

**City of Savannah Municipal Archives  
Proud Savannah History Project  
Interview: Robert Bush  
Interviewed by Lacy Brooks, October 6, 2021, Zoom  
Transcribed by Brittany Ellis  
Transcription edited by Megan Kerkhoff**

*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.**

Lacy Brooks: Today is Wednesday, November 10th, 2021. It is 10 AM. I am Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Robert Bush for the Proud Savannah History Project. We are conducting this interview in Savannah, Georgia via Zoom. Thank you for joining us today. Let's start by having you tell us your full name, and please spell your name.

Robert Bush: My name—my full name is Robert Wayne Bush. It's R-o-b-e-r-t. I go by middle initial 'W,' but it's Wayne (W-a-y-n-e) and Bush (B-u-s-h).

LB: Please tell us your pronouns, and how you identify.

RB: He/him/his.

LB: And when and where were you born?

RB: I was born in Warner Robins, Georgia in 1964 and grew up in middle Georgia.

LB: When did you move to savannah, and why?

RB: So, I moved to Savannah in 1989, and it was almost immediately after law school. And I, I came to Savannah because—part of it was kind of— part of the reason was kind of a sign of the times because I had actually wanted to work overseas. And I had a job with the, the Judge Advocates General, General Corps. And I was going to go to Germany to work there. And, but what I realized was that, you know, I just could not go back in the closet. By that time, I just, you know, wasn't willing to accept that. And it was hard enough to get out. And I wasn't fully out at that time, but, but I had come a good way. And so, so I turned on that job, and I was interviewing off season. And I got an offer from the Savannah law firm, so I, I came here. Was just—it was—I drove into the city right after Hurricane Hugo passed through, like the Sunday after. With the Saturday or the Friday that Hur Hugo passed through, so.

LB: So, when you first came to Savannah with that first job after law school in 1989, what were your first experiences like in Savannah? And you said you were out. You had—you were out at that point in your life. Is that correct?

RB: Yes. Yes, I was out to certain family and friends and—. So, Savannah is a difficult city to break into. And, and, you know, and I, I remember just, you know, taking some time. You know, finding, you know, finding my footing here. Finding, you know, social connections. But I did, I did want to get involved in LGBT advocacy. And, and I had a particular concern about HIV/AIDS and, and those issues. And so, I cannot remember how I sought out the LGBT community here, besides socially. You know, that time would go—Faces was a bar that was like—was a LGBT, bar gay bar at the time, I guess what we called it. But—and then there was Club One. And, so, there was, you know, finding the community through sort of the social avenues. And—but, you know, I had some very strong, you know, political feelings and feeling that, you know, that we should do more political advocacy and, and political activity. And, and, and FCN was [?] at the time, and, and it focused mostly on social, social events. And, and, so, you know, which I think was important, but I feel like we needed to do more.

And somehow, I heard about Mark Krueger and the work that he did. And, and, you know, Mark really was one of the, the primary faces of the community at the time. Lawrence Marley had left town, but his legacy was here. I remember Patty Latham. And there were some others, but somehow connecting through, I think, Mark first, I kind of plugged into others in the LGBT community who wanted to do some political advocacy. And, and so—and I remember also, Jamie Maury and Martha Womack. And, and just, and others whose names escape me at the moment. I'm also—we're interested in, you know, taking the LGBT community forward politically.

And so, so a number of them came up the idea of starting the Community Action Group, which was formed for the purpose of giving a political voice to our LGBT community and, and supporting advocacy on political issues. And, and, so—so, I work with the Community Action Group with Wilson Huff and I. We, we sort of served as the, the press team for, for the Community Action Group. And we would write responses to media that covered LGBT issues. And, and, you know, and, and they would even be congratulatory. For example, the, the local paper published this, you know, astonishing article at the time about a transgender community living in Statesboro and taking care of themselves, which is a wonderful thing for them to do because it was not critical. And in it, and it was very surprising. So, so Wilson and I, you know, drafted a letter, and then we sent it to the newspaper. And we were—you know, our goal was in—our function was to try to, you know, bring a community voice and community awareness—community voice to our group and community awareness that we're out there. And in that, you know, that we're part of their community.

LB: So, in relationship to that press, those press responses, can you talk about your work and your time as a columnist with *The Edge*? Was that correct? With *Savannah Morn*— it was a, a—

RB: Yes.

LB: —paper with *Savannah Morning News*. Can you talk about that a little bit?

