

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

**Bill Johnson, 2016**

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Item Type     | Moving Image  |
| Publisher     | Rhodes College  |
| Download date | 2025-05-17 22:24:21   |
| Link to Item  | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/30939">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/30939</a> |

Dr. Charles Hughes: Aright so it is September 30<sup>th</sup> 2016 and we're here with Bill Johnson as part of the, well now the Out Memphis and Rhodes College Oral Histories project. Thank you so much for joining us today to talk about your experiences in the community. Just to start I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about where you're from and your early life a little bit.

Bill Johnson: Well I actually grew up in Martin Tennessee. I've lived in Memphis more years than anywhere else. I lived for a couple years in Fredrick Maryland. Went to college at Lambeth and Jackson, what use to be Lambeth and Jackson. And other than that, I love Memphis I love being here, I've made it my home.

Dr. Charles Hughes: How old were you when you came to Memphis?

Bill Johnson: When I first came to Memphis I was 25. I did spend a lot of time here when I was young because I had some aunts and uncles who lived here

[1:00]

and I would come and visit them for the summer and stay a few weeks.

Dr. Charles Hughes: What were your impressions of Memphis before you moved? What did you think of the city even before you moved? Did you have images in your mind of the city when you came to visit your Aunt and Uncle? What was the city like?

Johnson: It was very exciting, coming from a little town like Martin it was the big city to me. I guess I fell in love with it when I was very young and for some reason I wanted to come back to here.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Was there a particular reason you moved back here or did you just decide it was where you wanted to live?

Johnson: I just decided to move here from when I was out of college in Jackson, and lived there for about a year. I realized Jackson just wasn't as big as a town as I wanted to be in and Memphis was close by and I knew it. So that's where I ended up.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Cool, so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit to whatever degree you're comfortable with, talking about when you kind of began to recognize your sexuality or think of yourself as

[2:00]

a gay man or as part of that community? When did you first become aware maybe not only individually but of a community of other folks like yourself.

Johnson: Well I was aware at a very early age as far as my individual sexual orientation. As far as realizing community that was something in those days, I'm 64 years old so I've been around a day or two, in those days it was very difficult to touch base with anybody else. There was no community. No sense that there might be other gay people out there when I was a teenager. But I did find some books that helped me. I mean I don't know, a lot of people don't realize just as an example, until 1966 in the state of New York it was illegal to serve alcohol to homosexuals. And I mean as recently as that, that's how backward this whole country

[3:00]

has been. And I know a lot of time we tend to think its just Memphis but it was definitely not just Memphis it was the entire country.

Dr. Charles Hughes: You mentioned books, do you remember what books they were?

Johnson: One book in particular I remember was by Laura Z. Hopson it was called Consenting Adult and even today I would highly recommend that to any young gay people struggling to coming out or with self acceptance it was just an exception book. Other than that there were little paper backs that I cant really remember. But they were enough that my mother found them and questioned me about them.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Oh really? I would imagine that was kind of a big moment, discussing with your family.

Johnson: It was in a way but I was very lucky in that my family was very accepting and very open and they knew.

[4:00]

They knew before I did. And I had one brother who was not too happy about it but other than that my family has been very supportive.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Great. When you came to Memphis, when you moved, how did you find community with other folks.

Johnson: It was just the gay bars, that's all there was and of course then there were quite a few of them. And I wasn't thinking in terms of becoming politically active when I first moved here. I met a guy and I would say the love of my life, unfortunately he passed away last year. His name was Rick Sullivan, and he was very well known in the community. We were together for several years. I moved with him for a job reason, for him, to Fredrick, Maryland and lived there for a couple years.

