

City of Savannah Municipal Archives

Proud Savannah History Project

Interview: Mark R. Hill

Interviewed by Carla Johnson, August 30, 2021, Zoom

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Note: All interviews are unedited and may contain language and content that some may find offensive or difficult to view. Interviews reflect the time period they were recorded and the views of the interviewee.

Start of interview.

Carla Johnson: Good morning.

Mark Hill: Good morning

CJ: My name is Carla Johnson, and I am a volunteer with the Savannah Municipal LGBTQ Oral History Archive, and today I'll be interviewing Mark Hill. And I'd like to start off by having Mark introduce himself, and tell us a little bit about himself, how does he identify himself, and where do you— where do you come from, and what—how did you end up in Savannah?

MH: My name is Mark Hill. I have been in Savannah for about thirty-four years. I moved here with my partner at that point in time because of the historic preservation movement that was happening in this city at that time. I love old houses, had always lived in the ancients or been around the ancients. And just because of that, what was happening here is what drew me here. Had—moved. I'm from West Virginia. I grew up—I'm sixty-five years old. I had parents that totally got me at it at an early age; they knew and they, they knew what they had on their hands. We'll put it that way. There's a picture of me on my fourth birthday, and I've got the, you know, the prerequisite Roy Rogers cowboy hat, vest, and little rifle in my lap. But behind me is a set of dishes. My mom and dad knew what they had. It was just, you know. And it's just, it's just like as I grew up, I—they always had my back. And my dad would just say, "Oh, that's just Mark," that kind of thing. And so, I didn't have all that BS that a lot of gay people had in my age group. I, I, you know, it just—I, I was blessed, you know. So, I knew that I had the support of my family; they were my biggest cheerleaders, you know. And it just—and that makes a hell of a difference in a child's upbringing, if they—if you have that kind of security in the household. And you know, so, you know, I, I consider myself one of those lucky guys—gay men in that age group.

I, I grew up, like I said in West Virginia. I'm from [?] in West Virginia. I was born in Clarksburg, West Virginia. That's Harrison and Doddridge County, and if you're a true West

Virginian, that's important because we—under. We are taught the history of the state from a very early age because most of the families have been there since the, since the, since it was part of Virginia. And so, we, we were, we were taught where we came from and how we got there, that kind of thing. So that is also embedded in my, in my brain as being one of those families. I, I, I absolutely love Savannah. I identify as a cisgendered gay man, and I had to find out what that meant. Somebody told me what I was. It was like, “Okay, another label. Okay, I’m cool. Just tell me what it is.” And, I and, and my pronouns are he and him. I am married to an absolute wonderful guy that puts up with me and trust me. I’m a piece of work.

CJ: We're gonna start to hear that song from *Oklahoma*: “I’m in love with a wonderful guy.”

MH: Exactly, exactly. It's just like, you know, the—he, he, he absolutely—we're—I’m all over the board, Mark—and his name is Mark also. He is flatlined, you know, he's just the most even killed dude you ever want to met. For me, so—it's just like, you know, it's, it's funny but he's got, “Yes, dear” down really good, “Okay, yes, dear.”

CJ: That is wonderful. Well, Mark Hill, why do you think this is a good project? Why do you think projects like this are so important, and what made you decide to participate in the project?

MH: You know, this project that the City of Savannah is doing, you know, is—it's, it's unique, all right. They know the importance of the gay culture and gay history to what Savannah is today, all right. And a lot of cities don't recognize that fact. Most urban areas go through a transition where the gay men move into a blighted area and, and bring it up. Okay? And then the nuclears or straight people come in, and, and basically once it's safe and pretty—and that's what Savannah was like. You know, gay people were downtown way before—as, as part of the the urban projects here. And, and, and, and making it livable again. Because, you know, Savannah, you know, the one thing that saved Savannah was there was no money to tear it down and rebuild, okay. That's why the, the architectural heritage is here today. And by, by, by grace it is here. But it was a lot of gay people that came into the urban area, that lived here, that worked here, that, that helped maintain these houses and helped redo them, and, and make it visibly safe for the nuclears to come in later, okay.

