City of Savannah Municipal Archives
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Interview: Billy Hester
Interviewed by Lacy Brooks, October 4, 2021, Zoom
Transcribed by Brittany Ellis
Transcription edited by Megan Kerkhoff

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Start of interview.

Lacy Brooks: Today is Monday, October 4th, 2021. It is 3: 34 PM. This is—I am Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Reverend Billy Hester for the Savannah LGBTQ+ Oral History Project. We are conducting this interview via Zoom in Savannah, Georgia. And thank you for joining us today. So, just to start real quick, if you would tell us your full name—and then if, if necessarily, spell it, but if not—and then where—when and where you were born.

Billy Hester: Okay, Billy Hester. B-i-l-l-y H-e-s-t-e-r. Born here in Savannah, Georgia. Telfair Hospital [laughs].

LB: All right. And, so, that means you are a native of Savannah. Now, I do know, you said you left Savannah at one time.

BH: I did.

LB: So—

BH: Yeah, you may want to know, yeah, I was born in 1959. So, I'm 62. So, let me give you some bearings, bearings there, there, there. Yeah, I, I went to school—high school, you know, elementary, high—up through high school here. Went off to college and majored in theater at Valdosta State in Valdosta, Georgia. And after graduating from there, went to moved to New York City to pursue theater. Yeah. And then ended up in the ministry, but that's another story. [laughs].

LB: Okay. Okay, and, so, you returned to Savannah. When? When did you return to Savannah?

BH: Well, what happened is, I was in theater in New York. Ended up going to Princeton Theological Seminary, which is about an hour outside of Manhattan in Princeton, New Jersey. Was pastor—I graduated MDIV from Princeton in 1989. Was in a church as a pastor for a couple of years in Manhattan. And, so, we moved—and I found my wife up there and had our first child in New York, and we moved back to Savannah. She's from Maryland, so I brought her down south in 1991. 1991. I was an associate minister at Wesley Monumental Methodist Church downtown for two years. My first two years back in Savannah. And then heard about a church that the Methodist denomination was about to close. So, I asked if I could try, try it. They had kind of been giving up on it for—you know, they've been trying. They knew in the late sixties that area was changing, and it was in decline. They had tried a number of things, and they had actually planned to close the church.

But it was really strange; the church I was in in New York, my secretary, their father became bishop of the South Georgia Conference right when I came down here. And, so, when I asked to try Asbury Memorial, for them to give it one more shot. Again, it was that connection from New York that helped me. Yeah, say, "Okay, Billy. Give it a try." I was kind of at a prominent—well, it's about one of the oldest churches in the country in New York. Norman Vincent Peale was a famous pastor a long time ago. And that was his church at Marvel Collegiate on Fifth Avenue and 29th. And, so, I kind of came down with a, a little bit of a kind of a reputation of being at Marvel Collegiate. So that the, the Methodists in South Georgia allowed me to take this church they were about to close. It's Asbury Memorial on the corner of Henry and Waters.

Now, they had it—when I was growing up in Savannah, it was a very dynamic church. I remember attending it. I didn't go to that church, but I would attend it periodically. Our youth groups would meet together. Very dynamic, but it shrunk. And again, they were down to about twenty-five, thirty people. Their youngest member sixty-six, and average age about eighty. They couldn't afford a full-time minister, so I took another church that was about to close in Thunderbolt. Wesley Oak on—right on Victory Drive and Mechanics. And did one service at 9:30, and then the other at 11:15. And did that for eight years 'till both churches were able to support a full-time minister. And then just went over to Asbury full time after that.

LB: Wow. All right. So, just to start with Savannah's LGBTQ history, can you describe your involvement with the LGBTQ community in Savannah?

BH: Yeah, yeah, let me kind of back up a little bit. You know, I grew up on 65th Street. And, and—as a child, right on the corner of Abercorn and 65th street. And kind of my—first, I'm straight. My first kind of remembrance of hearing about or of gay people was that we had two men move into—onto our block on 65th Street. Men from New York. And, and of course, so rumors were going around. I never met them. We saw them at a distance. And I was like, probably around twelve, eleven, or twelve. And so, you know, we kind of had our little gang.

