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Aaron Foster, 2016

Item Type	Moving Image
Publisher	Rhodes College
Download date	2025-08-11 21:24:39
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/30940

Date: 2016-07-22

Interviewee: Aaron Foster

Interviewer: Charles Hughes

Collection: Memphis LGBT Oral Histories

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Charles Hughes: So we are here at Rhodes College on July 22nd, 2016 with Mr. Aaron Foster to talk about your experiences, thank you so much for being with us as part of this project. I guess my first question is just if you can tell us a little bit about where you from and your early life, and that sort of stuff.

Aaron Foster: I grew up through elementary school in middle Tennessee in a little town called Fayetteville where my father was minister of the Presbyterian church that year, and then when I was in the 7th grade we moved to Memphis and

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I went to junior high, high school, and then came to Rhodes, and graduated from Rhodes with a degree in music education, and got out into the real world and realized I didn't like children, so I had to find something else to make a living, and came back to Rhodes and worked as an assistant manager at the bookstore, that would been in 1970 and went to graduate school at Memphis State and got my masters in music education and then went into church music for a while and did lots of different things after that, but my experience at Rhodes was very, very wonderful here, I really enjoyed and met

[02:00]

friends I kept for the rest of my life, but at that time, you know this was 1967- '63 through '67, there weren't gay people. It just was not talked about or done or anything and I just figured you know if I would wait long enough I would be cured, and move on and my life would be like everybody else's, but didn't work out that way.

Hughes: What was Memphis like when you moved, you know both just generally or also just in terms of specifically as your experience growing up how would you describe Memphis in that period?

Foster: We were in a very blue collar area, where the men worked at International Harvester

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or Firestone, and the women were stay at home moms generally, so that it was, you know, basic high school education would get you out and get you a job, you could go

from there, but I didn't feel like I had a deficient education when I came to Rhodes, I felt that I fit right in with my background, but again it was the kids, the boys were expected to play sports, and the girls were cheerleaders and took home ec. classes, and that kind of thing, and if someone were a sissy, a guy didn't hear of lesbians, it was just not mentioned,

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it was something to be feared, you would have been different, and I knew I had those feelings, but I didn't know what to do about them, and then as it turns out after we were all grown, a lot of my close friends, particularly at Rhodes, were gay, but we didn't know it at the time, or we didn't ever talk about it that time.

Hughes: How did you kind of find that out, I mean how did you come to the awareness that there were other folks who felt like you did and that was okay, how did that happen for you?

Foster: I was hoping you would ask. I eventually through several different jobs and so forth, started working for South Central Bell, and I worked

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in what they call RCMac, recent memory change, and we put the numbers actually into the computer that made peoples' telephones work, and one day this order came across my desk for the gay switch board. And I thought that can't be right, that's really not what that is, but put the number in, got it working, and then later called it and talked to a really nice guy, most understanding, and he kind of talked me through, yes there's lot of gay people and that he had been married and was divorced and had grown children, but he was out now and invited me to the gay coalition meeting, at the library.

[06:00]

Well I went, I guess three times before I actually made it in the door to a meeting, and as I walked in the door, Vincent Astor was presiding that day, and I slinked to the back so nobody would see me or call any attention to myself, and they were working on a benefit show, to raise funds that seemed to be their main purpose to existing was to raise funds. And so Vincent volunteered me to play piano at one of the benefits, and a company, several guys, that were going to sing, so and working with them, I got to know more people in the gay community, and there were people my age, my educational background,

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and we just thought alike, felt alike, it was so uplifting to realize that hey these are people like me, I'm just like them. So at the benefit show that night this gorgeous

lady came up and started talking to me, and I thought that voice is so familiar, and finally he said, "you don't know who I am, do you?" "No, but I recognize your voice." He said, "I'm David, you've been talking to me on the switchboard." So that was my first experience at cross dressing and again, it was fine. This is who I am this is what I do,

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so that really opened up so many avenues and then participating in the coalition and we published a newspaper that introduced me to a lots of other people and organizations and so forth. I really have never been a bar person, so that was really a way that I could meet people other than going to a bar, and being so uncomfortable.

Hughes: Absolutely, several things I kind of wanna revisit, the one that you said was wonderful, one thing I was, so you know, right around, were you aware in, because it seems like when you started to coming to gay coalition meetings, that would be in the mid seventies, were you aware previous to that of Stonewall or of the gay liberation movement

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Were you aware of that stuff or the locally with the arrests at George's and other things like, were you aware of these things?