And, and, and, so you know, this type of project with the cities—should show that, should reflect that. And you know, and it also tells us of our, of our journey through the political maze that Savannah can be, and, the through of dealing with officials and police and, and those stories need to be recorded. Because there are people that twenty, thirty years ago that were pounding on desks to make things right. Because they had had enough of, of certain actions and things that were done by the police force towards gay men downtown. You know what I mean? It was, it was just, it was, you know—and, and those people should be recognized, and their actions need to be recorded. And the city is recognizing that.

You know, this started with Luciana the archivist, reaching out, wanting to to know if there was any written record. And First City Network has the, the—is one the oldest gay organization in the state of Georgia. And two, has an archive of all the newsletters that had been written since day one. And, and I knew that, and so I reached out to them. We were able to, to, to route those two to her. She has—she is in the process of scanning them and putting them out on the, the, the City Archives, which connects to the Georgia Archives, which connects—it goes on, and on, and on. And these are our tablets and vignettes of the happenings of the day that let the community, our community, know what the hell was happening in our world. Okay. Everybody read that magazine from that little, that little newsletter from cover to cover because it told us who was dropped kicking us at that point in time, and it gave us information that we needed to survive. All right. And that's being recorded, and those are being published and I—tell you what, I am just so grateful to her, her staff, and her vision to make this happen.

CJ: That is wonderful, and the other two people that I've talked to really reflect that too. And you know, you've really— you guys have inspired me, and I'm gonna inquire about what have we done in Atlanta to preserve our oral history as well, because I know a lot of people who have been involved in the LGBTQ+ Movement. And so, you know, you've inspired me to continue as well. Well, let's let's continue on. So, what was it like for you in the early days in Savannah, in terms of being a gay man, and how did you end up being involved in the movement? I'll just for, for the ease of, of definition just call it the movement.

MH: I think I was always involved as a, as a young person as as much as you could be in the sixties and seventies. I knew what I was. And so, you know, when things occurred within certain cities, I recognize it, even as a, as a teenager. The upstairs lounge tragedy in New Orleans, you know. I was, I was a young teenager at that point in time, and it petrified me, you know. I read it and reread it. It was a tiny little blurb in the, in, in the back of, of, of the Pittsburgh newspaper that I caught—looked at. It was just a little square, and I was—

CJ: Well, for the sake of listeners would you, would you just briefly describe this incident because I listened to an entire podcast on it. It was devastating—

MH: Horrific. It's absolutely horrific—

CJ: And a lot of people don't remember that story.

MH: No, no. It wasn't—it was a, a, a, an upstairs lounge in New Orleans that attracted gay men, okay. As, as their watering hole. Privately owned. It was a Sunday afternoon and remember — like I said, it was upstairs in a building. Somebody firebombed it from the, from below. Okay, Molotov cocktails up the steps. It being an old building, rapidly caught fire. Most people inside

the building were, were consumed by fire and smoke and killed. Because of who it attacked, the city basically ignored it; there were people that were never identified because at that point in time, gay men did not carry identification on them, left it in their cars and their automobiles because of the police raids that were happening at that point in time. So, a lot of these bodies were never identified. Families didn't search for them. There was one guy that—and I can't remember his name—that was identified like a year and a half, two years ago and he has been missing from his family all this time. They just thought he walked away. Now, who the hell does that? You know, that's the devastation that it was. And as a young kid, I saw this. You know, and there's, there are pictures of people hanging out with the window, that their bodies are charred. I mean they're trying to get out, they're trying to get out of this building, and there's nowhere for them to go. It was horrific, you know. And, and—so you know, that is part of our history. And, and like I said, as a teenager, I picked up on that that event. And there were other things like, the Anita Bryant thing, the pie in the face. I stood up in my Student Union in college, amongst a bunch of straight guys in fraternity—my fraternity, and just applauded. The looks. Like, I was just like, oh my God. But you know, it was what it was. You know, you know—

CJ: And who knew that it would be an act of bravery to simply feel free to laugh at something that's ridiculous? As you know, as we do today in the face of some more—

MH: Yeah, but she was dangerous. She was—

CJ: Yeah—

MH: She was extremely dangerous—

CJ: Yes, she was extremely dangerous—

MH: And her voice carried power. And, and we, and as a community—and people say today that that boycotts don't work. Trust me, they do. Okay, you can boycott Chick-Fil-A anytime you want to, kids, and you damn well better do it, because they are, they are undermining us. And that's a political statement here, I know. But, but, but we controlled that Florida orange juice industry to the point where they got rid of them, okay, because there wasn't a bar in, in—on the East Coast that, that could serve orange juice and have it consumed. We dropped the consumption rate of orange juice at breakfast time to the point where they were—we brought attention to it, so don't ever tell me that boycotts don't work. As a unified group, we control. You follow the money. Okay, always know that.