And we would make jokes about them, and you know, call them—the, you know, queers and things like that. You know, growing up, I was in theater, and so in college, then met a lot of gay people. And one became probably my closest friend, became a roommate.

And started, you know, seeing things a little differently. I had been raised in the church and was very—Christianity was a very big part of my life and believed homosexuality was wrong, but meeting the people in my theater department that I really liked a lot kind of helped me struggle with that a little bit. And then when I moved to New York, this church, Marvel Collegiate Church, had a lot of gay people there. And they were in leadership positions. And I had never seen anything like that before, you know. And I go, "Wow! That can, that can happen." So, that, that was new to me. And then when I went to seminary and studied, you know, theology and of scripture and all of that, I realized, "Wait a minute. You know, I just, I really think it's wrong that we're not—the way people, LGBTQ people are being discriminated against. Back then, it would just be 'LG people.' Back in those days [laughs].

But, you know, funny thing happened. I did a paper at Princeton on—I don't know what's called— the Bible and homosexuality, or something like that. But I, I read a lot about a guy named John McNeill. He was kind of the first person—he wrote a book called *The Church and the Homosexual*. He was the first to really be writing about it as a—from a biblical and church perspective. And he himself was gay. He was a priest and was thrown out of the Catholic Church. And but was re—I used several of his books for the paper. And a funny thing happened. I was talking to one of the other associate ministers at my church in New York, and I said, "I'm really enjoying learning a lot from John McNeill and his books. Have you heard of him?" and he says, "Billy, John McNeill just works upstairs. He's a therapist on the fourth floor." So, the building I was in—my church building, John McNeill worked there. And, and sure enough, we had him actually come speak at one of our groups. So that was like, crazy.

So, anyway, I moved back to Savannah with this whole concept of kind of what church should be like. And, and again, we, we—it was a Christian church, but in, in New York, but we even had Jewish people—Norman Vincent Peale was a dynamic speaker, so he had all kinds of people just coming there. It's a black, white economic classes. It was just what, you know, I think the Kingdom of God should look like. And so, when I had Asbury as a church back in those days, the corner of Henry and Waters Avenue was called Area C. That's what they actually designated it. This area of very much high crime, low income. And it was kind of a real put down, you know, about about, the way they designated that area. And, it was like, "How in the world am I going to get people to come to this part of town?" Now, that, you know, automatically one would think, "We'll just open it up to the neighborhood," which was majority African American. But they were already had their churches. They were going to their church. So, it's trying to find people who didn't have a church. And, and right away, my wife and I knew that we could be a

home for LGBT people, that this—and would be different in Savannah. That there would be very few places like this, places of worship. And this could be our key to coming back.

And what we did is, how do we even get people going there? We had a, we had a four-person choir: four elderly women, three of whom were tone deaf. And so, it was like, painful. And I didn't even want visitors to come at first because, you know, they'd try it, but that music was so bad, you know, they wouldn't come back. So, I had to get things upgraded. And what we did is—what my wife and our strengths were—was musical theater. So, we opened up a theater as part of the church. We would have two—do two musicals a year. They were open auditions for the community. And my wife, who was an actress, she did Broadway and everything. And, so, she was already doing community theater in Savannah and was getting to know people in—from cast. And, so, when we open up this church and said it's for all people, she made sure to let the cast members of the shows she did know. And they started coming, and they started singing in the choir. It really helped our choir. And we would, we would—had tremendous shows. They would sell out. People would come to see these shows, and some of them would say, "Well, let's try the church on Sunday." So, we were getting cast members coming to the church and then some people who would try the, the shows. And again, all with knowing that this is a church open to all people, who are not just accepted or not just said "They can come, and we won't criticize them." But that they are affirmed. And so, that was very different. And that was kind of well known. And so, we were able to build the church up gradually.

