot between Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville at the time. There was a bar owner in Knoxville-excuse me in Nashville, who had a bar called Warehouse 28 and they were originally from Maryland as were Bill and Rick, that had started the Coalition here. They chartered a bus and a lot of us from Memphis drove up in cars. We all got on the charter bus in Nashville, and left our cars in the parking lot of the Bar, Stopped in Knoxville and picked up a few more people, drove all night. Ironically we stayed at the Hilton right downtown. They got a group rate for us and I'm sure the Hilton was a bit aghast when they realized what was going on. We got there early. The march was on Sunday at that time and we were there all day Saturday. Went to Baltimore, to a bar that they knew up there, said we had a night of partying, came back, marched,

[47:00]

And rallied. We had held fundraisers here to take money up, but apparently no one realized we were supposed to send it in in advance. So, our organizers, when we arrived in Washington, said, "Who do we give the money to?" And the organizers in Washington were like, "Wow this is perfect, because they were in jeopardy of losing the sound system for the rally Sunday afternoon, and the money from Tennessee actually saved the sound system. We had a revelation when we arrived that first time. We didn't know we needed a banner, and two guys got together- they had a relative in Alexandria and they drove over and got two bed sheets. Again, those keep coming back up. Sewed them together, put pockets in each end, brought it back to the hotel and they're painting with paint on there "Tennessee." The old joke about you plan ahead- well it wasn't centered and there was this gap at the end, so they ended up putting a great big exclamation point at the end for Tennessee and one of the Washington papers commented

[48:00]

And said, "Wow, those Tennesseans are glad to be here!" Because of the exclamation point. Like I said, we marched, and of course a lot of people did drive up separately but we had a charter bus with about forty people. Hypothetically speaking, there may have been a little bit of weed smoked on the bus. One of the drivers said, "You got to break a window open back there. I'm driving up here guys." Then, we stayed over Monday and various ones had meetings with

elected officials. Some of them knew we were coming and others got a big surprise. Suddenly, it was not just a constituent, it was the gay community coming to see them. And like I said, then over the years there were other marches. I went in 2009- the most recent one. I did not participate in the lobbying afterwards, but it was huge. I'll jump back. In '79 we had the march, and it was the first time I had been around that many people like myself, because there were probably a couple hundred thousand of us. They always downplay the numbers, but I feel confident that it was at least that many.

[49:00]

And there's the rally and then you get home to Memphis. And I was in McDonalds on Union, standing in line, and I hear a voice behind me, and it's a lesbian that I knew that had also gone to the march. And she and I were having like, "Oh, wasn't it wonderful we did that," and all that. And it took us a minute to realize that all the people around us were like, [gasps] you know, "They're talking about that stuff." You know. And that would have been impossible even a day before because you didn't just stand out in public and discuss that you were homosexual in Memphis. But we had felt this release of being around people like ourselves and we had lost our inhibitions. And of course they crept back in in time. But you realized, you know, you don't just walk around Memphis being open. But by the time we got back on Monday and Tuesday we were still full of the exuberation of being so free that we could march down Pennsylvania Avenue that it held on long enough that we were just being ourselves right there in McDonalds

[50:00]

talking about things like that.

Hughes: Did you find that you particularly- you participated in so many of these over the years- Did you find either locally or nationally or even on the state level that you had particular political allies? You know, were there legislators that you could go to in a positive way?

Johnston: Yes. When Steve Cohen, our District 9 Congressman came in, had been very supportive. And typically most Democrats were more supportive than the other side. And some, of course would surprise you, in either party. You never knew, it was the individual. And locally, in Memphis and Shelby County, in I guess, I forget the exact year, I guess it was in 2012 or 13, we went down to the County Commission. And we were seeking a legislation that would protect County employees.

[51:00]

Actually, we were hoping to get it where any employee in the county, that didn't go. So we sought just for county employees' protection. I wont name names on this but there was a rather conservative county commissioner and he came up with the compromise saying you couldn't be fired for something that was non-work related and they could support that because it didn't have

the word gay in it. And our notion had the gay and lesbian in it or sexual orientation or gender identity and they didn't want to go on record voting for that, but they would vote to say you couldn't be fired for something non-work related and it didn't go on file as them supporting us or supporting or lifestyle and all that.

Hughes: Interesting. Kind of fast forwarding to- this has been such a momentous period in the last few years in terms of thinking about specifically legal changes.

[52:00]

And of course its not by any means done but thinking of this as someone who's been so active for so long just wondering if you could just kind of reflect on this really pivotal moment in the history of these issues.