RB: Yeah, I was the first out gay local columnist. And, and I just wanted to—you know, you know, I think when people bring, you know, bring to advocacy whatever their skills are. you know, and, you know, my friends—Jamie Mowry and Martha Womack—came from their counseling background, and they did some, you know, really important and impactful work, which I hope they'll be talking about on here. From, from their position as counselors. You know, and as an attorney, I was an advocate. And, and, so, you know, taking issues and trying to understand them and bring, bring, and further a position on matters that, you know, were important to our community—was important to me. And getting out there, and putting something out there without apology, saying, you know, you know, “We're here. We have these opinions.” It wasn't always political; it wasn't always LGBT issues that the column dealt with. But a lot of, a lot of the columns were about political issues.

And at that time in the press, most of the LGBT mentions were, you know, negative and/or they were related to what the, the conservative party was trying to do to exploit power and popularity. And there—and it victimized a lot of people. And, so, so, you know, I felt that was important in a lot of ways for us to just step out, have a voice, and, and to make no apology about it, and not really give them room to criticize or judge us. You know, I mean, the general—sort of the general community and those in the community who would do that because there were those who supported us.

So, so, I called the newspaper when I found out they were doing kind of a local version of Creative Loafing. And I asked if I could do a column, then I wrote a sample column, and then they accepted it. And so, for a year as long as the paper existed, I did a weekly column. And, and, you know, and in advocacy, you know, you have—you do a lot of thankless work, a lot of work that people don't know about. But sometimes you get to do something which brings you pleasure, like you felt like, you know, you had an impact. And, and I think, I think for a lot of us, holding people accountable who would not be held accountable for the damage that they were doing to LGBT members of their community, you know, is a really strong interest.

And so, one of the things I got to do with my column was to hold people accountable. And, and, and, you know, so, one of my favorite accomplishments was getting a response from a local legislator after I had criticized him in a column about an issue, and he wrote me back and—or he

wrote the newspaper—and it was printed in the, I mean, in *The Edge*. It told me to kiss his ass, you know, but I thought, “This is great. You know, this person heard this, and they felt some sort of—you know, maybe even regret, or at least some sort of defensiveness about their position because this was out there to call, you know, to call them on it.” So, so, you know, I—you know, it wasn't, it wasn't the *New York Times* and it wasn't the *Washington Post*, but it was an opportunity in the press and to be read by, you know, multiple people, to have an LGBT face there and without apology to say to these people “You know, you're wrong for this, and we're gonna keep calling you on it.”

LB: Right. Can you talk about your, your active—your legal assistance that you have worked on with the LGBTQ community, and how legal action furthered your, your help in the community?

RB: There, there's, there are two—sort of a two, two-prong part. A two-prong structure to this. And, and part of it was LGBT advocacy, and the other was—another thing that was very important to me was the injustices surrounding HIV and the persecution of persons who were HIV positive, were living with AIDS at the time. And so, I wanted to be able to, you know, represent persons with HIV/AIDS on, on legal issues. And so, so I, I had been in Savannah for a couple years, and I left the firm that I was with, and I was—I wanted to set up a project to at least do documents for persons living with HIV/AIDS. At that time, I was at a juncture; I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, except that I did know I wanted to do this. And even if I was leaving Savannah, I wanted to get it set up. And so, so Brandie Haywood at Union Mission, you know, along with Mike Elliott and then later Mike Freeman.

Brandie Haywood heard about what I wanted to do, and, and so, she met with me because they, they had a program of housing for persons with HIV/AIDS, and they still have a transitional living facility here. And so, they were interested in my, you know, assisting their, their residents of the facility. And so, we ended up working together, writing a grant, and a year later, we were awarded the grant.

And in the meantime, Georgia Legal Services Program, which is the law firm—the non-profit law firm that I've worked with ever since (and currently work with)—heard about it. They wanted to offer me the off—the offices from which, you know, I could do the work, and so I ended up being hired there at some point when a staff return position came on. And then it was a year after that, that we got the funding for the HIV/AIDS Project. And then the HIV/AIDS Project was—it lasted for thirteen years. And I represented persons who are HIV/AIDS, who had HIV or AIDS, and on a wide gamut of legal issues. And there was a, a, a similar project in Atlanta that—mine was the only other one outside of Atlanta in the state of Georgia. And so, so, I try to maximize, you know, cover the area as much as I can. And the philosophy was, you know, “Come here, you know. I'll represent you. I'll advise you. I'll refer you. I will at least point you in the right direction. But you won't leave here without knowing something.”

And—but, you know, but it was rough. It was—you know, I had, you know, sort of several hundred persons in the project, and we did everything from advanced directives to federal litigation to an immigration case I had where I represented a woman whose family was affected deeply by AIDS. And the husband passed, and then she had an HIV positive daughter, but an HIV negative son. And she was HIV positive. And there were, you know—as happens with anyone in our society that suffers from any sort of critical health care situation or any other marginalized status—there were a lot of implications, and a lot of legal issues that, you know, persons who, you know, don't suffer these, in these indignities and don't face. And so, so, I represented individuals.