A crazy thing happened. About the first show we did—we did *The Pirates of Penzance*, and I had this young kid build the set for me. And we still have pieces of the set, this is in 1994 that he built it. And he got excited about—Nathan was his first name—about—he had never done much of that, but he got excited about it. And he went—he moved from Savannah and went to New York, and studied, and he's doing Broadway sets now. But I was in trouble because I could direct the shows, produce the shows, but I, I'm horrible with construction. I couldn't build sets and stuff.

So, one Sunday, this elderly gay man who had this real raspy voice like that, came up to me after the service. He's very flamboyant. He said, "My name is Dix Elliott, and I love this church. I felt my mother's presence here with me today. And I used to do set design in New York City. If I could ever help you, let me know." So, I got Dix Elliott to help me, and he, he was incredible. He would—in this—in Area C, we would have these incredibly painted sets that Dix did for us.

Well, about a year late—he became a big member of the church, very active, and one of my closest friends. And he came to church—he came to the church before one of the shows, and said, "Billy, you know, I'm here to see the show, of course. But I had—my car broke down, and I had somebody take me to the church. Can you take me home?" I said, "Of course, Dix." So, the show's over, I'm driving him home. I'm pulling out of the parking lot. I said, "Dix, I, I should

know this, but where do you live? I'm sorry. I don't know where you—" Said, "Well, I live on 65th Street between Abercorn and Habersham." And I go, "Really? That's funny." And I'm driving down Waters Avenue, I said, "You know. I used to live on 65th. I grew up on 65th when I was a kid." And as I'm getting closer to 65th street, I'm realizing that the guy sitting next to me, who helped build this church for me, who became one of my closest friends, was one of the two guys I used to make fun of who had moved onto our block [laugh].

It is so funny [laughs]. Dix was from Augusta, Georgia. He had thought about going into the ministry, but being gay he knew he couldn't, so he moved to New York met his partner there, John—who had already, who died. I never got to meet John; he had died before he went to Asbury. But it's funny. He had a bro—a younger brother and his family owned Elliot's Funeral Home in Augusta, which is a well-known funeral home there. And his younger brother took it over. Well, Dix and his brother would talk sometimes, but his brother had problems with Dix being gay, and so there was some conflict and tension there. But when Dix died, we had the funeral at Asbury, and I decided I was going to share the story that I just shared with you, even though the brother may have a problem with me announcing Dix was gay. I was like—. So, we—after the service, we get in our cars because we—you know, they had the, the cemetery and everything was in Augusta. So, we drove on the highway to Augusta. We get there, and there's also a—since Dix's brother was prominent in Augusta, there was good many people at the cemetery. And Dix's brother got up there and shared the story that I shared at church. And I had a relative, as I was pulling off out of Augusta, a relative came up to me and said, "Billy, you don't know what happened here today." They said, "It was incredible, you know."

But Dix Elliott—and what's interesting to Dix had been at—oh my gosh, he's just had Stonewall. Had, he had been at Stonewall the night of the invasion. He had lived in New York, and he had lived at Stonewall the night it was invaded by the police and the, the gays fought back. And it's really funny, about three years ago, we had a couple from New Jersey—an elderly couple, gay couple—who joined, moved to Savannah, came to church. and you may have—know about Bobby because he was on the—they just celebrated the fiftieth year of that invasion. And Bobby Soletto was one of these, the couple that just came to Savannah several years ago. And they celebrated their like, fiftieth year together not too long-ago. Bobby was the, a dancer at Stonewall. And he was in actually the bird cage. That was his—he said, "It was my first night in the cage, and it was invaded." And he didn't like to talk about it. That night. But because it was its fiftieth anniversary recently, a year or two ago, he—they—he did allow the media to interview him here. And there's a wonder—I don't know if it's WTOC or what—but it's Bobby Soletto and, it's worth seeing his interview. And Bobby, unfortunately, died of COVID. We just lost him, you know, maybe seven months ago or so. But yeah, but he was, he was a dancer. The man of stonewall, yeah.