Foster: I really was not aware of those. Everything was very me-oriented very in the closet, even my family didn't well, they knew we just have never talked about it, I just like I said, was very alone in my gayness. I had lots of friends, but was not out to anybody.

Hughes: Right. See, when you said you started coming to the Memphis gay coalition meetings, you said it seemed like the primary thing you all did back then was raise money. What were the things that you were raised money for?

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Foster: Well a lot of it was for various organizations, whose names I can't remember now, but for general social action of some kind for gay pride was one of them, which was very interesting to have a parade with 12 people, things like that, but not too long after that AIDS got to be the topic and the need in the community and a lot of it went for AIDS, to AIDS patients, organizations, research, that kind of thing.

Hughes: And the performances, that was the primary, were there other ways that you raised money too or was it through these events?

Foster: Those were the main things that I participated in were in the different events,

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and then at the gay pride festival, each year there would be collections for different things, sale of t-shirts and things like that, and then also after that, I started playing the piano for the MCC, Metropolitan Community Church, which at that time met on Sunday afternoon, at church by the river, downtown, and just made some of the dearest friends through that, and I would play at 8 o' clock at St. John's Catholic and run around to Union Avenue Methodist and play 11 o' clock and then 2 or 3 o' clock drive downtown and play at MCC and then back to Methodist Church for Sunday night service, but the friends at MCC were just really very important,

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and at that time really got to know quite a few of the women in the community because most everything before that, I had not really on purpose it's just the way it worked out, gotten to know the men much better than the few women who came to the organization.

Hughes: Within that organization, describe what sort of an average MGC meeting was like, was there an agenda that was followed? Was there more of a discussion? How did that group actually work? Cause it was so pivotal, how did it work in that early period?

Foster: Usually, there was an agenda, and a presider, who had the agenda, and I don't know where they arrived at the agenda,

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but then different people were asked to either be on a committee or form a committee and report back after work had been completed or this thing studied, and things like that. It was definitely the presider, but there was definitely a format for meetings, and I'd say people ranged in age from their 20s up to 50s more I'd say 20 to 30 age group.

Hughes: And you said when you first started going it was very small, did it grow?

Foster: Yes, I'd say from an active membership of 20 to 30 to 60 to 70 and then they outgrew the space in the library, and at that point I can't remember,

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I dropped of the active meetings because there were other things I was participating in.

Hughes: Excellent. You mentioned also newspapers, and it seems like the newspapers were really crucial to the community at that period, could you talk about that a little bit?

Foster: They were. That was so important, they were available free at lots of places in town besides the bars, you could get one at the library, public library, just walk in, pick it up, which was most helpful too to people that were not out at the time but yet you knew what was going on, and there were things that you could attend because you saw it in the paper that you could go and not worry about being outed. But the papers were really not only advertising for gay

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oriented businesses and the bars, of course, but everything from lawn service to house cleanings, and it was great because you could hire someone that you knew would not faint and fall out if they found a gay magazine under your bed, so the newspaper I felt were most important and the people that worked on them really really worked very hard and long to make sure that they were done and done well and then distributed.

Hughes: Did you ever do any writing or anything for any of the papers?

Foster: No, that was one of the things that I would liked to have done, but with working full time and having the church job at the time was pretty limited

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so I didn't get to do that.

Hughes: Were there any other you know, you've talked about how you're not a bar person, but the coalition was very important in terms of kind of finding the community. Were there any other spaces or groups of folks that you, that other than your circle of friends also sounds very important, were there other kind of community spaces that you and others found were safe and welcoming and that the community could grow through in that period?

Foster: Right, at the time there was also a gay men's chorus, and again that was a really nice comradery because we had not only the fact that we were gay, but that we liked to sing in a choir type setting, it wasn't rock and roll. So, we got to be a pretty close group

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and eventually grew to be about 30 active people and would do 2 or 3 concerts a year and then sale of tickets for the concert would either go to a benefit for something or to help finance music but purchase for the organization, the director

was a volunteer and all the accompanists were volunteers and of course all the singers, and then at that time there was one openly gay church, of which I think was originally affiliated with Metropolitan Community Church, and then they went independent, and they're now out on Highland. And was just took the place by storm there were so many people who wanted to go there and participate as openly gay people

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worshipping together, there were several churches that were gay friendly but not really. They tried to be, but it was just was not the best situation.