I also taught at, you know, a lot of conferences because one of the things that was important to me was, again, to maximize the, the ability for persons with HIV/AIDS to, you know, either be represented or to represent themselves on things that they could do if I gave them certain information. And I started this project called Arming the Advocate. And I came up with a little booklet, and I put information in there about various infor—various areas, whether it was social security or VA benefits or housing. And even a portion about advocating for themselves in the community. So that, so that—you know, I'm only one attorney, and I can only take so much, so, so many cases. And so, I wanted to make sure that we armed people with the best knowledge that we could for them to advocate for themselves.

And so, we're presenting this at a clinic at the University of Georgia at the time to a law school class there, but also presenting it to various statewide conferences, and then to three or four national conferences under the National Association of Persons with AIDS, which was a very important organization at the time. And, and, then I, I did one international conference. I did a poster presentation in Durban, South Africa in 2000. So, what I tried to do was, you know, marry the individual representation with a systemic advocacy. And then efforts to try to enable people to represent themselves pro se on the things that they could represent themselves pro se, which means without an attorney.

You know, but it was a hopped-up time; it was an intense time. And, you know, you know, the, you know, the animus and the, and the, I guess persons with AIDS was still, you know, pretty high. There's still a great stigma. You know, you have bill collectors calling, you know. My clients saying, “Oh, well, you're gonna die anyway. So, don't you want to pay your bill?” or humiliating them if they came in to pay their bill. And saying things like that to them. Basically, disclosing their status. I remember going to the emergency room more than once to argue a client into the emergency room because doctors would say, “Well, you know, there's nothing we can do. They're going to die anyway.” But they were in an exigent critical health care situation, and they needed to be treated. And in the hospitals, certain, certain personnel at certain hospitals were resistant. And so more than once, I remember going and advocating. But just under the, the

Emergency Treatment Active Labor Act that, you know, you have to admit this person or your—you face liability.

And so, so, it was a real—I mean, it was, it was an intense sort of a varied kind of advocacy and representation because it just hit on all fronts, and you just, you know, it always felt like you were fighting. I always felt like we were fighting. And this is something that—excuse me [pause]. That, you know, is also—I think our, you know, our LGBT community has forgotten a lot of this, but at the time—excuse me [pause]. If any of us knew, any number of people who were actively dying and their partners, and there might be one worse off—worse than the other that was taking care of the other. There would be in the evening—you might go to the hospital to visit this person because this person was rushed to the hospital on this night. And, and, you know, you had friends—and for me, clients—dying, you know. And, and it's hard, it's hard to convey the sort of siege feeling and maybe mentality at the time. And there was incredible pain.

There was incredible injustice, and then there was, you know, great love and support from the people who were supportive. You know, and, and, and people talk about the lesbian community, how supportive they were, but they, you know, my experiences they were. And they, you know, they, they were there. They carried a lot of the water. And, and all of us who are in here trying to do the right thing and trying to be supportive when the community we faced would actually choose the opposite and persecute along the lines of the person's suffering. And we had I spoke at the World AIDS Day—the—I was the speaker for two years. So, between those years, but, but it was held—you know, was held, you know, every year for many years. And we had an AIDS Walk that, that we took every year. And Club One, and Kale at Club One, you know, and his partner always, you know, made the, the bar available and gave support. They, they supported a lot of, a lot of activities in the LGBT community.

I also—you know, there is no underestimating the contribution of Susan Alt, who was the nurse over the Y—local Ryan White clinic. What she did for the, the lives of persons with HIV/AIDS in, in our community. And I, I couldn't even begin to give you a halfway to complete list of the ways that she did this. But she was also accountable for the reporting and the grant work and all of this--of the grant that, that occurred, or they had to happen to support the clinic. And, and so, you know, her name should be mentioned as well.

