

City of Savannah Municipal Archives
Proud Savannah History Project
Interview: Maria “Chela” Gutierrez
Interviewed by Lacy Brooks, October 12, 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 Tuesday, October 12, 2021. It is four o'clock. This is Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Maria Gutierrez for the Savannah LGBTQ+ Oral History Project. We are conducting this interview in Savannah, Georgia via Zoom. Thank you for joining us today. So, let's start by having you tell us your full name, and please spell your name too.

Maria Gutierrez: All right. My full name is Maria Celia Gutierrez, but that's like my go to jail name, so I go by Chela, which is spelled C-h-e-l-a. Otherwise—and the last name is G-u-t-i-e-r-r-e-z.

LB: Okay. And if you would, please tell us your pronouns and how you identify.

MG: This always cracks me up because I grew up in the seventies, and, you know, I'm a she, but I would like to be just a “the.” Like, the Chela. That would be fun at some point [laughs]. I'm just joking around.

LB: And when and where were you born?

MG: I was born in—well I'm from Mississippi. I grew up in Greenwood, Mississippi. I was actually born in Kentucky, but I was only there two weeks, and mama moved back to Mississippi. And that was in November 2nd of 1970.

LB: And when did you come to Savannah, and why?

MG: I moved to Savannah in 1998. I was straight married in the nineties, so my husband and I moved here after I had—I was like, “You know, I don't think I want to be married anymore.” You know, I didn't know at that time that I was gay or anything, but I was figuring it out. I just knew I needed to get out of Mississippi, so we came to Savannah because I had met some people when I was at art camp in—at Penland in Asheville, North Carolina. And it's an art camp for—it's an art school for adults, you know, where you go—and anyway. But I met friends that were already living here, and it was back in the late nineties when people were buying property in the Ardsley Park area, Baldwin Park and redoing it. And it was a great place to come and to move to. Plus, it was flat, just like where I grew up. And it was hot, just like where I grew up. So, so that's what we did. We moved here, and then I'd say within three months of moving here, we got a divorce. Its, its also—it doesn't take very long to get a divorce in Georgia. It's like less than ninety days.

LB: So, you moved here in the late nineties, and at that time, can you describe your involvement with the LGBTQ community in Savannah when you came? Did you know anything about the community?

MG: No, no, I didn't know anything about anything. Like, where I grew up—Greenwood, Mississippi is where all of the—everything bad that happened during the sixties and early seventies happened in the Mississippi Delta, like the Emmett Till was killed in the place where I grew up, you see. So, if you—like, my father's from Uruguay, and my mother is from Greenwood, Mississippi. So, just him being from another country, I wasn't really considered white because that's just kind of how it was in the Deep, Deep, you know, South. But, so, when I came here, it was like, “Whoa!” I couldn't believe it. I mean, I didn't know Black and white people could get married. Nobody told me, and I felt like such an idiot when I figured it out. Had no clue. I didn't know you were supposed to tip, and that was the first job I could get was I learned how to wait tables at Six Pence Pub. And it was right after I got a divorce and had no idea that you can make money doing that. And then felt like a real, like a jerk, you know, growing up and never tipping because I thought people just got paid to wait on me. I had no idea, so it was eye-opening.

And then as far as the gay community goes, that's when I saw, you know, people, I'm like, “Oh, oh, okay. These are my people. This is what's going on. I get it now.” So once I figured that out, it was great. The community was very welcoming. They were great.

LB: And would you describe your current—today, your involvement with the LGBTQ community?

MG: I am—I would—I do not go and like, hang out gay places. I just am. You know, I am married—I have a wife. We've been married for—I guess we've been married like six or seven years now. But I was divorced. I was single for like fifteen years. And I've always had, you know, a lot, a wide—a diverse group of friends. It was more about when—I didn't have friends that were only gay, but I had a lot of really close connections with, with other gay people who—because not everybody is out and stuff. And I came up through in Savannah where it's in the late nineties and stuff, not everybody was out completely. And there's still people who aren't. But I'd say Savannah's come a long way. I think I got, I got—danced off the question, though. What was the question?

LB: What your current relationship with the LGBTQ community? So, what are you—are you active in any kind of outreach programs or anything like that?

MG: I would—I am not active in outreach programs, but I am available as far as like, at the fire department we have a few of the girls that are that are gay on the fire department. And I just try to make sure that I present myself as open and out as possible to let them know that “It's okay. You can be yourself. You can be you. It's safe. Whatever you want to do.” And I always have. I'm a definite advocate for women who are on the fire department. I'd say, I'd say my most active gay self is on the fire department, just to make sure that I'm an advocate for all other women that are out there, in addition to the other gay women that are out there. So, it's important that we—that women in general just stick together and support each other, instead of trying to dog the other one to try to not be the worst woman, you know, at work. And we have—and women have a problem doing that. And I, I did it. I used to do it. And then it took me leaving Savannah and trying to be a teacher and coming back to realize that I was—I was my own problem. And once I realized that, my whole attitude changed about everything. I'm an advocate for, for all women out there, no matter what.