So, so I don't know if you're interested—I guess I've gotten a little, little ways of the history, though. But what one of the major things we did as a church and as a community when I started, I started Wesley Monumental in 1991, and then I went to Asbury in 1993. AIDS, of course, had become a big thing in the eighties when I was in New York. And when I came here, it wasn't even talked about. And churches especially weren't talking about it. But I found a group of people who really wanted to, who realized this was wrong, and we needed to do something about it. So, there were a handful of clergy and lay leaders of churches that got together, and we formed something called the AIDS Interfaith Network. And I'm trying to think if we formed it before I went to Asbury. I know we used Asbury some for our meetings. And I started there in '93. I just can't remember if we started it maybe around '92 in Savannah. We would go—I can give you the names of some of the people that were on there. Would that be helpful?

LB: Yes.

BH: Okay. Jane—Jamie Maury. I don't know if you know Jamie. Jamie, I think, worked for the city, and then late in life, he went into the priesthood. Jamie Maury. J-a-m-i-e M-a-u-r-y. Bill Broker was a major player. Bill is part of Georgia Legal; I think he runs Georgia Legal here in Savannah. And he helped us become, what is that? 501(c)(3). You know, become not—but become a non-profit. Bill Broker. A guy named Mike Freeman, who went to seminary and then worked for Union Mission. He worked for Union Mission. Mike Freeman. Diane Fuller. Diane was a big member at First Baptist Church downtown. And Diane's husband was Chris Fuller, whose father was Millard Fuller who started Habitat for Humanity. So, but Diane—so, Millard Fuller's daughter-in-law was Diane. And she was very social justice minded.

Then one guy I was really impressed with being part of this is Reverend Gregory Eason. Greg was—is African American, and he was at Saint Philips AME Church. I'm pretty sure it was Saint Philips. But back in those days, it was, you know, it was hard to get participation from the African American community. Then what happened after a while, after several years of meeting and everything, we started getting more African members because it was moving into that population more. And, but, right—but before that, it was a real— you know, they didn't talk about that. It seemed like that in the African American community, so I was really proud of Greg Eason for being a leader in that.

And Bill Willoughby is another person. He's a, he's still at the church over there on—I think it's Abercorn, the Episcopal church. And I think that's where Jamie Maury went. It was one of the first churches I think we heard about in Savannah that would be, you know, accepting of LGBT people too. I get all the Saint Thomas, Saint-these all these things mixed up, but it's an Episcopal church on Abercorn. Those are all the people that I can remember that were kind of the nucleus of that. And we would have kind of like services of hope and healing, you know, to say "This is for everybody. Please come. And we're lifting up people with AIDS. We're lifting up people

living with AIDS. We're lifting up caretakers. And we're saying this is not something that needs to be quiet or ashamed of, and we're here to pray and to help one another with it. And that these faith communities are here for you." So that, that was the AIDS Interfaith Network.

One thing you may be interested in when I started at Asbury and kind of had this emphasis of really being this welcoming church, we did get threatening letters. And since it was in the mail, the FBI got involved. It just went on for about maybe five months or so. And then they stopped, you know. And I don't know if it was one person, two people. I mean, over the years, you get people criticizing you, say you're not doing the Christian thing or anything. These were different. These were actually violent threats, you know. But, but fortunately that didn't last long. We do have a security guard. We do hire a security guard at our church. It was mostly, at first, because we were in this Area C, where there was a lot of vandalism and looking at cars. But as you see all the hate crimes going on, now we, we, we say, "Don't stay in the parking lot. Help us, you know, make sure we're all safe here at church" kind of thing. So, yeah, we've seen that change, unfortunately.