CJ: It sounds like you recognize the value of political action pretty early on. You just got it. And, and that really helped you understand the power of action. So, when you moved to Savannah, you—I assume you were quite young, and you were single at the time—

MH: No, I was partnered at that point in time. I was twenty-nine when I moved to Savannah—

CJ: Ah, so you weren't that young when you moved.

MH: No, no, well, I moved here without a job and without a house. My parents thought I was absolutely crazy, but it was a leap of faith. But no, I was twenty-nine. And actually, my—you know, we (my partner and I at that point in time) approached things a little bit differently. We were starting a business here in town, and we were a very out gay couple, okay. We were a unified unit. We'll put it that way. Actually, we were together for close to thirty years. Okay, so, you know, the longevity was there also. But, you know, we were both young men. But we wanted to make a, a— we wanted to, to understand Savannah, and. And, so, we started doing things that were positive for the community as a whole. We were involved—and you have to understand, Savannah was extremely accepting of us. You know, the, the old guard (because we were doing things positively) promoted us a lot—I did things in Savannah that I could never have done. You know, we as, as a couple, we became members of the Downtown Neighborhood Association. Okay, which is a, a group of people that live downtown. We were on that board for a number of years. We, we chaired the holiday tour of homes together for five years. We, we helped orchestrate what was called, at that point in time, Pick-up Savannah, which later became—or was part of Keep Savannah Beautiful. And what we would do was, we would have clean up days downtown. Okay, where we promoted it with business owners and the residents. We would have cleanups on the streets. One year, we even brought in like five different elementary schools: second, third, fourth graders—had them bussed in, fed them lunch. We had docents in this, in Forsyth Park to tell them about the history of the monuments, of the about the plantings, that kind of thing. And, and, and so, we were trying to educate people about litter awareness. So those things, as a gay couple, were extremely important because people saw a gay couple that were extremely positive and, and, and part of the community as a whole. Okay, and that's how we approached Savannah for many, many years. Okay.

There were other people that were doing the, the, the, the elbow work within the community itself. And when called, my partner and I then would go and help. But we were—we weren't the, the leaders at that point in time. And the term “leader” is kind of like, a, thing that—kind of wince when people refer to me as that. It's just something that I kind of do, you know, that now. but it's, but there were people like Mark Krueger, you know, the Pattys. It's, you know, it just, yeah—Robert Bush. Those, those people were out there pounding and pounding and pounding. And, and, and, and so. Where they were doing this, we were doing this okay, and it all worked. Does that make sense?

CJ: Well, you said that you were part of an organization as well, so it sounds like some of those elements were able to come together.

MH: Oh, yeah.

CJ: In an organization, you know, in a very grassroots way to, you know, bring disparate groups together. I mean, this is small town.

MH: Yeah, we had, you know—

CJ: Southern Georgia, and I'm sure there were a lot of different groups in there.

MH: Yeah, one year for the tour of homes, just about every, every house on that on that holiday tour of homes was a gay couple. Okay. And you know, gay men and Christmas: we put it out. You know, it was just spectacular. You know, and, and we had—we all had a good time doing it, you know. And we all, you know—we're all, most of us are still friends today. You know, those are—

CJ: Just incredible. So, how are you—give me an example of how different groups of people really came together to make a difference because I've heard a lot from my previous interviewees about some of this disparities, you know, between the African American gay community, gay men and lesbians and transgender. How were those disparate groups of people able to come together, would you say? or did they?