LB: How long have you been with the fire department?

MG: Since '05. I got on on '05, but I left for one year back in 2012. And that's when I went back to Mississippi for a short period, like for less than a year because I thought I was going to teach like my momma and daddy. And I made it ten days and quit [laughs]. And then I just got to—I was like, “I got to go back to Savannah.” And I did. And they took me back.

LB: All right. And so, in the time that you have been a part of the LGBTQ community, have you seen it change over those years? Have you seen the relationship that Savannah has in the community changing?

MG: I just think that the, the original group of people like with the First City Network and everything, they're all slowly dying out. So, I don't—and I'm not involved with the young, young people, so I don't really know what these guys are doing out there, you know. I think I run across more trans kids in high school and all. It's not just strictly, you know, “Hey, I'm coming out as gay.” It's like they got a whole lot of other stuff they're coming out with, so you can't just, you can't just put them in a pocket. But it's great that we have the, the Center downtown on Bull street. That's a fantastic resource, and, and I'm really glad that it's there because that helps a whole lot. That is a place where it can bring together the people who are, you know, the fifty-year-olds and the fifteen-year-olds so that we can support each other.

LB: So, you've mentioned the Center, are there other places that you can think of that are in Savannah that would be friendly or affirming or inclusive for the community, for the LGBTQ community?

MG: You know, off the top of my head, I don't really know. I just know like, you know, like at Fannie's on the Beach. Of course, it's always been a very, you know, welcoming place for gays because it's owned by a gay woman. So—but I, I just don't, I don't get out and about that way anymore.

LB: So, do you think that Savannah at this time would be considered an inclusive community? And why do you think that, or why would you think not? do you feel like Savannah is inclusive?

MG: It was way more inclusive than Mississippi [laughs]. So, I would—I think that it is inclusive. It's just—in pockets. It depends on where you are in, in, in Savannah. There is—and that's just—this is going to be anywhere that you go. It's gonna just have—like people will gather

together. You know, so there'll be more neighborhoods that'll be welcoming than others. But otherwise, I, I think Savannah is—has definitely come up a couple of notches from when I first got here, sure.

LB: And do you feel that—are you familiar with the, the program that—the Proud Program that Alderman Purtee and the other—that has been created? Are you familiar with that program or?

MG: I'm on the board.

LB: Oh, that's right. Okay, yes. So, do you feel like that has had an improvement in business relations in Savannah?

MG: I think—

LB: How do you feel about it?

MG: Well, I just think it's made people aware that you can't discriminate against people. And businesses, you know, you can't, you cannot discriminate them—against them for being gay. You know, come in your business, trans or anything. I think it's helped in that way. COVID has not helped anything with people trying to make programs happen, so I think it's a fledgling project that will move forward. What, what I hope to see happen with the proud project is like, the city working within first. Let's work within all of our own departments and just lead in that manner that we want the rest of the city to lead like. And then it'll spread out when we show ourselves within our departments being inclusive. And that's inclusive all the way around, not just gay inclusive. I mean like, all encompassing.

LB: And going back to maybe when you first came back to Savannah in 2005, do you feel like there were—are some traditions or events that that are happening in Savannah that need to be documented for the LGBTQ community? Can you think of anything, outside of going to the pubs? But you feel like there are events or community events that happen that need to be documented?

MG: No, I cannot think of any. And, you know, I wish that I had more—I was more active in those ways. But—and just to get the, get my story straight with stuff. So, I moved here in '98. I got on the fire department '05. Left the fire department in 2012. Came back to the fire department in 2012. It's—just to get a timeline right.

LB: Okay.

MG: So, but no, I, I do not know of anything that—I mean, and there's things out there. It's just that I don't participate as much in those areas as other people would.

LB: Are there other programs that you're active in? That you participate in? That you're an activist for?

MG: Oh, well, I, I mean, I rescue kittens [laughs]. I do. I rescue kittens. My wife is on the board for Renegade Paws Rescue, so she does dog rescue. So, we're very, very active in that for sure.

LB: And, let's see. So, when you said you moved to Savannah and you said it was a, you know, a different experience, you know, coming to the area, and then you—can you talk at all—do you feel comfortable talking about your experience in that change for yourself where your feelings changed when you were first here?