[5:00]

While I was in Fredrick there was a small college there, this was like 1977-78, called Hood College and they started a small gay support group on campus and the town of Fredrick went nuts. I mean there were just like letters to the editor, wars in the paper and I started seeing all of this and thinking you know this is not right, its not right that here I am, I have no problem with who I am I have no problem with being gay. These people have a problem with being gay. Its not right for them to try and make their problem become my problem. And that lit a spark. I knew we were coming back to Memphis the following year so there on my kitchen table in Fredrick, Maryland I drew up a list of things that I wanted to see happen. Realizing that the only way these things were going to happen somebody had to do them,

[6:00]

and that somebody became Rick Sullivan and myself. Even to the point of, I think it was probably the second gay news paper in Memphis I think it was called Gaze, I even can see that name on that table in Fredrick. But at the time, I was subscribed to Memphis Magazine, there was an article in Memphis Magazine about the lack of any political gay lesbian presence in the city of Memphis and I was like well there's even more incentive. When we get back to Memphis we're going to do this, I don't think Rick was as happy about it as I was but I did need him, not like I was using him, but I did need more of like mouth piece because I'm not very much of a public type person and he definitely was. So it was a good relationship for starting the movement there.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah, what were those, when you were drawing up those plans in Fredrick about Memphis

[7:00]

What were the things you wanted to do, other than talking about gays, what was on there? Do you remember those plans?

Johnson: Yeah well there was a whole list of things. And on of the things that was on there, it was like a list of goals, one of the things on there was like a gay community center. And even though we did not bring that about, it was one of the goals that eventually did come to pass. It was basically though just forming a political group. A political organization that would address local concerns, state concerns, the things like the still existing sodomy laws, just that kind of thing.

Dr. Charles Hughes: And what would you, the sodomy laws being a great example, what would you define as the biggest challenges facing gay folk in Memphis in the 70's? Some of them that may would've been relevant anywhere right?

Johnson: I pretty much think so. I mean maybe not in San Francisco

[8:00]

as much or New York as much but still there. They certainly were in D.C., from what I saw they were struggling at that time. Of course that wasn't long after Stonewall, 1969. I'm not sure I remember the question now.

Dr. Charles Hughes: What were the big challenges when you came back to Memphis, other than the sodomy laws.

Johnson: Well I think probably the biggest challenge was getting people to become involved. Too many people were afraid for their jobs, their families, you know I can't be out and found out, I cant go out and march down the street with you or I cant come out to your meetings. There would be several thousand people at gay bars

scattered about on any given Saturday night but we managed to get the first Memphis Gay Coalition meeting 19 people which we thought was quite the accomplishment. SO I think that was the big challenge

[9:00]

Was getting past that fear of coming out, of people coming out. And it was a very legitimate fear, coming out and maybe to some extent now in certain circumstances, but nothing like it was back in the 70's.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Were there a lot of problems with police? Was law enforcement target the community? Was that an issue particularly?

Johnson: I think that was an issue, but I don't think so that it was as much in Memphis as it was in other places. Early 70's I remember being told about, I never really experienced it, but raids on the gay bars. Because it was against the law for same sex people to dance together, so the bars would flip the lights to let you know the police were coming in and all the dancing would stop. SO it was that kind of thing

[10:00]

That was harassment, I'm sure that I know nothing about I just didn't feel that as much here. I've never been called a faggot anywhere except in Dallas. My point being I never really experienced that kind of, social prejudiced here as I had experienced in other places. In D.C. I experienced it quite a bit probably because they were more out and as we come more out you get more reaction, negative reaction.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Interesting. So when you got back and you started thinking about getting folks together for political action in what would eventually become the coalition, how'd you do it?

[11:00]

How did you organize this big community that was so large as you say but not particularly centralized? What were your strategizes of trying to find people to come together?

Hunter: That's a tough question. Well I'll just tell you how we started out, we put flyers on the bulletin boards in gay bars and then we felt that it was important to get the paper started, the Gaze Newspaper started to reach more people and hopefully get more people to become involved. It did grow, I mean you know ended up with probably 200-300 members in the Memphis Gay Coalition after 2-3 years we had to move from my living room to a meeting room in the public library that use to be over here on Peabody. SO it did grow and we did have events, we did organize the first, to my knowledge, the first gay march ever held in this city in 1981.

[12:00]

And we marched from Higbee Park down Cooper Street to Overton Park, what was in Overton Park's Shell and held a rally there. We had 100 people.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Wow that's a good turn out.

Hunter: It was actually a good turn out, I mean there should have been 5,000 people but getting 100 people in the Bible Belt to come out at a time when you could lose your job, lose your housing, lose your family, everything. Just because you were known to be gay. So 100 people was a good turn out.