MH: You know, they do. Okay, for many years, you know I didn't realize—I'll be honest with you, I did not realize there was such a huge gay Black population in Savannah, okay. Because I, I, I did—and you didn't see them in, in, in the places that—out and about, where, where, where, I, I went, you know, but, but, then in my in my brain, see being from West Virginia, we were always integrated, even in schools. Segregation was foreign to me, even as an adult and as a child. I mean they did it in West—they bussed in West Virginia when I was a kid, but it made no sense because my, my school was close to my house, and the same people that I went to school with—this building were the same people I went to the school—that just didn't it to me. The federal guideline and, and and like I grew up in an—I called it an international community: there were Italian neighborhoods, there were Polish neighborhoods, there were Appalachian American neighborhoods, there were Black neighborhoods, or Greek neighborhoods. And—but we all went to school together. Okay, so there was nothing—probably ten to fifteen percent of, of the teachers that I, that I had in high school were Black. You know what I mean? So, that, that, that segregation thing, I didn't get because it wasn't part of wh—how I grew up. But when I came to Savannah, I—it was, it was, “Oh, oh, this is still happening. Or this is happening?” And that was my first experience. So, you know, and so, I had a hard time myself understanding the concept.

CJ: And so, from what I've heard from other interviewees, there were definitely segregation in terms of people of color living in certain communities and white people living in certain communities. And also, the gay bars were somewhat segregated.

MH: And that needs to be recognized and remembered because we were dying. They had to step in politically, they—and they also took care of us. So, during that, that, that point in time, they became a force of within their own communities. And, and everything was intermingled. You know, and friendships were built over that. And—

CJ: The HIV crisis helped to bring the communities together, would you say?

MH: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Especially, well, in that in that older—and what you see now in that that aging group of people. You know, those friendships are still very extremely, extremely solid. And also within the Black community at that point because, like, HIV (like, like every other things—like when you see it in COVID today) hits the Black and the Latino communities extremely hard because of the disparity financially and, and that kind of thing, and, and, so, you saw it in—during that first wave of HIV and AIDS. And so, the communities had to rally together. Of course, you know, at that point in time, we were also learning, because nobody knew anything. Okay, we had to learn to survive, and we had to learn to take care of each other because, again, the government wasn't doing a damn thing for us. They were just thinking—they were hoping it was going to wipe us all out. That was the attitude. You'd call it what it is. And because it was it was hitting people that they really didn't care about or didn't care that even existed. But yeah, and today, you know, you, you, you see still that little that, that disparity but there.

But the City of Savannah today has a group of people called Proud Savannah, which this mayor has put together. And it's a very broad group of people (age, color, gender, gender identity) that, that, that have come together as a community of voices to let the city know of these disparities that we see. And, and John Wilcher, our sheriff—I'm on a subcommittee with him. It's a, a citizen's advisory board, where he and John Wilcher—he's amazing. Our sheriff is another, you know, person that is just amazing with especially with the gay community. He doesn't care, okay. And, and—hi, John. He—and I'm on that that subcommittee. So, before COVID, we were meeting once a month once, every two months. Just updating him as a voice within our communities and keeping his ear to the ground, so he knows what was happening, so he could operate his, his organization efficiently. So—

CJ: One of my one of my interviewees told me that initially, there was only one—basically an [?] who was a member of the force who was a lesbian, and she—I'd, I'd love to find her and interview her. Do you remember her name?

MH: Like, I will. I can't, but I will.

CJ: Yeah, because I think she would be a wonderful interview, but she was such a fierce advocate when, you know, when gay people were being beat up a lot, and—or crimes against gay people were being completely overlooked. You know the regular so-called bashings.

MH: Her appointment came, came about based upon that, that—what was happening. Or what was happening, such as that. There were gay bashings that were happening. In, you know, in parking lots and that kind of thing. And usually—

CJ: Do you remember the incident with the Marines that killed a gay man?

MH: I—yeah, I do. That happened just as I was coming here, or right before I came here. But I had already heard about it, you know, at that point in time. And there were other incidents very similar to that, that happened over the course of the years. And it, it started out as a, as a—and it's a very aggressive type situations, where you know the gay men didn't have a Chinese chance in hell basically to, to, to survive, or, or to get away. You know, when you have a group of thugs that, that have their mindset on doing something, they're going to do it, you know, and—

CJ: Right.