But it's hard. It's hard to talk about that time and really give, and, you know, really give a, a feel for, for what it was like and how badly we'd like to impress upon, you know, younger LGBT community. And this is part of your legacy. Part of your legacy is not the people, you know, is this generation because they're dead, you know. And, you know, and LGBT advocacy at the time was just darkened by, you know, suddenly, you know, we're dealing with these life and death issues with, you know, the inadequacy of the testing procedures and with, you know, social injustice and, and—

And, you know, I remember my first buddy. You know, I arrived home from being out of town. I got a call that he was in hospice, and he was dying. And rushing out there and, and rushing out to the hospice, and realizing, “Okay, I’m gonna stay overnight.” And so, the—I got my stuff, and sat by him in his room, holding his hand. And then the nurse came in, and I asked her about his family. So, they gave me the information to call the family. And so, I called them. And I told them, this is the situation. And then the family responds, “You know, oh well, we’ll, we’ll, you know, we’ll plan to come to Savannah next week, you know.” And in the past, just, just, you know, an hour or so later, me holding his hand and me only having known him so long. But, but, you know, I was the person who was there, and that’s the way this these things work. There were buddy systems. And, and buddy systems were necessitated because of the lack of other support in a person’s life. And, and a lot of times lack of support was because of this prejudice and ignorance of the person’s own families.

LB: Can you also talk about, during that time, how you were trying to get the word out to the community about what you and other people in the community were trying to do? Without what—I think it would be good to explain how things were different then versus social media, is what I’m trying to get, you know?

RB: Yes, yes, you know, and this is something that, you know, it just dawned on me not all that long ago. That, you know, we didn’t have social media then. So, when we, when we stepped out and we did something, it was on conviction, but not necessarily feeling supported, or knowing if we were supported, you know. And the advocacy community because there’s a lot of dysfunction from—in our backgrounds and because there’s a lot of strong feelings about the way that things should be, and because it’s really complicated. You know, there’s, there’s a lot of, there’s a lot of infighting. And so, so, you know, you might, you know, you might take up, you know, what you think you need to do, and you do your best. And, and this happened on, you know, on several fronts—I mean, to several people. And that is, you know, you don’t, you don’t have a Facebook. You can’t report back, “Hey, I did this.” And get people, you know, get, you know, people affirmation, or, or, you know, just, you know, feeling any support. And so, you know, we were doing this work, and, you know, we didn’t have that base to plug back into.

We didn’t even know what each other was doing in some circumstances because even, you know, Mark Krueger who might—you know, have a lot of respect for. And when he used to ask me to do anything, I would just, whatever it was—. He asked me to advise FCN about non-profit status, and I learned it, and I show up at the meeting because he asked. Because he, because I knew—they knew of his work. But I didn’t know all the things that he had done. And, you know, after listening to his, you know, oral history that I was like, you know, I knew he was doing some of this. I knew some of these experiences because he would call me about some of them at

the time. But, but, you know, a lot of what went on, we didn't know the other was doing because we're doing it.

And that's the way advocacy happens. People work from where they are. And, and a lot of advocacy doesn't happen in, you know, in the press. And, and, like with, you know, the HIV project, you know, advocacy, you know. You know, there was the, the arm. I would write editorials, and you know, I would be on TV or something like that. But a lot more work was done with people didn't see, and people wouldn't be known—wouldn't know about. Whether it's for individual clients or, for example, you know, my mothers, who are my clients, would not make arrangements for their children because to do a temporary guardianship, they have to sign over their rights to the child. And they just, they just couldn't do that, no matter how, you know, how poorly they were doing at the time. And so, I researched standby guardianship, which is something that happened in other states had, where there could be a conditional naming of a guardian. And then I talked to our Atlanta office of the Georgia Legal Services, and then with Sylvia Cayley at Atlanta Legal Aid. You know, we wrote a bill for creating standby guardianships that was introduced into—to the legislature and the judiciary committee. It died in that committee that year. But two years later when the legislature was—someone had submitted a similar legislation. They asked me to come up to testify about stand by guardianships and the need for standby guardianships. And so, so, a lot of, a lot of the things we do, you know, in advocacy, you know, they're—it's not out there, and it's not publicized. And, you know, and it's just that, you know, people care about what they do. And there, there are a lot of people doing this. So, I did do my part, and I did make my contribution.

But there were all these other people doing this. And then there was, there's this continuing line of people coming in now and doing things that I can't do and bringing us forward. And, you know, that's kind of the way—what I've learned advocacy happens. In being an advocate, sometimes it's hard to let go of a sense of ownership about the way that things should go. And it took me some time to do that, but now I can just sit back and marvel at, you know, what these new kids are doing. And, and you see them doing the work that, that furthers us. But I, I wish they could know and not forget what we went through because it was, it was searing. And it was, you know, it was—you know, it is hard to imagine unless you really want to know about it and seek to learn about it.

LB: When were—when was the standby guardianship bill introduced? Or when was it approved? Do you know that date?

RB: I think it was '96 or '98, around there.

LB: Okay. And other areas that you were active in organizing people? To—were there on forums to help get this information out to the community to help them? The things that you have been working on about, you know, behind the scenes, now you were trying to get it to people.

RB: Yeah.

LB: What—how did you—?