Johnston: Well if you told me in the 70's that we've come as far as we have I would've laughed. 'Cause I don't think anyone really thought we would've got this far. Now standing at this point I wish we had come farther. We've gotten just about everything now except for job security. I can remember when the impetus changed over from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act to Same-Sex Marriage. I was unhappy as were others. We were like no that doesn't need to be the focus, 'cause frankly I wasn't too concerned about getting married, I wanted to keep my job. And I thought what good is it being married if you both loose your job? That sort of thing. Course there was no national law and that's what we were seeking.

[53:00]

A lot of states had passed non-discriminations, a lot of municipalities had. Not here, but... So I was disappointed that the focus had become same-sex marriage. Now that we've achieved that I have high hopes that employment discrimination will become the focus. There was a group called Get Equal formed out in California. Robin McGehee- he and a young man formed that out there. And Robin was originally from the Memphis area and has frequently come back. I think she's a wonderful lady and I've had the pleasure of marching shoulder to shoulder with her. They would do thinks like the recent Black Lives Movement did like blocking the bridge. They blocked roads in Las Vegas. Imagine that with all that talking. They made a lot of tactics that have been used over the years. Course acted to get people to vote. It's amazing how people- they don't think

[54:00]

Their votes going to count. They don't bother. You have to convince that, yeah, that one little vote might help.

Hughes: I was going to ask what you thought the greatest challenge was right now. It sounds like job discrimination.

Johnston: I think it is. Cause it only takes one homophobic manager. I'll give you an example, the one time I was working for a chemical cooperation. I was out to my coworkers. One of my coworkers had a gay brother. They had no problem with me, we all got along fine, and the general manager's Vice President came down from out of state- we were owned from an out of state company- and he was interviewing people and one of my coworkers who worked down at the plant was a young straight 20-something young man and they were like, "Why aren't you married?" And he's like, "I just hadn't- I'm not ready to get married." And they're like, "You should get married." And he goes, "Well, you know, the gay guy in the lab's not married."

[55:00]

And of course the guy's like, "What." And the young man had no intention of outing me or getting me in trouble, but the next day I come in and there's my immediate boss going, "I can't believe it, we have to let you go." They didn't want to fire me. I even had, it was interesting, I had two supervisors. One was a Pakistani Muslim and the other one was a Hindu and both of them wanted to go to bat for me to keep me and I was like no you can't save me, trust me because this was coming down from the home office. Unfortunately I was gone. I did manage to find other employment rather quickly so it worked out for the best. A lot of people face that because you never know who up the chain of command is going to be a religious zealot and finds out, even though your coworkers don't mind, you're doing your job well, and that particular case- the lab I worked in you had A, B, C, and D levels.

[56:00]

I went in as a D, I went to C in record time, I went to B in record time, and I was fast on my way to being A level. But that made no difference to them when they found out that I was queer. And your livelihood is important.

Hughes: Absolutely, absolutely.

Johnston: 'Course nowadays I'm retired so I can sit here and tell you openly about...

Hughes: Right. What has changed the most do you think in terms of the community in Memphis? Either good or bad or whatever. What's the biggest change or what are some of the bigger changes that you know of over the time that you've been here and been active?

Johnston: Well it's kind of a boomerang almost. Early on the focus of the community was on social. You would have social clubs, the balls, and that sort of thing. And then as the 80's came along it was

[57:00]

political and civil rights. And now that we're achieving that, it's starting to go back the other way to more social. And it's a lot more fun and the only Mardi Gras Krewe in Memphis now is very

mixed, but the emphasis behind it originally was a group of gay people, gays and lesbians. And we do Mardi Gras but the twist here- it's always for charity. They have a big ball and it raises money for charity. And of course it's hard to resist the big elaborate ball with costumes. There's a line from the old classic film *The Boys in the Band* where Emory the flaming queen comes out and says, "Oh Mary, it takes a fairy to make something beautiful." Well if you're going to do a big, elaborate ball you're going to have to have a bunch of gay men in there doing that. But I think that's the biggest change; we've come full circle from being almost purely socially oriented

[58:00]

To being almost entirely political civil rights oriented and it's curving back around now towards social. Even at the community center, now of course a lot of groups kind of got left behind and they've got further to go like we did back then with the gays and lesbians. The transgender community is still facing the same discrimination that a lot of us have managed to get past. A person meets me as a gay man they're not as uneasy about it. They meet a transsexual and they're like, "Uhhh, I don't know what to think." So they're still facing that. A lot of their impetus is going to have to be still fighting for that equality and people to feel comfortable around them. And to be honest there are a lot of gay people and lesbians who don't fully understand transsexual and transgender people and there's a lot of education to be dealt with there. I know a new thing is that when they ask people to

[59:00]

Fill out the form, do you want to be addressed- what pronouns do you want? And we never worried about that I mean, good lord, I was called she and queen and stuff and never found it offensive, but to be correct these days you've got to be more correct, you know. How does this person want to be addressed? Regardless of how they appear.