MH: And that's just the way it works. You know, that boy lost his life. And, and then there were, you know—there have been other incidences where, you know, there—you know—that, that gay people have lost their lives, just doing something kind for people. There was a, a gang in, in Savannah. The Jivens Gang back in the 80s, and it was run by a fifteen-year-old thug, and he had eight or nine policemen under his, under his thumb that were part of the gang. And to get into his gang, you had to kill a cracker. Okay. Neighborhoods were freaking out because people were getting shot, and, and—just out walking their dogs or shot out walking dogs. And there was a, a, a young man that was the manager of the Pink House. And he was at another bar, Faces, which was down on Lincoln Street. It was in, after— it was Fourth of July weekend. And he—there was a woman. And Faces at that point had one restroom, okay. It was, it was unisex. And the woman was a tourist, and she was a little bit, just wary about sharing the restroom with the boys. Okay, so, this, this guy—his name was John, and he offered to walk her up to the Pink House because the tavern was open, so she could use the ladies room, all right. He was walking up through the square that's in front of the Pink House, and three young boys—teenagers, young teenagers—attempted to rob them. And, and this was daylight. This is the Fourth of July weekend. They shot and killed John, okay. And he was doing a, a good deed for somebody, and was walking from place to place. That's how ruthless this gang was, you know. So, you know, and, and that's not—you know, it's, it's a gay thing, but it's, it's not something—they probably didn't know that he was gay. But it was somebody being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

That, that also alerted our community to what was happening with the administration, and we rallied in that same square. And, and actually supported the next the, the, the woman that was running for mayor against the mayor at that point in time.

CJ: Do you think that your actions were instrumental in getting some control over this gang?

MH: I think, it—there was a lot of political awareness at that point in time. People were petrified. A group of neighbors downtown had hired—we, I was in with a group of people that hired a private, a private security firm to, to, to monitor the neighborhood. All of our neighbors pitched in because the, the police were, couldn't control it. I mean, it was crazy. And, and plus you know, with eight or nine cops working with them, they found out later that are all in federal prison. You know, it's like—

CJ: Wow.

MH: There was—it was. Nobody knew that it was unstoppable until it happened. You know, it was, it was craziness for, for about—God, you know. And there were more horror stories about, about this kid doing his thing throughout the Historic District in Ardsley Park. It was nasty.

CJ: So, that's another great example of how, you know, the community rallied together to make things happen. It sounds like there's a lot of different organizations now in the city. They're, you know, sort of divided up by faith. You know, faith-based versus government versus, you know, still the non-governmental organizations. Would you say that there's a lot of it—positive interaction between them? Or do they function very independently?

MH: They're—you know, I don't want to use the term silos because, you know, a couple years back, maybe that was, that was the case. But with the interaction with, with our mayor and how he approaches it, bringing the, the leaders of those organizations together, the conversations are there. The connections are there. And they needed to be, okay. It was just that everybody seems to work at the same issue in different ways. And you know like, there's Tybee Equality Fest which, which is out on Tybee. There's, there's Savannah Pride, which is, which is within Savannah. There's First City Network. There's, there's other organizations out that are helping.

But one—the other thing that is a catalyst, that brings some of them together is that we have an LGBTQ Center now. It's a physical place where people can use and people, organizations, can be in the same building to meet and meet on their own agenda at the same time. And that makes a hell of a lot of difference because we have a place to call our own. And, and between what the mayor is doing, and, and the LGBTQ Center is doing, and then those wonderful people at Tybee Equality. And then all the other small communities here, you know, that are—this, that are, that are—they've got—young people today don't take prisoners, okay. They are—and it's wonderful

to see. If they, they wonder out and about. The one thing that they, that I, that I cautioned that, that I, that I always caution them is that you have to understand your history, or you can't really move forward. You have to respect the history, and you also have to recognize the work that got you to the point that you are today. When I was the Executive Director for Savannah Pride, you know, I've worked with a lot of absolutely talented younger people—amazing young adults—and I absolutely love working with them. But when marriage equality happened, they were just like, “Yay, we got it. We got it. We're going to be good.” I stopped—I told him, this—I said, “You have to watch that political pendulum,” I said, “it might be swinging in your direction one day, but it can swing back again.” And with the Trump Administration, we saw that, okay. That pendulum was coming right for the, for our heads again. and, and a couple of them got a hold of me, and he said, “Okay Papa Mark, you were right. You did it. You nailed it.” You know what I mean?