Hughes: The church that was actually embracing the gay community, was that reflected in sermons in the way that folks structured the services or was it more about the community like how the community could organize and meet there, was what it that made it so successful?

Foster: I think it was the need for gay people to be able to worship together, and particularly as couples male-male couples female-female couples and families, a lot of them had children, particularly the women couples,

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and it was very important to them for their children to see gay men and other gay women, and there were a few straight people that attended the services as well, but as far as the sermons that was planned at my own Church so I didn't really get to attend services, but would get to go to potluck dinners and things like that, they feel that normal church function of a support group Sunday School classes, that kind of thing.

Hughes: Particularly as the community became more active and open throughout 70s and into the 80s and as you were getting more involved and finding these community spaces

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did you personally or did you see sort of was there a great deal of push back, I mean were there people trying to actively either oppress the community or try to stop, did you run into any kind of negative treatment?

Foster: Personally, I didn't really, but then I was very careful to not put myself in that position, at the telephone company, there were several guys who were very out and everybody knew it, and it really didn't make any difference, but it was much much later before I actually came out, with my coworkers, at that time I had been in a relationship for several years and everybody knew I lived with this man and his son, but

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it just wasn't really talked about, and at church, at that time, the Methodist church was not open, you know, they said they loved you as a person, but you couldn't be gay at their church. But as far as like at gay pride, parade, and things like that, they were attended by very supportive people and there weren't protesters that I remember, and the police and security people who were there were again supportive, so I was not in a situation

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where I felt like I had to defend myself for being gay or that I ever felt in any danger.

Hughes: Talk a little more about the early days of the pride parade, it's become such an institution here and right such a major event, and you said it started out pretty small...Talk a little bit about how the pride parades developed and what they were like, not just in terms of the fact that they felt safe, which is obviously very important, but what were they like?

Foster: Well, they were generally sort of rag-tag floats made out of crepe paper, scotch tape to cars and things like that, or a flat-bed truck with people in various costumes and that kind of thing, but mainly it was the different organizations carrying their banner and

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there was usually a lesbian group and a leather group, men and women and square, the gay square dancers always had a group and after several years there was the AIDS support group, they went through several different names, the Men's Chorus marched and then just, oh the parents of gay- PFLAG got to be a real active group and most supportive. And then the Metropolitan Community Church had a group, so it was just basically marching down the street with your banner and that you were out and proud. It was generally not a very long

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parade, but there was always a big celebration afterwards in a park with refreshments and music and t-shirts for sale, and that kind of thing, and it just grew each year and outgrew Cooper Young and moved downtown, but the groups that planned it really really worked very hard, in financing and getting groups together and keeping order and getting everything figured out as to who goes where when and this kind of thing. And it's a very good thing.

Hughes: Did the chorus perform at the pride events or did you just march?

Foster: Usually after the parade, we would sing two or three songs, but not an actual show.

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Hughes: Excellent, I wonder if you could to whatever degree you'd like talk a little bit about AIDS, I mean its such a crucial moment for the community and a moment of such challenge but also as you've talked about such support in organizing and other things like that... what was it like when the AIDS epidemic really came to Memphis? Anything you'd be willing to share about that would be really interesting.

Foster: At first, you know just kept thinking well it won't happen to me or people that I know, but then you started seeing people that were obviously very ill and you didn't quite know what to do or say

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And then the AIDS organizations started having open houses, anything to offer advice, this is what you do, this is what's happening to this person, and you can help them by doing this and this, and then the benefits to raise funds, locally there was a organization that was the AIDS to end AIDS that was trying to get a actual home for AIDS patients, and eventually that did happen, but before that there was really push for an AIDS support network, and that was most important in that you would be assigned a particular patient that you would

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help with food, getting them to the doctor, getting them home, any normal, you know help them with their daily routine if possible. It got to be a real burden on a few people and they really really suffered serious burnout, which I can understand, you know just working with anybody that's ill, but the research it seemed like it was just not going anywhere, and people would be taking all this medication, just huge amounts of medicine, and still get sick and die. It was very frustrating and also frightening, I mean there would be one of my friends at the telephone company lost

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six friends in a month to death, and it was just one of those things that once you were diagnosed it seemed like there was no hope, you were doomed, and it was many years before it got to where people were actually living many years after being diagnosed with HIV, so we've come a long way, and at first it was only gay men, and then gay black men, and then prostitutes and women started getting it, and that's when it got to be sort of a collective thing with gay and straight people working to achieve some kind of result.