Hughes: Maybe before the term transgender became common- was this identity, was this a type of person who you recognized?

Johnston: It was rarer back then. The year I was the President of the community center I had a transvestite on my board. He was straight, but liked to dress as a woman. His wife liked to dress as a man. They were lucky to find each other I always thought. But I don't recall us having any transgender people that were really active as much. There were a couple who did shows.

[60:00]

And there was even a controversy that if you've had the surgery and you've had hormones are you really qualified to be a female impersonator when you're maybe almost female now, and some of the drag queens are female impersonators, especially if it was a show or a competition for a crown, maybe you didn't want to compete against someone who'd actually had surgery or hormone treatments that say no if you're going to be an impersonator you actually have to be a

male or vice versa and pretend to be the other gender. So there wasn't always full acceptance within the community.

Hughes: Interesting. Just a couple more questions. In terms of racial collaboration was there a lot of overlap between white and black and Latino?

Johnston: There was not. In the early days the bars were very segregated. I can remember one point when George's on

[61:00]

Marshall they were requiring black customers to have more than one form of ID. And George was afraid that his club was going to become primarily a black club and he didn't want to do that. I don't know what his entire reasons were, but he didn't want to do that so we became aware that he was requiring photo ID's kind of like voting today and not everyone had three photo IDs to get in and Gaze newspaper, managed by Bill Johnson at the time, wrote an editorial chastising George's about it and I remember going in that night and George knew I was associated with the paper and the Coalition and he got in a fussy fit and he ripped up the newspaper and threw it in my face and he said, "You're barred." And I thought well it's a badge of honor. I've been barred because I stood up for this now. Ultimately what George did was he hired a black drag queen to open up another bar, which he financed

[62:00]

Thinking he would funnel out, and it worked. Most of the African American gay community wanted to be in their own place so he built them one. Now today, fortunately, there are very few bars so everybody has to mix. And not only racially but gender, female and male as well. I don't remember- there was never a Hispanic bar, until later on there was a bar that was really a straight dance club that would have a gay night and that was primarily for Hispanics. And we were both split male and female as well. The sailors out at the naval base lot of times would come in and go to the lesbian bars when they weren't out of the closet yet or couldn't be, but the lesbians would let them come, maybe they had female sailors that they knew that would say yea he's okay let him in. But just one of us they would say, "Why are you at our bar?"

[63:00]

Go to your bar."

Hughes: Well my next question was actually- and you've = spoken in a couple of ways to collaborations, but also maybe also non-collaborations between gay men and lesbians. Was it a pretty healthy relationship between the two communities or was it complicated?

Johnston: I think so. Like I've said Aphrodite and *GOPS* and Queen's Men all- in fact Queen's Men and Aphrodite I think were formed as almost like Sister/Brother organizations at one time.

And then Aphrodite lasted longer than the others. Socializing not as much, but collaboration on other things. Now there was an organization called Black and White Men Together and that was primarily for interracial couples. And there was- and still is, I believe- a Black Pride separate from the Memphis pride or the Mid-South Pride. I remember the year that I was President at the center I went representing the center to Black Pride and I was probably one of only two or three Caucasians there. But it wasn't a matter of you have to it was just a matter of

[64:00]

Wanting have your own thing. I would say probably very few Caucasians still go to the Black Pride celebration in Memphis, whereas everybody comes to the Mid-South Pride downtown. It's like the term gay- isn't just for men. It can be the over encompassing whole community although now we're going to the initials GLBTQX whatever and all that. I have a funny cartoon at home that someone did where there's a big table set up at the Pride parade and its talking about how everyone is welcome and there's a guy standing there in a sheet with a torch and somebody elbows the lady at the table and says you want to handle this Ms. "Let's-be-Inclusive?"

Hughes: This says, my last sort of question- and then of course we have the scrapbook if you're interested in sharing some of those memories.