So, they listened, they understood. But it takes people in our age group to point out those things to these high-energy young folks. To let them understand that they have to be—they have to stay woke, they have to understand that what they have is precious, and it's very fragile, and it—you have to guard it. It's not like it's a given; trust me, it's not.

CJ: Well, we have that great advantage of now having elders, you know, because at the beginning of the movement, it was a young people's movement. Young and maybe middle-aged people's movement.

MH: It was, but—

CJ: Early middle age.

MH: Yeah, and I, I will agree with that statement, but you also have to—we also have to recognize that we lost probably almost a half to three quarters of those people that would be elder today to HIV and AIDS, okay. That's—we lost it, we lost a generation.

CJ: We're thin at the top with elders who are experienced in the movement, especially among men and people of color. You know, and I'm thinking African American men and women who lost their lives to the AIDS crisis.

MH: And, you know, and in Savannah, that was recognized here, okay. Black community and the lesbian community and the straight female population because—you know, it was recognized quite a bit because it was hitting that population readily, along with the, with the, the, the, the, the, the gay men—be that they be Black or be they white. But the, the women were also being hit. And, and, and Phoenix Project and Madeleine Project were, were or helped organizations through Union Mission, that, that helped give people the care that they needed and connected the

dots. You know, and there were people that, that, that saw the, the, the snowball from hell coming. And that, that were, that, that were, were forefront fighters from the very beginning.

CJ: So, I've heard some people lament the fact that the fulcrum, some of the movement work which were some of the lesbian and gay bars— there aren't so many of them anymore. They're not so much the hub of social activity. And, and also, activist activity that they were. Would you say that's true in Savannah?

MH: Oh, yeah, definitely. You know, one: Savannah is a blue dot within a red state basically. Now, you go five miles outside of town, and you're in you're in Trump land again, which shocks the hell out of me, but you know.

CJ: Well, that's true about Atlanta as well.

MH: Yeah, exactly.

CJ: Decatur. I live in Decatur, so we consider ourselves a blue dot as well.

MH: Well, you know people have to understand—and I make this statement quite readily—that, that the political power in Georgia doesn't come from the cities, it's in the rural areas. Look at the line of governors that we have. They're all farmers, okay. And, and—so the political power comes from the small farming communities. And, and that's where, that's where the money is and that's where that, that, that, that political stronghold comes from. I mean, and that's a hard battle to, to, to fight. So. But that's the truth of the whole thing. It doesn't come from Atlanta. It doesn't come from Savannah. It, you know—or, or, or, you know, any of the other larger dots on the map. It's—that's where that's where that political stronghold is.

But as far as the, the gay bars being the center of, of, of the political activism and social activism, it, it doesn't happen that way anymore. Electronics and social media has taken over that interaction, especially with gay men. And that's obvious, you know, we all know about the apps. And, and so there's not that happening. You know, the, you know, that we have one gay bar in, in Savannah that is still very politically and socially active: Club One. And they, they do their best to, to maintain that status. Socially, you know, it's like all gay bars. There are, there are, there are a lot of wedding parties that end up there. And, and, and frequent there that, that, you know—you know, and, and, and the older folks, we don't tend to go anymore, you know. We just don't, you know. The one thing I joke about, if somebody in this town would start an old-fashioned tea dance like we had in the seventies and do it Sunday afternoon before the old fart folks are ready to go to bed, they'd make a fortune. Because, you know, there's a few of us that still like to just go down to the good stuff you know, and we'd have we'd have a blast. But, but, you know, that would take—nobody's taking me up on it right, just yet. But you know, you

know, like but, but the, but you don't see that because they— it's just that, that political activism happens when it's necessary within, within. And also, Savannah, the bars here are extremely opening and welcoming. You might—there are some that, that aren't, that are, that are, are hangouts for the local bubbas. And, but, but most of the bars downtown see the frequency and interaction between gay people and, and, and the straight people, you know, that are here. Now, the straight people and the gay people that live here kind of get it. You might ran into some conflicts with tourists that are from someplace else that don't understand that, that there's a large gay population here. You know what I mean?