Dr. Charles Hughes: So at the march, that rally at the shell where there speakers from the city, were there speakers that were brought in? DO you remember any main issues that were talked about?

Hunter: Well the main issue with that and I'll backed up a minute and talk about something else, talk about speakers. But the main issue with that was to just get our foot in the door,

[13:00]

To say look we're here whether you like it or not and we're going to organize and get people active and change things. The speakers were local. There was the Director of the ACLU at the time spoke, her name was Julie Steiner. I guess its okay to mention people's names I hope.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Sure well they were there!

Hunter: She was a speaker. I spoke. And a few other people in the coalition spoke. I wouldn't say there were any specific issues that we addressed, just coming out and the idea of a quality. That we're no better or worse than you are. You're going to have to look at us whether you want to or not. So we wanted to be in the public. And we did have police escort. There were a lot more people that were along side the streets that should've been marching with us, watching us march

[14:00]

Than there were in the march.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Did you get the sense that they were watching in support?

Hunter: Oh yeah. We did not, oddly enough, as they did this past weekend at Gay Pride on Beale Street, have protestors. You know the burning in hell kind of thing and we did not have that. Maybe it was because nobody except the gay community knew what was going on, but we did get coverage.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Like from the news?

Hunter: From the news, yes and from the television and newspaper.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Did that march lead to a growth in the organization or a growth in the community activist?

Hunter: Oh yeah, it did. And I get my time framed mixed so I might say 1981 when I mean 1980 but it was sometime in there that we, I'm thinking it was in 1980 before the march, that we hosted the South Eastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men.

[15:00]

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah!

Hunter: You know that?

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah! Yeah I found that. Definitely talk about that.

Hunter: And we did have a lot of interesting Key Note speakers, again young people may not know who these people are but one was Leah Hopsins from Kansas City, she was a big activist in Kansas City. And Barbara Greer who was a very well known author, particularly of lesbian oriented literature. And Leonard Matlovich, who was the first openly gay military serviceman. And he came out and of course was kicked out of the military and I think one of his famous lines, and I'll misquote it, was "I was given a medal for killing two men and a discharge for loving one." And he was phenomenal. And those were Key Note speakers at that conference. Then we did have protestors. We had bomb threats.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Right well the reason I kind of knew some of the details

[16:00]

I mean I knew about the conference from other things, but I did find some articles in which you were quoted about Reverend Brit and his fundamentalist protestors who came. It seems like that kind of just added to the prominence of the conference that they showed up.

Hunter: It did. We got a lot of media coverage over that. It was held at what was then the Holiday Inn River Mont downtown so it was very public spot.

Dr. Charles Hughes: That's great. Stepping back a bit just to think about the coalition and the meetings at the library. We've talked to a couple of folks who have spoken about, including Vincent Astor, about the importance of the library as the space. How did you end up deciding that's where you would meet? DO you remember a though process?

[17:00]

Or was that just where you could go?

Johnson: You know I honestly don't remember. A lot of people were involved with a specific task and I have a feeling that somebody volunteered to find a space or we asked somebody to find a space. And these rooms were available at the library and I do remember thinking that they're going to not let us do this cause we're a gay group but we did not have that problem at all. Which is just another thing about Memphis, it always surprises me. It's a much more gracious city than we give it credit for and I think even for gay people.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Interesting

Johnsons: We see the backlash but we really don't have the kind of problems here that you would expect us to.

[18:00]

Dr. Charles Hughes: If you could think back, put yourself back in those early meetings that were obviously so crucial what would they be like? How were they organized? Was there an agenda with a set thing? Was it more conversational? How did the meetings work?

Johnson: Well generally there was a meeting because there would be planning for things. Things that we needed to do, and there was like a rotating facilitator. I believe that's the word we used for someone to keep things in order and kind of on an even keel. But it was planning things to,.. My memories no that great. Planning events we were going to have, to get people involved. Planning ways of combating state laws, or city ones, things that were discriminatory. Just that kind of thing.