Another thing, and you, you probably—you may have heard about this from, I think it was Standout Youth who did this. It was in 2008. Standout Youth was the major sponsor, but we helped with it. And, but there was a showing of a documentary called *For the Bible Tells Me So*. Are you familiar with that? Oh, it's, it's a good thing to watch. It's a really good—you can get the DVD. It's called *For the Bible Tells Me So*. It's about four Christian families who have, you know, one of their children is gay or lesbian, and their perspective. And what's really good about it there is, you know, some of, some of the—couple of the parents have totally changed and everything, but others are still struggling with it. But at least they're real honest about it. And it—one of the, the major parents in it is a woman named—and I wrote it down. I was trying to think of it, and I had to. She is, she's something else. Her name's Mary Lou Wallner. M-a-r-y L-o-u W-a-l-l-n-e-r. And, and what we did, they rented out the theater. Mary Lou's one of the parents. And she and the filmmaker came to Savannah when we showed it in Savannah. Ironically, I didn't know this until after the film was shown here. But the filmmaker told me, the first time it was shown— it was film—it was shown at the Sundance Film Festival and won some awards. But the first time it was shown in public was at my former church in New York City, and I didn't even know that until I, I—after I met him down here.

But Mary Lou's daughter came out to her when she was in college. I think it was college. Wrote her a letter—or maybe right after college. Her mother had been very much, you know, trying to do the Christian thing. And she was part of that. I'm trying to think of that guy's name who used to have that program 'Focus on the Family.' Very very conservative. And she just was in shock when her daughter came out to her. And, you know, said to her that she would never accept that part of her. You know, just would never accept. And the daughter ended up killing herself. So, Mary Lou, however, instead of just keeping on, you know, listening to the same ministers and

stations and everything, decided to kind of do her own studies. And then became—you know, grew and became totally supportive of LGBT rights and, you know, it's always like, on the front lines of marches and everything else. And that's why she came to Savannah when this was being shown here. But I just thought that was a, that was a really cool thing we had open to the community like this. Because I—I may not have mentioned this. It was actually a public movie theater where we showed it. It was—it's closed down now, but it was a theater here for many, many years. It's the one off of Victory Drive and Skidaway; you know, where the Target is over there, and there's—I'm trying to think what's next to it. But, but over, kind of closer to Skidaway. I guess—I'm trying to think if it was even— I think it was still a theater when you came. You came in '94, you said? '95?

LB: '96. I think today it's been refurbished to Frank's and might be closed again. But yes, it is Skidaway and Victory.

BH: Right. Yeah, that's it. Because, yeah, 'cause I—what I said, that was 2008. So, you would have been here. So, it was still would have been a theater. Yeah. But that was really cool, you know, and I think again, I think it was Standout Youth, who, you know, did all the leg work. I was just there as a panelist with some other people, you know, but it was a really cool thing to do in the community that got a lot of publicity.

LB: So, I have a quick question about the AIDS Interfaith Network. That particular program, did you rotate from church to church to create an outreach to the LGBT community?

BH: Yeah. Yes, exactly. And we wanted to be sure it wasn't just singled-in on one church. I wanted people to know that that it's not just one church that believes this. That this is—you know, other churches. We had one at Asbury, my church. We had one at the Episcopal church on Abercorn Street. We had one at Gregory Eason's church, the African American church. It seems like that there was at least one or two—oh, we had one at Trinity, I think, downtown. Ralph Bailey's did a lot of work, too. He kind of went to Trinity Methodist Church right about when I went to Asbury. And Ralph had a gay son and had not talked about it much. And he, he was getting kind of in retirement years. It felt it was time for him to finally, you know, talk about it more. And so, he was a friend. I don't think he was real involved, but, but I think we said, "Ralph, can we use Trinity?" that kind of thing. So. But yeah, so you're right, it was rotated.

LB: And do you feel like that particular outreach, that network helped the community find a place that was—? And looking at, for safe or affirming? Those kind of—a friendly environment.