But the, the bar owners and people that own them are very open and embracing to the gay community. You know what I mean? So, a lot of, a lot of the gay men that that, that, that bar hop and do that kind of thing, they, they openly go to multiple places. And you know, the FCN has a, what they call—and I can't remember what they're calling it—but they, they, they frequent a bar downtown on a Tuesday afternoon at Happy Hour. And it—the gay people just converge on it. It's just like, yeah and it's—and, and we used to do it years ago. And they're bringing it back or they haven't brought it back. And it's fun, you know what I mean? It's, it's, it's an afternoon after work and everybody goes and has a couple drinks, and you get to see people that you haven't seen for a while and, and get to interact and it's, you know— it, and, and you know it's just been brought back after COVID. Now, COVID's back with like, like a bat out of hell in Chatham County. And so, how long these things are going to last again? For right now is yet to be determined.

CJ: Absolutely, yeah. We're, I think, we're all experiencing that all over the world actually.

MH: Yeah.

CJ: So, I guess you know, there's a great advantage in being assimilated, as they say. You know, for immigrants who come into this country, that you don't have to worry about being around your own kind of people. That it's, it gives you a tremendous amount of freedom to know that you can go anywhere and be anyone. Do you think that holds the true for the faith community as well for the churches in Savannah?

MH: Many, yes. You know, many, many have, have social active committees within them and are extremely accepting. The synagogue here, the, the Israel. The Unitarian Universalist Church has always had a social active organization within. There's one or two Methodist churches. And, and then you've got the Episcopal churches that are extremely gay friendly here. The Catholic Church is not so much. The First, First Baptist Church. The First Baptist Church on Bull Street is extremely gay friendly, okay. But there are other churches that aren't so gay friendly. Independent Presbyterian Church is—they're just (and I'm gonna say it) they're nasty, all right. They're just nasty. They're extremely anti-gay and, which is crazy because our ex-mayor is a

member there. And there's a story in itself. But it's just so—so, there are those that, that would like to undermine us, but there are those that are extremely supportive.

CJ: Uh hm. You know, you were just—I wanted to get back to one thing that you were talking about, and that's the young people. You know, I think one of the reasons why this project was so dear to a few key people's hearts was that they don't want the young people to forget. They want people to remember what it was like, how, how many very dedicated and inspired people made a difference. And how we should never forget, and, and know that, that we have to keep fighting. And I think you touched on that with some of the younger people that you advise. Is there—I, I really would like to continue in that direction. What are some of the other things that you think are very important to impart to the younger folks in the movement these days, and what do you think are some of the most important issues facing gay people today? I'm talking about women, people of color, transgendered, people who are gender fluid who have a number of different pronouns—

MH: Sure.

CJ: And that and the like.

MH: Well, one: as we progress, the—it's (and this is flipping the coin a little bit on this point) it's their job to educate the old. Okay, there's, there—you know, with the new terminologies and the how they perceive. It's like the word queer. Okay, in my generation, it made me want to bawl my fist up and punch somebody. Okay, it was on. All right, bottom line. They have taken it, accepted it, and, and, and, and possessed it. Okay, they have taken possession of it. And, and, and it's now a term that people like me have had to come to terms with, “Okay, it's okay. All right, I'm a queer guy. I'm good.” You know what I mean? I'm not being called a queer guy (which I—still the fist comes up, okay) but I'm queer and it's mine. You know, I own it now. All right. Which is something that they have done. On the other hand, they need to be more readily accepting of our, our diversity. All right. They can't build silos that they tend to want to do within a community, all right. Transgender people, Black gay men, white gay men, sexually orientated fluid people. We have to accept our diversity. We have to, to, to possess that and protect it because, because there's an element out there that would rather us be at each other's throats than to unify. If we're unified, they can't stop us, okay. Our own, our own force is in the acceptance of our, our culture. Our, our being as a whole. Not just my little part of the world, okay. And that's something that they have to continue to work. They see that wall building up, they need to rip it down real quick, all right. And, and that's what I hope to see. It's important because you know, you know, being a gay man—you know, my, like I said at the very beginning, my family was gold. They were wonderful, but many people didn't have the blessings that I had, okay. Being a gay man is extremely tough within its own self. Between your family, your job, your church, everything else

is just like coming at you because, you know. But being a transgender in this culture. Can you imagine being a transgender person in America today? You know, and trying—

CJ: It's a tremendous act of courage to, to come out as a transgendered person. Yeah, it's, it's one of the last bastions I think of.