[19:00]

Dr. Charles Hughes: Great. Thinking about organizational strategies, like you want to fight an unjust law, how would you do that? If the meeting decides we're going to fight this law what would happen next?

Johnson: A committee. What else, a committee. There were different ways of doing those kinds of things. We worked a lot through the ALCU because of the legal connections. I actually worked for the ACLU for a couple of years, which was very beneficial. I remember working with Abby Ribbonfeld in Nashville who was really the attorney that was primarily responsible for overturning the sodomy laws in this state, and that was sort of through the ACLU. I think that was probably our main channel.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Cool. Were there other similar

[20:00]



Groups in Memphis that were similar at the time that you could make coalition with, other than the ACLU? Were there other groups you knew you could call on for help or support for your activities.

Johnson: Not that I can remember, not that I can remember at all. People were very, non-gay people, were very closeted if they supported us because they felt that they would feel what we felt if they came out with support. I hope I'm making sense.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Oh yeah, absolutely. Any organization has problems or difficulties, what were the problems the coalition faced in those early days? Or at any point what were the problems that you all had to work through?

[21:00]

Johnson: You mean like in home problems?

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah like internally.

Johnson: Personality differences mainly. And there were some disagreements among some people about what we should do and how we should do it. But I think it was mainly personality conflicts, which is pretty much true in any organization. And I don't think it was a big challenge, it was just part of it. But our big challenge was getting more people involved and finding ways to get things done in a time where it was hard to get anything done.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah. I'm going to ask a couple of questions sort of about how you all saw yourselves, not just the Memphis Gay Coalition but just as the community but particularly politically in the context as a couple big national stories, and you mentioned Stone Wall which obviously was a little bit before.

[22:00]

But how did you see, or did you see I guess, your work in the context of the gay liberation movement in the 70's or those sorts of struggles?

Johnson: Oh absolutely, I mean I think that's really what it was all about. And that was one of the very first things we did early on. I even started to do it before I left Maryland, trying to make contact with other gay groups and network across the country which without Google was very difficult to do. But we did manage to do it. A lot of gay publications, like there was the Blade in Washington and I would have access to that. And they would have listings of other publications nation wide. So we just contacted and networked and it was really all one big movement, we were just one local section of it. As a matter of fact, for part of the time we were part of a state organization called the Tennessee Gay Coalition for Human Rights

[23:00]

But we felt a need to be more locally identified.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah I was wondering about that relationship with the Tennessee Gay Coalition. Was it a matter of well we were obviously supportive of them we just want to have our own thing?

Johnson: Yeah,. There was never any rift or disagreement, to my knowledge, between us. We continued to work together and make trips back and forth.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Right. In the 70's, the other big national story that I was wondering about what effect it might have had on organizing the local community as sort of the Anita Bryant moment. The big rise of save our children and those sorts of push backs against the anti discrimination laws. I would imagine you felt the effects of that here but I'm wondering what effected that reaction had on the way that you worked on the communities, or the community itself?

[24:00]

Johnson: I don't think any at all. Those kinds of thins make you more determined. Maybe that was the effect. The more you're going to hate me the more I'm going to push myself in your face and let you know that this is not my problem, its yours. More determined.

Dr. Charles Hughes: To think a little bit about Gaze, what was your vision for what you wanted that paper to do? When you were thinking about it back in Fredrick and then when you and Rick Sullivan put it into motion here, what were your goals for that paper?

Johnson: Well my goals were very different from what others peoples ideas were when we actually got started. But my goals were to make it a political paper, strictly a political thing to get people motivated, interested, become part of the whole gay liberation movement

[25:00]

To get things changed. And I do think it had that effect, somewhat. People wanted more social things in it, which was fine I was just very hard headed in those days. I was a very angry young man. But basically It was just to get people involved.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Obviously that paper became so important, how did it spread? Did you contact people personally and say hey we got this new newspaper, did you try to find places to stock it? How did you get it into the world?

Johnson: Well finding places to stock it, and of course logically the first places that would stock it were the gay bars but there were some other places. Even the public library. Again, which was a surprise to us. There were some other places, some bookstores around town and

[26:00]

places that displayed it for us. And it got around. I mean it got around. And we did have a subscription mailing program too that was not very large, but it did exist. To get it out to small towns in Arkansas and West Memphis and Tennessee.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Did you feel that you had kind of a regional scope during it?