BH: Yeah. It helped. I know me in a lot of ways because, you know, it's one thing—you know, we've let the gay community know—or our gay people we knew in shows and everything—that Asbury was a safe place for them, which is great. That's good. But what kind of change are you

making in the world, in communities? So, that's where the AIDS Interfaith Network said "Yeah, we're really trying to make a difference. And it's—and we're glad we can do this at church, but justice ministries is very important, and we need to change the world." And so that helped. And then doing things, like—oh, another thing I tried. I forgot about this. I can't remember—it was kind of in those years. But in—but, like, on our side, we—I'd had like a three or four night series of the Bible in homosexuality. You know, and I talked about it, and that kind of stuff. I can't remember if we showed videos or not, but it was a series, again, with the same concept, saying "Yes, great that we're welcoming. But how can we be more active in the community and make a difference there?"

LB: So, and kind of in that same idea, how do you describe Savannah's current relationship with the LGBTQ community? And do you feel that maybe some of this outreach, maybe, had that change that you'd hoped?

BH: I, I would like to think so. We're certainly not where we should be, but in some ways, we're farther along—and we, you know—acceptance of marriages came along a little faster than I thought it would happen. I don't know if you know our history a little bit with the Methodist Church. We, you know—it—this was really interesting for me because like the Presbyterian denomination and Methodism and Lutherans, we would social justice issues. The Methodists used to always be first with them, but what happened is we're a global denomination. And so, we have voting delegates in Africa where our fastest growing churches are, and in Asia. And so, when—and they're more conservative regarding LGBT issues. So, when we go to what's called the General Conference to change our polity, you know, in the United States it might be sixty-five percent moderates to progressives, but when you add those conservatives with the Asians and African American—African, not African Americans, they have people from delegates from Africa—we never can get past it. And so, we have people in the United States very frustrated about it.

And, and we've been left behind a little bit from the other denominations who've taken—the Episcopal, Presbyterians. I will have like, somebody move from the North to Savannah who's Presbyterian, and they'll try to go to a Presbyterian church in Savannah, and say "Wait a minute. It's still—they're acting like they were before we changed it." So, they'll come to Asbury, and here was the irony: our denomination hadn't changed like their denomination had. But came, but came, became—but because they came to this region and was more conservative, they were coming to the—our local church. And the irony was that our denomination had—I was kind of a rebel for our denomination.

And, and then we voted to not have any weddings at Asbury until everybody could be married there. So, we voted as a church. Nobody could have a wedding. My daughter got married about two years ago and couldn't get married in the church she grew up in because we said no, no

weddings. And she understood that, and she believed it. Now, what's happened since is we voted. There was a big conference for the Methodist in 2019 that was going to, for once and for all, say "Would the Methodist change or not?" And about twenty of us—it was in St. Louis. About twenty of us went to St.—from Asbury went to St. Louis with hope, hoping it would change. It didn't. And so, we voted to leave the denomination. So, we're not technically a Methodist church anymore. And so, now we can have same-sex weddings. And unfortunately, its—this has all happened during COVID, the pandemic, so we're not doing all we want to do yet right now. But, but, yeah. So, we're at a much better place with everything. Yeah.

LB: How long did that moratorium last? How long did you not do weddings at the church because of that?

BH: I think it was five years. I think it was five years. Five or six. Well.

LB: Yeah. I'm trying to think of something else that I would—.

BH: I know I've thrown a lot at you.

LB: No, it's been great, too. So, what do you see as the future for, you know, Savannah's place or its relationship with the LGBT community? What do you think—where are we headed after we move away from COVID? Let's hope that happens soon anyway.

BH: Yeah, we're in, we're in an interesting place at Asbury. And, and in this—and also, let me mention this. This is just—also happened in—during COVID. So, I had both of those churches for eight years. That little tiny one in Thunderbolt, Wesley Oak. And a good friend of mine named Lynn Drake took over that church. And it's really struggled over the years. But it had the same theology since I had been there as Asbury. And so, they just broke away from the denomination and have merged with us. So, we kind of now have a campus, you know, Asbury and then the Wesley Oak and Thunderbolt. Now, we can't really do much right now because of the pandemic. But we do hope that this—it's got great exposure being right there on Victory Drive. You know, for promoting justice issues and things like that.