MH: Well, it is. And you know you, if—God bless those parents that recognize the kids at an early age. Okay.

CJ: Yeah, I have two I have two or three friends that, you know, the other night—I'll tell you a funny story. This—my friend, Michelle, who has to head back to Angola with her husband because they're, they're working for the State Department. And she's dragging her thirteen-year-old back with her, and I said, "Well how is she doing?" And she goes, "Well, apart from the fact that she is now a bisexual witch." I said, "What do you mean?" She goes, "Well, she's decided she's a wiccan, and she's decided that she is bisexual, and wants to be a they." And you know, and, and I said, "Well, how do you feel about that?" She said, "I don't care. I just don't want her to be angry at me about it." It was really kind of cute. But, but I think, yeah, you know—

MH: Teenage daughter right there.

CJ: Well, and that's such a terrible age for mothers and daughters. Anyway, I remember it well but—so, I think that, you know, the sensitivity has to go both ways, like you said. That we need to teach each other how to treat each other constantly. And then with the movement as you said, I remember a chant from, from our demonstrations, which were "people united can never be defeated." And that had to do with our anti-war activities, our you know, my, my Women's March on Washington in the 80s for reproductive freedom, marching with, with—the very, the very next year was the Gay Rights March on Washington back in the 80s. So, I think that if we, you know, if we all can realize that and teach each other, we can't be defeated.

MH: No, exactly. you know, and those dinosaurs that want to and what they do, is they pick the weakest link within our, within our culture. Transgender children are their target right now, which I find extremely offensive, okay.

CJ: Right, it's incredibly abusive.

MH: It is. It's nasty.

CJ: It is very low.

MH: You know, and—

CJ: So, so, that's one of our biggest challenges. I think we were touching on that before. Is the issue of maintaining the dignity and rights of transgendered people is probably at the top of the agenda. And what are some of the other things you think are very important, especially things that you are personally involved in?

MH: Well, you know, I think, I think—also, you know, you have to educate your, the, your workforce, okay. You have to educate the outside community of who you are because there's still a, you know, there's still walls that are, there within everybody's community. That they don't understand us and then that kind of thing. When you move into a neighborhood, you know, you may be the only gay couple, or you seek out other gay couples. And you, and you, and you volunteer, okay. You don't have to volunteer for a, a, a gay situation or something within your own community. Do other volunteer work. Okay. Let them see you as part of the community as a whole, all right. Let them understand that you're a person that is, is part of the community and extremely productive. All right. That takes note with them, okay. They see. Let them put you into that light that they put everybody else in, and not this, this other person. And also, as in a social realm, if you're married, don't accept a lot of the certain terminology. Like, I have people saying—refer to Mark as my partner. I correct them, “No, he's my husband.” Okay, you know, and, and things like that. You have to educate. You have to. And you have to—don't be shy about it. It don't have to be mean, but you, you make a point. And some people times people go like this, and I'm like, “No, no, you don't get it. You don't get it. If we were living together and, and—but we're now married. See the ring?”

CJ: “We're not living in sin anymore.”

MH: Exactly. Trust me. “I knew!” Yeah, but you know, but it's, it's, it's, it's a metamorphosis. It's always going to be. And we have to be socially and, and, and, and, and also take care of each other. You know, we have to rally around each other, especially in small communities. We—I may not know you or know your name, but I might know of you. Okay, but you're still part of, of us as a whole. And you know, if something happens in your world or your household that you need help, we need to rally. We need to support each other, no matter what. You know, if you're being abused at work, we need to take note. You know, if you, if something happens that wouldn't happen to a straight person in, in a law enforcement type of situation, we need to pay attention. And we also need to beat the drums when necessary. Stay woke, especially in Georgia. Stay woke on what's happening at the capitol. They're sneaky little rascals, okay. They will take something to, to a farm bill that will affect transgender information because they don't think anybody knows. I mean, they are, they are, they are nasty up there. And you have to stay alert and stay woke the entire time.

CJ: Yeah, agreed. Well, Mark, this ends the official part of our interview. And I'm gonna go offline for a second. I—after. I thank you so much for participating in this interview. This was great information, and we, we hope that if there's anything else that you'd like to share with us, we could schedule another interview. I like to keep them kind of short, though, because people get tired. So, thank you again for participating in this interview.

End of interview.