RB: Yeah, I was still doing—I was still doing a fair amount of LGBT advocacy at the time. And, and, so—and again, it really was kind of a, a white hot time. But, but, you know, even throughout, like, on mayor Floyd Adams—I was the gay, you know, the, the out gay member. The representation of the LGBT. Yeah, me that—obviously, in those days, there would almost always be a white male, and that's what it was. You know, and I was the, the LGBT representative of the City Commission on Human Rights. And, and then—I even worked with my friend Mike Freeman to do an, a, I think it's a six or eight week class for the Unitarian Universalist Church to become a welcoming congregation. And, and—gosh, there's, there's—. I was a member of the board of FCN. There just—I mean, I was—so, still pretty involved in LGBT advocacy. And I in fact, I won the Stonewall Bar Association Award in 2004 for LGBT advocacy, and that's the LGBT arm of the state bar. And so, so, I kept, you know, I kept that going.

One of the things that I never—I mean, and I still feel very strongly, is that we need to be involved politically. And at the time, we were really a focus of the conservative party. That really needed to play against something in order to be—in order in order to elect their candidates, you know. And sometimes it was immigrants, but for many years, it was, you know, the LGBT community. And, so, so, you know, it was, you know, very important for us, to, to me, I've always was—very important for us to maintain a voice. And, and, so, I always had connections to Atlanta and be talking with Jeff Graham or Carla Drenner, you know, about, you know, pending legislation. And then I would try to—as social media became more of a, a concrete thing, then, you know, I would use Facebook to send notices out to a collection of names that I collected over several forums that I had done. About, “Hey, this is being considered now. We need to call this person.” And, you know, or just, you know, “Make sure you sign this, and send it in.” Something like that to try to make sure that we, we have a political voice. And, and, so, so, I did, I did start having these forums, which to me it was very important to number one to, to educate our community about the, you know, the, the political issues of the day, and how we can address them.

And then later, as a political act, it also became very important to me to make sure that we secure LGBT relationships as best we can. At that time, we couldn't marry. But something called the advanced directives for healthcare—it was the only way that we could give an intimate right to a

partner. And so, through that document, we could at least give that partner the say for what happens to us most personally. And, you know, regarding our health care, even disposition of our remains. All of this, that document cover.

And, and then also, I, I'll offer a financial power of attorney. But I started having things—excuse me [pause]. I'm planning on having these forums where we would actually do those documents. And so, we had several of them. I remember the first one was at, at a middle eastern restaurant that is no longer on—it was a hookah lounge too, on Broughton. And I partnered with Gay Savannah to do it. And so, it was, you know, we said, they were having their social and we had set up a room in back, and then we had, you know, people come back, and I would talk to them about their documents. And then we'd actually be able to do the documents on site. And so, that just, that was the first. Then we did another restaurant. We did at Rainbow Inn and Coffee Deli. Coffee Deli was, you know, Paula with Coffee Deli was always, you know, willing to support this kind of thing. And, and she knew me, and so she said, "Look. Here's the key. Do it. Just lock up when you leave." You know, and it was that kind of unquestioning support, which was pretty wonderful. And we did, we did some hundreds of these documents. I don't know how many.

But, but, I, I also—because I was doing some elder focused work at my law firm by that time—I also started these cementing LGBT relationships, fifty-five plus. And so, I could actually hold these maybe during the day or something because this was consistent with what I would do to work. And so—and I started it with LGBT, LGBT sixty plus because that's really what this—my, my funded project would cover. But not that many people showed up. But once I changed it to the LGBT fifty-five plus, that made this seem to—make a big difference, so we, we got a lot of attendees. And so, so we did, so I did a lot of those. And to me, I called it cementing LGBT relationships because I saw each one of these documents as a, you know, another brick in the wall of, you know, our community where our relationships matter. And this gives some sort of legal compulsion to our relationships because we couldn't get it through marriage. And so, so, I did those.

And then I also did some—I'm gonna try to share the screen for a moment. And I also did some political or some informational sessions that on political issues or important issues to the community. I had to kind of be careful about whether, whether they were political, whether they were informational. But as an attorney, I thought, "What I can do is share legal knowledge about what are your rights, you know." Obviously, they're not where they should be, but what are they? And so, this—if you can see this one. Can you see this? This is—when we did, I think this one was 2014. And it was our first forum for the transgender community. And we had a transgender attorney working for us at the time. And so, we prepared a forum. And, and I always try to partner with a, an organization because I just thought that was a good idea. And at this point, FCN wasn't really interested in this, but Savannah Pride jumped on it. And, and Mark Hill—who I think you know, you know really—was, really brought kind of a congenial and thoughtful and

dedicated and committed center to our community at a time when we needed it. And one of the reasons I feel that way is the way that he would respond to doing something like this, like, “Sure. I’ll do it. We’ll provide refreshments” was his response. And so, pull this together, and we did this back in 2014.