Now, I have in the—this mostly comes from a lot of my gay members—is they don't want to be known as a gay church. You know, they—that this is a church for everyone. We're gay—you know, straight and gay people come together. It doesn't—you know, so they don't want to be singled out that way, and I understand that. And, and since we have put so much energy into this issue for so long, we're realizing too we've got, we've got so much work to do with race issues and with, with poverty and homelessness and with the climate change and, and—. Wesley Oak's a great location for that because you're right on the bluff with the river and everything. So, you—we don't want to lose this emphasis with the LGBT community, and we have to be careful, we

don't flip over too much and lose it. And I don't think we ever will. But part of our goal is also to look at some of these other issues, too. Yeah.

LB: A quick idea that I did have. You said when you first went to Asbury, that there were only—how many members? Thirty?

BH: Twenty-five to thirty. Somewhere in there. And—

LB: How strong are you now? How many members do you have today?

BH: Probably five fifty. Some- five hundred and fifty. Something like that.

LB: And how about Westley Oak's? Is there—?

BH: —And only one of those, by the way, only one of those original members that hung in there, she's ninety-seven. Is still there out of that original twenty-five. Wesley Oak is small. They, they've gone through rough times. I think there are only about thirty people there.

LB: Yes, they are small.

BH: Yeah, they are small. Yeah. But I think we can help them out a lot. And, and, and I think—you know, what's one thing we're excited about. For instance, we're kind of landlocked at Asbury with cement. And you know, it's hard for children to play and everything. Well, we can do some children active—in fact, we've already had like, an easter egg hunt over at Wesley Oak since we don't have that kind of land at Asbury. So, so, yeah so. It's going to happen. It's just going to take some time [laughs].

LB: One additional question I did have regarding the ace—AIDS Interfaith Network. When you did move back to Savannah in the early nineties, what was Savannah's crisis like at that point with AIDS? Are you familiar with what was going on for the community in regards to AIDS?

BH: Yeah, my memory is not great, but I just remember being frustrated that it wasn't talked about. That—and I had come from a setting in New York City in a church where it was talked about, to this place where it was all covered up. You know, and so much shame involved. And, yeah, and it's funny. Mike Freeman has become a very close friend of mine. He, he was part—he was a, a Baptist. He was Baptist and went to a Baptist seminary—I think it's in Kentucky—called Southern. That was, you know, kind of broke all stereotypes. It was, it was known for its social justice issues. And Michael Elliott, you might have heard—Michael, who started Union Mission—he went there. And Chris Wilburn, who worked for the City of Savannah for a long time, he worked—he went there. You know, it produced all—.

And then what happened is the conservatives took everything over and kicked all of the progressive professors out and everything out. But we got some of those people here in Savannah that have helped us a lot. And Mike Freeman was one of them. In fact, he left the Baptist Church and became part of the Unitarian Church or I would have had him with me over at Asbury. But I called him today. He had suffered a stroke not too long ago and is recovering. But I was trying to see if he could help me remember some of the details because he was a big leader at that time with it. And I, again, I was kind of new to—even though I'm a Savannahian, I was kind of new to the scene here and was just kind of in shock of how it wasn't being talked about, you know, and what can we do. Plus, I had the motivation of "I'm getting gay members—" [phone goes off]. Sorry. "I'm getting gay, gay members at my church, and I need to show them that we're trying to make a difference here, you know." Yeah.

LB: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to share with us about the LGBTQ community, it's history in Savannah? Any other ideas that you can remember.

BH: Let's see here. I think I've done about everything I've written down here. Let's see [pause]. Yeah, I think that's it. I'm sure there's stuff my little pea brain can't remember, but, but, but that, that gives you a little bit of a view of it.

LB: Well, thank you very much for sharing your history today. I really do appreciate it, and it has been a pleasure. Thank you.

BH: Thank you, Lacy. Good luck.

LB: Thank you.

BH: Blessings to you.

LB: You too. Thank you so much. Bye-bye.

BH: Bye-bye.

End of interview.