MG: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, once I realized that, that I was gay, it was—I, I was like, “oh, okay, I understand. I've got it.” And, and I, I wasn't—and I didn't go out and just like, try it; I knew it. You know, I'd never cheated on my husband, and I just couldn't do it because I didn't want anybody to ever cheat on me. So, I told him what I thought was going on. And he was upset because he and I had grown up together, went to kindergarten together, and all through high school and everything. And started dating when we were in college. But, anyway, once I realized, it was—I mean, it was liberating. I just didn't know.

And when my mother, you know, I didn't—she just kind of asked me. She's like, “Are you dating women?” I'm like, “Maybe. I don't know.” She's like, “Oh my god. I knew it when you were seven years old.” I'm like, “Well damn gum, you knew it when I was seven, why did you—.” She's like, “Well, I just didn't want you to have to live your life that way, and it'd be too hard.”

I'm like, well gosh, yeah, I've wasted a lot of time. You know, I still—it still happened. So, it was just—it was liberating to just move forward and just start living my life, instead of the life that I was supposed to be living for other people. And, and I've just been—it's been good. Everything's been fine.

LB: Were there people in the community that you reached out to? Were there any people that helped you through that transition period, or that you feel like you need to recognize? Or was there any—I know the First City Network that was—.

MG: Yeah, they were, they were around. It—for me, coming out wasn't hard at all because I was twenty-eight years old, and I'd already lived my other life. I just was, I was, I was available in the community for sure because I lived out on Tybee and I waited tables at Fannie's on the Beach and stuff. And I didn't have—I had a lot of really good friends that I still have to this day from that, that coming out time in my life. And it was, it was great. It was a great experience, definitely.

LB: And you said that you work as an advocate on the fire department. Are you able to talk about how any of that experience has been? Can you speak to that?

MG: I just make a point to, if, if the guys are dogging any—like if, if they're being—if they're riding a woman hard—that sounds horrible, way I said that. If they are—I guess I can't say talking shit. I just make a point to listen to what, what's going on around me. And if somebody's talking shit about another of—one of the other women on the department, I straighten them out. I, you know, I, I tell them. I said, you know, “You can't talk about her doing this with him, when you're, you, you boast, and you say it's okay over here with the guys doing it. But if a girl does it, you said, you know, you call her something else.”

I said, “You can't do that.” I said, “You should be proud of her for being just like you. We're all being exactly the same.” So, I try to call them out and that sort of thing. And just to make them realize that everybody has a past that they bring in with them onto the floor, and you have to be respectful of that, you know, and don't push buttons and everything. And just make a point to lift, lift up your fellow, you know, co-worker, your fellow firefighter. And not try to push them down because we gotta, we gotta do this thing together. So, and can it be hard? Yeah, it can be hard because then people, people don't want to hear me. Don't want me to do—say anything like that.

They don't want me to like, tell them that they're doing something wrong. But I don't care [laughs]. I don't care.

LB: And what future do you imagine for Savannah, as it relates to the LGBTQ community and maybe relationship to the changes that are happening in the non-discriminatory ordinance that was recently revised? What kind of changes do you see, or you hope for?

MG: I hope that it'll be okay for people who are working within the city, if they feel like they need—if they're trans and they wanna and they're ready to transition, that they can be protected and embraced because it's just a—it doesn't affect their work. They just need—just trying to be happy, you know, and continue moving forward in life. So, I think that when this—the city is able to come up with a way for us to advocate for our fellow employee and, and learn about things that we aren't comfortable with. Like, just have a conversation, just be willing to just talk about it, so everybody can just get all their questions out there, and go, “Okay. We're all still human and have, you know, these similar interests. So, let's just move forward and get our job done.” So, it'll be good to see that, that happened because I don't know if the city is quite there yet, but I do know of, of people that would, would like to be able to relax and come out. But they're just not quite—they don't feel safe enough yet.

LB: And what would you say to a young LGBTQ person today, or maybe to your young self, or someone coming along for the future? What would you say to them?

MG: It's just, you know, it's about you and what your talents are first. I mean, the gay part is just a little part of you; it's not like—it doesn't define you. So, just be you and go forward, and the rest will follow.

LB: Do you have anything else would you like to share with us about the LGBTQ community that maybe I haven't touched on? Any of the history? Any people that maybe—that were part of that history that you're familiar with that you'd like to include in your history?

MG: Well, I mean, I know so many people. The problem is I just don't remember everybody's names anymore because there were so many people that have been very supportive of me, and, and me of them throughout. I mean Jenny Orr. I would say pops out my mind the most because

she's been right there, you know, supporting me with whatever from the time, you know, I came out in 1998. So, I would say a shout out to Jenny Orr for sure.

LB: All right. Anything else you think of that you would like to share?

MG: No, I'll probably think of it later [laughs].

LB: All right. Well, thank you very much for sharing your history today. I really appreciate it, and it was really nice to meet you. I appreciate it.

MG: Alright.

LB: Alright, goodbye.

MG: Bye.

End of interview.