Johnson: Yes

Dr. Charles Hughes: Were you often contacted by people in Arkansas, West Tennessee, or Mississippi to say thank you or can you help?

Johnson: Yes we were. Occasionally we were. And that was very rewarding because growing up in West Tennessee I kind of knew what that was like. To feel that sense of isolation and need to communicate with other gay people. I didn't know there were any other gay people in Martin until the girl that I went to high school with that lived next door to me

[27:00]

I never knew. I met her at a gay bar in Memphis one night and she said I thought you knew I was a lesbian.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Did she suspect that you were gay?

Johnson: No, not in those days.

Dr. Charles Hughes: I was reading in 1982 you left Gaze and you penned this editorial where you talked about how, forgive me if I'm getting this quote wrong I got it somewhere saying, Being a gay activist has been very rewarding for me I've been rewarded by having a vast majority of lesbians and gay men that I'm nothing more than a self-serving trouble maker. I want you to talk about that because that's such an interesting thing that relatively soon after you had started this newspaper

[28:00]

You started to feel like that. I was wondering if you could just talk a bit about that.

Johnson: Well I'm not really sure I remember that. I remember writing that, I don't deny that I did I'm just not sure I remember it. It was at a very difficult time. It was very difficult to have these personality clashes with other people and they were accusing Rick and I of all sorts of things that I can't even remember what they were. It was like we've risen to this place of being gay activists and we didn't really want to do this but somebody had to do it and now people, within the community, are resentful of it and I think it was that kind of thing going on. I was just tired, I had been working on that for three years. Just basically tired of it.

Dr. Charles Hughes: That's understandable.

[29:00]

Johnson: When I say that I mean, you have to realize it wasn't an hour or two on the weekends. I pretty much just spent almost every waking moment for three years working on this, I mean it was my life. Maybe part of what cost me my relationship with Rick Sullivan was I didn't do anything else. I think I just burned myself out.

Dr. Charles Hughes: And when you said you would spend every waking moment doing these things, what kinds of things would take up the time just in terms of the newspaper?

Johnson: Well, writing for the paper. Writing the bulk of it because many people didn't want to do that. Writing the bulk of it, doing research and doing legal things. Talking to people, I was doing radio shows, I was on TV a couple of times.

[30:00]

Debating people, that kind of stuff. Just one thing after another like that. It was just a constant process. Mainly networking.

Dr. Charles Hughes: You mentioned you were on TV, do you remember what the context of that was? Were you being interviewed or do you remember what those were?

Johnson: Being interviewed. There was one, I think it aired on PBS, it was in the 80s and I believe Rick Sullivan and I both talked. I don't even remember what we talked about, of course it was gay issues. I was on TV a couple of times when I was working for the ACLU about gay issues but they were just little things. There were a lot of radio shows. The radio shows were always set-up. I would agree with these, I guess the early Rush Limbaugh types, I would agree to go on this radio show and debate somebody about

[31:00]

Gay issues and I would have a list of things we could not talk about. One was their religious beliefs. We're not going to interject your bible into this. It was usually a little fundamentalists little preacher from one of these little churches that I'm sure we're all familiar with. One was down at the gay pride this weekend. And it was all set up and aimed to be a gay bashing basically. Usually that's what it was. But I stood up to them. I can say that. And I will today.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Was that PBS, was that like a local thing or was it national?

Johnson: It was a local thing.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Interesting. So thinking a bit about, and then we'll transition into thinking about the 80's and beyond, but in that period other than these amazing political

[32:00]

spaces that you were helping to create and also the paper being one of them, you mentioned the bars were there other places that you would go or that you felt you

could find community with folks? Were there other places that you thought were important even if you weren't there in terms of folks being able to gather together and be together?

Johnson: Probably the Metropolitan Unity Church would be one. There was of course gay social groups, I don't know if that's a place where I felt particularly comfortable. They were like modeled on Marty Gras carnival cruise kind of things. I think they probably did things, I started to say they didn't do anything but I'm sure they did and did a lot of good but they were restricted. They weren't like all the gay community could feel involved with it I think.