And so, so I started doing legal forums. And, and I remember we had another one at Coffee Deli about a report. You know, reporting back on the—a report that provided information and data about aging LGBT persons, and the, the sort of the profile of their lives, and, you know, where, where things can be better, and how they can be better. That one wasn't as well as attended as some. But, but we did that. And then we did this one here. This was a, a legal forum that—it was after DOMA. The, the the Supreme Court in Windsor, U.S. v. Windsor, overturned the Defense of Marriage Act, which was, was a big deal for our community. It wasn't marriage; it didn't give us marriage, but it did remove some of the laws restricting in our relationships. And so, so—excuse me [pause].

So, I planned with—Amy Crosston was my intern at the time, and she was going to Savannah Law School here. And so, she and I—and she is a representative of Outlaws and Allies at Savannah Law School—planned this forum. And then my buddy from law school, one of my best friends, happens to be a, a law professor. And he was being a Student Affairs at some point and for some time. And, but he specialized in immigration law, but also sexuality in the law. So, he and I prepared a presentation, and we presented it to the law, the law school. And so, we had law—these law students attend, in addition to private attorneys. And, and then, we got the word out. And the private attorneys were able to get continued legal education credits for attending. And so, this was a way to try to use, you know, our particular perch to, you know, to try to get out the message. And also, these were—these students were kind of charged, and so, it's sort of like, you feel like you're charging people to go out in the community and kind of further the message. And so, so that went really well.

And then the next day, our, our good friend Laura, Lori Surmay—who is a lesbian attorney in Atlanta, highly respected, especially with her adoption work—but she came down, and she joined us for a forum that I had gotten Candler Hospital to, to give us a room for. And so, we held the forum. Twenty-seven people attended that. And it was the same after DOMA, but it had less of the legal technical bent to it. And, and so—and then, at—after each of my forums, I did, you know—I do a review a form, so they can review it, and, and they can—it was kind of like, a satisfaction form, “how was it?” and get some comments from them. And so, it was very well, very well received. And so that was, that was one of the first bigger forums. And then, we also, also did one that was probably the biggest—and I think we had, we had about like thirty-eight people attend this. But this was a self-defense for the LGBT community in Georgia. And this was—again, it was an effort to talk about, you know, what are legal issues affecting LGBTs in Georgia, what are legal rights in Georgia?

And so, so, I, I asked Candace Hardnett, who, you know, has her own outstanding advocacy, you know, in the community. As well as—I can't. I'm trying to get this little thing to go down. I'm not sure how to do it. But, but Pam Miller—I asked Pam Miller, who has, you know, been very active in the LGBT community, and actually, you know, ran as an out lesbian candidate before. I think was the City Council, and it might have been the Board of Education. But she—but the first out lesbian to run for an office here in Savannah. And Mark Hill because I thought these were great faces of our community. They each have done great work. And so, we got together, and we talked about this, and we planned this event. And we asked Carl Drenner, who was the first openly gay individual elected to statewide office in Georgia. In addition to Simone Bell, who was the first openly gay African American state lawmaker in the U.S. to be elected to state office. And then Jeff Graham, who is probably, you know, most esteemed LGBT advocate in, in Georgia because his many, many committed years, and, and he's the executor of Georgia Equality.

So, they came down, and we held another forum about legal rights and about legislation that Representative Drenner had proposed and had, had been proposing for some years to protect LGBTs from discrimination in employment in Georgia. So, so that was probably the biggest forum that we did. And then, and then, so, I—you know, kept up that kind of thing for a while.

And then the last one that I did was one that happened right before COVID. It was February 16—15, 2020. And, you know, I had taken some name change cases for our transgender community because I felt it was important to feel out, like in especially some of the counties around Savannah, how are they treated. And, but there are only so many that I could take. And then also there's a need to have gender marker changes done as well. And, so, so I worked with—to, to prepare documents where, you, know persons could represent themselves pro se (again, without an attorney) so they wouldn't have to pay an attorney because the name change is something that they can do if they're, you know, educated about how to do it. They can do pretty easily. And so, you know, try to prepare the pleadings that they can use, and they can complete the pleadings. And I had this book with the, the directions about how to complete this. And then, like, “In court, this is what basically the judge is going to ask you. Just be prepared for this. That's—you know, it's really pretty a simple process.” And then, you know, we just try, to try to prepare everything that they might need, so all they need to do is complete it, and file it, and then go through the process, get the final order, and then petition if they want to change their gender—their marker on their birth certificate. And so, these are the, the attachments that they needed to put on there.