[29:00]

Hughes: Right. Did you find that or do you remember at any point do you remember at there at some point being a broader alliance around AIDS, about getting straight folks or other folks involved, did that start to happen here?

Foster: That started to happen here, and one of the main things that helped it was a dinner at St. John's Methodist church. I think it was the first Monday of each month, and a retired chef, gay man, did the cooking, and people donated food or he knew people who knew people that got food donated, and when Jones prepared the food for years, and that was where families could come that had a member of their family who

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was ill with AIDS or HIV, and they then formed a group, sort of a network.

Hughes: Was that in the late 80s?

Foster: I would think so. I was trying, I gland out several years ago because of heart failure but I can't remember how long, but he was cooking in that kitchen when he should have been home taking care of himself, but that was a mission for him.

Hughes: So as, I wonder if you just have any thoughts or recollections about the development of MGLCC kind of coming around after MGC, do you remember, as the organization formed any involvement and anything like that?

Foster: Oh, to me, that was

[31:00]

so exciting because, again, gay people had some place to go besides the bars. You could go and be yourself and go to whatever you wanted to it's where the men's chorus met, at the community center, but the idea of making it an organization that was on going, that was more that just well this person's term, and once their term is up, then the next person doesn't do anything with it and the organization fails, but getting well the switchboard, the gay switchboard was the beginning, and that was when call waiting and call forwarding, first became available, and they

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would forward the telephone number to different people's homes, so they could answer the switchboard without having to go to a certain office. Well then eventually, the switchboard was installed at the community center, so again the number could be forward and that was a central point, but the community center developed activities, pot luck dinners, the chorus met there, it was open on Saturdays, just come by, and have a cup of coffee, and visit with whoever is there! And worked strictly with volunteers and we had ended up in three or four different

buildings before we actually became MGLCC organization with the wonderful place where they are now.

[33:00]

Hughes: Excellent. How has MGLCC changed over the years? It has become such a, like you said now in a building and everything, have you noticed any changes other than the obvious of where it's located?

Foster: Well, I think that the main thing now, and I've seen it go through several evolutions, is service to the community of all ages, and ethnicities, and male, and female, and transgender, and seeing that that service is made available and continuous, where before, when I was really active in it, it was just another social organization for people to get together and have a good visit, that kind of thing,

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but I think now the services that they provide, particularly to young people, I can't imagine being out in high school, now it's pretty common, but they need support and the community center really offers that.

Hughes: Absolutely. One thing that is really interesting about Memphis, obviously, you know we are a very racial diverse city, in your experiences was there overlap or collaboration across racial lines, did the communities kind of mix racially were you aware, did you work with black gay folks, were there? Was there much overlap between black and white?

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Foster: There was some. The black and white men together was a pretty strong organization, during this time, but still kind of kept their distance, not that they weren't welcomed. I think both black and white were still a little uncomfortable with each other, and being gay helped bring us together, so that we could participate in activities in supportive groups, and that kind of thing, but there was still pretty much separation because like church on Sunday morning, the blacks had their bar and whites had their bar, and they seldom crossed, there would be

[36:00]

A few black guys that would come to the white bars and a few whites that would go to the black bars, but generally it just didn't occur to me, because I went to the bar where the people I was going to meet were going and whoever was there was fine with me.

Hughes: Sure, was it similar with the Latino community?

Foster: There were very few Latinos that I was aware of, I'll put it that way. And again realize it was 70s and 80s, so I don't know if they would have been out that much. Probably the younger guys would be, but that was not the circle I ran in.

Hughes: Excellent. Just a couple more questions.

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This is such a momentous time in thinking about changes legally and culturally, I mean it's obviously not that everything's gotten better but things have really in this last few years have been very momentous in terms of marriage equality and other things of that nature. What are your thoughts about that? I mean, how do you kind of as someone that has experienced so much, what do you think about this really important moment we live in?

Foster: It's so exciting. First off, in looking back, my first partner when we first met, was an episcopal priest, and for us to live together he could not be a episcopal priest, so he gave up his church and became a school teacher, which was a miserable existence

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I hate to say, but anyway, it was the only way we could live together. Was that he was no longer an episcopal priest, he still preached almost every Sunday, but he couldn't be gay and have an assigned church. But now, what's going now with the episcopal church has open gay bishops and so on so forth. Not that it's been the smoothest transition in the world, but when we were together, we had to get Susan McKenzie to draw up very specific wills and codicils and so forth that stated what happened if he died, what happened if I died, and that we were partners and business tight partners.