[33:00]

The gay bars were probably the biggest place.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Were there any specifically of the bars that either you liked to frequent or that you remember being particularly important?

Johnson: Well everybody would say George's. George's was like the granddaddy of the gay bars. A place we thought would always be there, and always crowded, and always a good time.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Would there be a lot of performers at the bars you would go to? Would it be music on the jukebox? What would the scene be like on your average night?

Johnson: Well it just depends. It would depend on the bar. You had your little neighborhood bars and there it would just be the jukebox. Place like George's they did drag shows which some people liked and some people did not. I always thought they were a hoot. Occasionally live music performances and stage shows.

[34:00]

But there was always music from somewhere. Always dancing, even with the lights off.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Do you have any memories of drag performers you really enjoyed or shows you really enjoyed from that period?

Johnson: I can't say that I could name particular drag queen names. I enjoyed it when I was there but its not something that I was star-struck over a particular drag queen. So I couldn't really say that.

Dr. Charles Hughes: One of the things that, and you've mentioned a couple of times and the most recent last weekend is, the development of pride parades and marches. What role in the early years, you obviously already touched on this a little bit but, this remains such a huge prominent pride even in this region, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about where that came from and what the early days of that was like?

[35:00]

Johnson: Yea I can do that. There was a break between what I'm gonna tell you about and what happened later, what has become what it is now. Because it was a very small group of people involved in the very first gay pride. And the very first gay pride was at 1981, you'd know better than I do.

Dr. Charles Hughes: I think it was 80 maybe.

Johnson: Could've been 80 yea. It was like picnics in backyards and hands full of people, but it got the ball rolling. It got this feeling that, you know we're here in

Memphis, there's cities around the country are starting to have this gay pride thing every year and we need to do it too. So it kind of just got started. It got bigger. And after I left, left town for a while, other people brought about this grand parades that they now have on Beale Street

[36:00]

which is pretty amazing considering what it was in those days but it was just a small celebration.

Dr. Charles Hughes: One of the things of course that obviously comes to define the 1980's in particular but also since then as well unfortunately is the AIDS epidemic. I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about what that moment as the epidemic really began to take, what was that like in Memphis? What was the response in the community? What was that like?

Johnson: Well the response in the community was probably in those early days like it was every where else which was total fear. What is causing this? What's this about? It was speculations

[37:00]

that it was only hitting gay people, that it was some genetic thing. I had moved away from Memphis for a while so I wasn't here when everybody just started dying. And a lot of my friends that survived still tell me stories about how every week there'd be a funeral of somebody they knew and it was just people didn't know what to do about it. I don't know and can't tell you the stories of friends for life or any of that kind of thing I was not involved in any of that. Like I said I had escaped for a while to nurse my wounds. But I just think it was like anywhere else people were just baffled and scared and couldn't understand why this was happening.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Where did you go to nurse your wounds after you left Memphis?

Johnson: Well I had a new guy in my life and moved away with him to the Ozarks for

[38:00]

A few years. Which was interesting. I was glad to get back to Memphis. You can only take so much of the woods.

Dr. Charles Hughes: So when did you come back?

Johnson: 1996 I believe. I left in 85.

Dr. Charles Hughes: So when you came back did you notice any changes in the community? What was the difference?

Johnson: Yeah it was definitely much more open. And I'm not going to say we can take credit for that, all I can say is we got the ball rolling and hopefully that had something to do with it. But times were changing too at that time. Right now, you know I feel like in Memphis I don't understand why anybody's afraid anymore.

[39:00]

Well everybody is afraid of something but I mean I don't understand why anybody is afraid of coming out in Memphis nowadays. It's just a very open. I'm very open at work, very out. My customers know I'm gay. Nobody cares anymore. Which is great. Well I'm saying nobody but you know what I mean. Just generally it's just a very open easy place to live as a gay man. And that was definitely not true in 1980.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Right. You mentioned before that when you wrote that, when you had the plans in Fredrick and you mentioned that you had envisioned that the two of you thought at one point there could be a community center and obviously you weren't here when MGLCC came together but coming back to Memphis and then seeing what that has become

[40:00]

Any thoughts on that given that that was one of those central things you and Rick Sullivan had talked about early on what do you think about the role?