[65:00]

Somewhat, you know, related, but unrelated. I was wondering, is there a book or a movie or a piece of music or a piece of visual art that's been particularly inspiring to you?

Johnston: Torch Song Trilogy. Harvey Firestein. I think it was originally written as three different plays. I saw it produced as a play here at Playhouse on the Square before the film. The film is very telling. It's also pre-AIDS, so it focuses more on just the aspect when his mother first finds him in the closet playing with the clothes and all that. My parents did square dancing and I can remember when I was alone in the house I would get Mother's big square dancing petti coats and put them on my head and that was my long flowing hair to play in the house by myself. I recognized that- Arnold the character in there. And then there's a scene later on where Arnold and his mother

[66:00]

Kind of have an argument and I remember showing this film on video to my mother and that scene came up and she's like, "Stop!" and I stopped the video and she said, "Is that how you feel?" and I went, "Yeah cause he's saying, 'I learned how to do things for myself because,' he said, 'I only need two things from other people. That's love and respect. Anybody who can't give me those two things has no place in my life'." And that to me that's a telling tale. If I get love and respect that's enough. I'm not going to expect anybody to feed me, carry me, or

whatever and all that. I just want love and respect. So Torch Song Trilogy I think is an all time classic.

Hughes: Wonderful. Wonderful. If you're interested in showing some things we've got some time and it'd be wonderful.

Johnston: I'll show you a couple. I think this one in particular.

[67:00]

This is the Tennessee group in '79 under that sheet that we ended up putting the exclamation point on. Pause for a moment of technical difficulties. Like I said I'm peeking out from behind the banner in a shirt. I had on a shirt at the time that was Tennessee Gay Coalition for Human Rights. Someone joked with me, "You should be from Ohio. You don't really have the shoulders to be from Tennessee." This is an article about the 1980 Southeastern Conference. I got to meet Leonard Matlovich, Barbra Greer, Lea Hopkins, and Meg Christian, who was and still is a wonderful performer. And it was the first time I had heard the song Leaping Lesbians and every woman in the audience knew the chorus and I thought okay I don't know what this is but they were all singing along.

[68:00]

Later on I got to know her and she does the cruise ship that Olivia Records became Olivia Cruise Lines and she sent me a hat that said Olivia Records. Unfortunately she lost it at a Piccadilly. This was one of the bedsheets that I did with the Positively Gay, Positively Memphis theme that year. That was the picnic that year and this was some of our group in '81 of the first march that we had. We were only on the sidewalk. We had permission, we had a parade permit, but we were not on the streets and we walked on the sidewalks going down to Overton Square, I mean Overton Park, where we had the thing at the Shell. The '82, another sheet. This was a purple sheet with our Gay Memphis Believe It theme on it and this was me with a sign. This was a dragon puppet that I had that was Dolores the dragon.

[69:00]

She joked that they wanted a drag queen they got the queen of dragons. She was the MC for the fundraiser that night. I'll flip ahead. This was in 2009 or '10. Audrey May and I, we just happen to be sitting next to each other at the community center. This was the triangle journal. It was one of our monthly publications here. They photographed us and then did an article about our seniors which I suppose we are. And they showed kegs of old wine in the background so we're just getting better with years going by.

Hughes: There you go. I don't mean to jump in but you said the thing at the Shell, sort of as part of these- would those be more performances or rallies?

Johnston: That was more of a rally and speakers. Various people would come in and be our grand marshal, kind of like our celebrity grand marshal. Lea Hopkins came in one year,

[70:00]

she had been a black Playboy Bunny and she was very much an activist. Jamie Anderson who is a singer, writer, performer, she jokes that she's also a parking lot attendant as her subline. That's how she subsidizes her income. And she loved to twirl batons and she walked the parade route twirling a baton, so we gave her a special trophy that year of being the best baton twirler in the parade. Of course she was the only one. But she had a number of really wonderful songs that were both humorous and about activism. I had the honor in 2004, being a grand marshal along with Betty Hefner. Betty, bless her heart, her knees weren't very good and instead of sitting up in the back of the convertible she had to sit down and she said, "Well you can sit up on the back." I said, "I'm not going to try to upstage you." So we both decided we were the comfortable grand marshals. We both sat in and someone reminded me keep the wave above the crown below the pearls.

[71:00]

Hughes: Well thank you so much for sharing these wonderful things with us today. Thank you so much. This has been really, really great.

Johnston: Well thank you for inviting me.

Hughes: Is there anything else you wanted to throw in.

[Inaudible]