And so, so, so my work really came—has come from, you know, what my position is, or what my background is. And, and, I guess, what my skills are. And so, you know, I'm trying to

maximize what I can in my advocacy through using, you know, my status. And, and, so, you know, that's kind of been my focus.

LB: Do you recall any pivotal points in time or major event that was a turning point in Savannah, as it relates to the LGBTQ community? Either, either a positive turning point, or a negative experience? Or event, excuse me? Do you recall anything like that from—during the time?

RB: I don't know if I, I think of like, a major pivotal event. One thing I do think is a wonderful sign of the times is that the mayor has, you know, you know, named a task force. An LGBT task force. And it's a diverse task force. And, and you know, I think there might be differing opinions in the community about, you know, how effective it is. But I don't have any criticisms of it. At least—one of the things is I just know what, what a huge thing this is that the mayor has done this. You know, back in the day, you know, we would have our politician friends, but it would be kind of, you know, with keeping their distance. But they would try to work on our issues, or, you know. And we started there, and we moved forward, you know, progressively here. But I think that, that, that is something to me that really speaks about how far we've come. But, but it was probably—progress was, you know, episodic and inching forward, and at times painful, and there was never that big thing that, you know, we could celebrate I think. Except, you know, I guess we had the supreme court decisions, and that wasn't really local.

LB: So—

RB: I think that the *Garden of Good and Evil* and Lady Chablis. You know, I just—you know, I don't want to say in spite of itself, but I just think that that had a huge effect to like, opening, opening up how people see, you know, at least maybe, you know, the transgender community. And you know, and there are some flaws with it. But I do think that was kind of a big deal, as far as kind of giving, giving a lot of people space to be able to not disapprove of what they're seeing.

LB: With that kind of idea, you've been here more than thirty years in Savannah. Do you see—do you feel like there has been a change in that inclusive feel for Savannah? Have we—I know it's been slow, but do you feel like it has changed from when you first got here to where we are today? Or is there still too much—I mean, still a lot more to be done?

RB: I think—I mean, there's, there's still a lot more to be done. I think we—I think there—again, back in 2015, Emergent Savannah asked me to arrange a panel for the—under the thesis of gay LGBT history in Savannah. And so, I asked Jamie Maury and Patty Latham and Sean Brandon to speak. And one of the things that we did, we, we listed every single name that we could think of of people who contributed, you know. And then we, and then we just try to talk about the history here in Savannah. And, and it's clear that things are getting better.

But there are also persons present who wanted to talk about the issues that they were feeling very strongly, and, and part of it had to do with transgender inclusion and things that we really do need to address. And I think the—you know, I think the tenor of advocacy is always one where there is an expectation that there is another step to be taken. There are more steps to be taken. And there are more voices to be heard, and that there has to be more effort to make these diverse voices brought to the, the stage, and given their, their hearing. And that we have to adjust how we see things.

And so, those of us who are, you know, old advocates, you know, we, we can't—you know, we can't not challenge the way that we see things, or we can't not challenge what we feel is the right thing to do because, you know, there's so much more to learn. We all come from our limited backgrounds, and it's a constant process of being open to educating and learning and realizing that what I have to say in some ways is important, and what I—stuff I did in some ways was important. And, but, you know, there are a lot of other people doing things that were important that I could not have done. And that I have to step aside, and I have to allow them to have their say, and I also have to question what my perceptions are. And, and so, so, I think it's very much a living thing.

I think we have, you know, conflict in our community. Will there always be that? I think in any advocacy community in this because people are trying to make something happen that they believe should happen, that people have different ideas about how it should happen, or what should be the end result, or how we should do it. And, you know, it's just, it's not an exact process. So, I think that a lot has been achieved. I think there's a lot left to achieve. I think the LGBT Center is a wonderful thing. I think the, the, the group of advocates that got behind that and made it happen and are working—are struggling to, to, to make sure that it survives. You know, I'm really proud of them. And, you know, and I realized that they are good at that. That's—there's not really a place in that for me, and that's okay because they can do that a whole lot better than I can, except I can support it, you know. So, so we've come a long way. There's always something to do, and sometimes those of us who've had certain roles, realize our roles change. And that's okay, you know, we just—you know, to me, I still want to remain aware and open to what contributions I can make.