Johnson: Well I do think that the fact that it was one of the Gay Coalitions goals, and there was a list of goals and I remember that being one of them and I wish I could remember all of them. I didn't keep all of the things I should've kept. But that was one of the main goals, to make that happen. We didn't make that happen but somebody did and hopefully that was some inspiration for somebody to make that happen. I think it's phenomenal, when I came back and saw the gay community center in Memphis I thought well this is just great you know I can't believe it. When I left here in 85 and I'm going to say I came back in 96 the change was unbelievable. Then again that was true nationally, I'm not sure how much of that was our doing.

[41:00]

I'm really proud of it, there aren't that many cities in the South that have gay community centers.

Dr. Charles Hughes: You mentioned the increase in openness with which people can live now beyond that too you know the last few years have seen, obviously there are still many significant challenges, but it seems as though in some respects its history is moving very quickly in terms like marriage equality and things like that. I'm wondering if, given that you were involved in that pivotal 70's period and beyond right? But I was wondering if you could just reflect on that. How the last few years and what that's meant for you as someone whose worked so long for these issues or in activism this way.

[42:00]

Its indescribable. It really is totally indescribable. The difference, I never would've dreamed that I would see this in my lifetime. I never would've dreamed that as a gay person I could actually, and I wouldn't, but I could go out and marry another man. And I wouldn't just cause I've been there and done that. I just can't believe it. I'm just astounded by it. Let me tell you a little story, can I tell you that?

Dr. Charles Hughes: Yeah

Johnson: Junior High school there was this guy that was, I should've been friends with but I really wasn't and his name was Scotty Bail, maybe I shouldn't say his name, but anyways I remember always seeing scribbled in library books, in fact I think I wrote in article in Gaze about this, but Scotty Bails a queer.

[43:00]

It was everywhere. And I liked him but I felt the need to stay away from him because you know at 13, 14 years old, back in those days, it was like, next thing I know Bill Johnson's a queer is going to be written everywhere. And I really regret that but the reason I bring that up is just to show you how different things are. To go from that from that for myself as being a young gay man, or a young gay boy, being afraid to befriend another person because somebody is going to think I'm gay to the point that now I can go down the aisle and get married.

Dr. Charles Hughes: I think your mic fell off there hold on one second. We'll clip it back on.

Johnson: Just, it blows me away. I'm not sure I can see you do this.

[44:00]

Dr. Charles Hughes: That's happened to me in the past.

Johnson: I got animated.

Unknown Voice: You want me to clip it on for you?

Johnson: Yeah if you don't mind.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Great. Just a couple more things. The flip side of the tremendous progress that's been made are the challenges that do remain and the things that still need to be done. What would you say are the key challenges that the next generations people like you and the others who founded the Memphis Gay Coalition that they're going to have to take up? What would you say the big challenges are right now for the community?

Johnson: I think the biggest challenge is loss of protection because without those things are going to continue to happen in terms of



[45:00]

People being denied housing or being kicked out of their houses. All sorts of discriminatory things will continue to happen. Not that the law will end that but it'll be a leg to stand on. It will be like eliminating the sodomy laws was to us back then to have protection laws you know antidiscrimination laws. Include us in your race religion whatever we're all human beings and to discriminate against a group of human beings because you don't like who they are is just, its no different from any kind of discrimination. So that's the biggest to me.

Dr. Charles Hughes: Couple questions to jump back a little bit but I also guess they're more general questions too. First one thinking about the diversity of the community but also

[46:00]

certainly in Memphis and in a lot of places questions about for one was their much kind of coalition building between black and white folks in the period when the coalition was building?

Johnson: There actually was. I mean you've got a unifying factor. There was a group Black and White men together which was not entirely local but there was a local chapter formed up. And I had friends who were in that.

Dr. Charles Hughes: And would you all kind of work together?

Johnson: Yeah very much so. Because there were blacks and whites in the Memphis Gay Coalition because there's this unifying factor if you're gay