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Now you get married and you share all of the legal rights of any married couple. And it's so exciting to see that. If you go to the hospital or get sick, you've got your spouse there to take care of all of the legal stuff. I just found that very exciting. One thing that kind of occurred to me, when gay men always look any man in the neighborhood, and now you can't say, "Oh, he's not available because he's married." So many gay men are now wearing their marriage bands proudly, I just thought this is wonderful.

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Hughes: What do you think is the biggest challenge? What is the thing that, either nationally or locally, is right now is the biggest challenge facing the community that we need to keep working on?

Foster: I think it's education of the general public. Because so many people once they realize that they know somebody that's actually gay, they look at it entirely differently than they always had before. So if we could get people to realize that being gay is just me, where you're straight just because you're straight, and it's all okay.

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I think if we can come up with an easy way to educate people that it's okay, that would be wonderful.

Hughes: Excellent. One more question that I guess it's somewhat related. Tell me about how you became a musician. What interested you, tell me about your life as an organist and musician.

Foster: Growing up at our little church in Fayetteville, TN where my father was the minister, we had a pipe organ which I dearly loved, didn't understand it but I just thought it was wonderful, and a fabulous lady organist, and I just thought it was wonderful I could watch her play forever. And she encouraged me to take piano lessons and I started doing that,

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and then took piano lessons through high school, and got to college, Rhodes, and the piano teacher that I was supposed to study with scared me to death, and so I jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire and started taking organ lessons with a teacher that was even more scary than the piano teacher, but I kept thinking, "Well, you know, stick with it because you can start playing at church and make some money." So that year for my final exam in English class, with Professor McQuistin at Rhodes, he said, "write a short essay on any experience that you've had since you came to college here." And so I wrote

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about my first organ lesson, which was kind of a satire sort of thing, but anyway, he came in after grading the exam, and he said, "you know, my church is looking for an organist, would you like to come play for us?" And so I started playing it at his church that next fall. Been at it ever since. But I really didn't like being a full time musician, because music was my therapy, that was my escape from the real world. So after having two full time church jobs, I decided that no I'd rather do something else to make a living and play the organ at churches as sort of my therapy.

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And then I considered it to be ministry, my father said, "You know, that's big as my preaching from the pope, it's the music the way you lead people in worship." So I did that for fifty consecutive years, and decided that was time to retire, and retired,

made the announcement to the organ guild that I was retiring, and the next Monday I had fourteen calls looking for substitutes, so I've been substituting ever since, run in and play, do my thing and leave, but again I feel it's the way I minister to people, and again it's my therapy.

Hughes: Do you have a favorite piece that you loved to play the most? I know that's an unfair question, but I'm a musician too, so I know that's an unfair question,

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but do you have a piece that you particularly love to play?

Foster: There are several, there's a Fantasy of Lemons that I just love to play, Dianne Bisch played it the whole time. And then the Sweet Gothic by Goman, which I played in my senior recital at Southwestern, but I would be hard press to name a specific, there is just some that are just fun to play, and then some that are just beautiful. I usually play at church music based on hymns so that people can associate the text as I play, and I think that's more meaningful than playing a big heavy classical piece that might mean something to me, but it's just notes to them.

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Hughes: Wonderful, is there anything else you would like to share with us that we didn't cover or anything that you would like to add?

Foster: I can't think, there's so much I kept thinking, after seeing you the other night, like, "what am I going to say?" How do I want to cover things, but it's just been, since I came out, finally, in my thirties, and everything was okay after that. I didn't have to hide anymore, I didn't have to worry about somebody discovering something, and have met just such wonderful people, and that has been really very good, and I like to try to support the organizations as much as I can.

[47:00]

Hughes: Actually, since you brought it up, what you were referring to the other night is the launching of the Vincent Astor Collection at the Memphis Public Library, and that was a really remarkable event, did you have any thoughts about... we were talking I know before about what an amazing thing that was, did you like that collection*

Foster: It was just so exciting to realize that someone has taken the time and the trouble to archive this movement. Because as things just kind of just happen from day to day, month to month, year to year, I didn't really realize how far the organization, gay people have come in Memphis

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And it's because of the persistence of people like Vincent and the gay coalition and MGLCC and the people that work so hard, in those organizations. So I found it really exciting that people who don't know the history can go there and discover.

Hughes: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and your memories today, thank you. It was wonderful, thank you so much, that was really wonderful.

[END]