I will say this. I, I do want to mention this because there are so many things in advocacy where, where you don't get real satisfaction of, of like, “Ah! We, you know, hit a home run or whatever. Or we did something that really held somebody accountable.” And there was this one day that I was, I was in the office, and I learned that Mike Bowers (who was running for governor at the time) was going to be making an airport—a campaign stop in Savannah. And so, so, at that time, Mike Bowers had just withdrawn a job offer to Robin Shahar. She was a lesbian who was a very accomplished law—new attorney and, and had been offered a job by the state. But then he withdrew the job because there was a sodomy statute in Georgia, and that the fact that she was

lesbian meant that, you know, that she wasn't, you know, wasn't deserving of getting, getting a state job. But there's a conflict of her having a state job. and so, so he took the job away from her. And, and at the time, there was—the sodomy statute was a real, you know, real problem and one of our issues.

Anyway, and so, so, I heard that he was going to be here. So, I ended up taking vacation time, and driving out to the airport, and standing there because I looked like I could be conservative, you know, just standing there with all the people there who are just ready to use—to support him. And, and, so, he steps down. And he's just this—you know, he's got this, there's a real arrogance. But a story had come out in previous weeks that he had been having an adulterous affair, and so he had been breaking Georgia law. So, he was saying that Robin Shahar was breaking Georgia law, he didn't deserve a job; he had been breaking Georgia law this whole time. But now he's trying to, you know, save his campaign. So, he's going around, and just, I'm as hard as, you know, rolled steel, you know, and just really just coming off.

And I got to raise my hand, and I was like, “You know, you know, Mr. Bowers, you know, considering the fact that you withdrew this job from Robin Shahar for your imputed, you know, breaking her behavior, as breaking the laws of Georgia. Do you really think that you should be running for governor when you were doing the same thing? You were having this adulterous affair.” And, and I was in like a very not sympathetic crowd, you know. And, and I could just—but I could just see it kind of hit him, you know. And so, then he kind of kept trying to, you know, keep his, you know, keep his mess—on his message.

And then I just asked again. I said, “Yes, but you were violating the law. As far as we know, you're still violating the law having sex with a woman is not your wife, although you are married, you know.” And, and so, you know, it wasn't like a huge thing in effect, but it was one of those few circumstances where I got to help hold someone accountable in a very simple direct way. It's like, “You have to face these words and that's what we are subject to all the time and still are to a great extent these days.” People saying these hypocritical things about us, as if we're morally inferior, and as if we don't deserve jobs. You know, there are other opportunities because of who we are. So, that was—so, if—when I think about, you know, a moment that I really enjoyed or an advocacy that stands out for me personally, that, that is that is one of the better moments. So.

LB: Can you tell us what the Proud Savannah History Project means to you, having heard about this? What, what kind of feelings do you have about this project?

RB: You know, I think it's important for history to know the lives of gays and lesbians. I think it's important them to know the struggles that our community has gone through. I think it's important for our community to know what has come before. And, you know, what I have

learned is there is such a short memory for very significant things and that I think this is an opportunity to to secure those memories and that knowledge that I don't think—I mean, I think we will lose otherwise. And, and then it's also an opportunity to really learn about, you know, what others have done because I've watched some of these and I'm like, "Wow. I didn't realize that." You know? And, and, and that's, you know—especially when there would not be recordation. At the time, there wasn't—you can't go to Facebook and pull these things forward and say, "This is, this was. This happened and, and on this date" or "Here's a photo," or—you know, you can't do that. And so, so I think it's important to know that. I think if you don't know your history, then, you know, I think you don't—you know, you're not very good at taking the next step in an effective way. And, and so, so I guess for those reasons I feel like I think it's—I think it's a wonderful thing. I think it's— would have been totally unheard of, you know, twenty years ago that this happening and this kind of value being given to the voices of LGBT persons. You know, that's pretty awesome. So, so I, I think it's a—I think it's a wonderful project, and I really appreciate the fact that the City of Savannah is doing it.

LB: So, are there any other thoughts that we haven't covered? Was there anything about your advocacy or your own life that you wanted to include in this particular oral history that we haven't spoken of yet?

RB: Yeah, I think you covered it pretty well. You know, I'm, you know, I'm a happy gay man and have been for a long time. And, you know, that's possible in this world and—but I'm not going to shut up if I feel like I need to say something. And I'm glad that my brothers and sisters and LGBT community are the same way because, you know, we're not really going to give you room to judge us, and we're going to participate in this in our communities and saving our communities and working on our principles. You know, by, you know, whatever we need to do to make sure that, you know, we're respected and that we are able to just participate in our communities as the same as anyone else. But we don't just do it for ourselves. We would be nowhere without allies, and so we are here to be allies because the principles go far beyond the marginalized groups that they affect.

LB: Okay, thank you very much for sharing your history with us today. I really appreciate it.

RB: Thank you, Lacy.

**End of interview.**