

City of Savannah Municipal Archives
Proud Savannah History Project
Interview: Kurtis Purtee
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, October 6, 2021. It is four o'clock PM. This is Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives as a volunt—as a volunteer. I am interviewing Savannah City alderman Kurtis Purtee for the Savannah LGBTQ+ Oral History Project. We are conducting the interview via Zoom in Savannah, Georgia. Thank you for joining us today. So, for the very beginning I would like, if you would, to tell us your full name (and if necessary, spell your name) and then maybe tell us where you were born.

Kurtis Purtee: Okay, so Kurtis Purtee. Kurtis with a “k.” A little unusual. Purtee (p-u-r-t-e-e). French-Canadian name. Born and raised in Flint, Michigan, hence the French-Canadian name. So, I made my way to Savannah about seventeen years ago. I came down with a friend to visit, and fell in love with Savannah, just the beauty, the history. And, and even then—said—well, I moved here seventeen years ago, but eighteen years ago is when I visited. But, you know, it was such a, a rich, cultural diverse city and that's what drew me to Savannah.

LB: And before I get a little bit further, would you please tell us your pronouns and how you identify, please?

KP: He/him.

LB: Thank you. And could you describe your involvement with the LGBTQ community in Savannah, and was that something that drew you to Savannah when you first came eighteen years ago? That would have been about 2002, 2003—

KP: Yeah.

LB: Is that right?

KP: Yeah, roughly back then. When I came to visit, you know, it was, it was so unique. Savannah was, like I said, it was rich in, in history, rich in culture, cultural diversity. You know, I, I was from Flint, Michigan but also grew up in a rural area, so I didn't get exposure to a lot of diverse backgrounds. There wasn't a big LGBTQ scene so-to-speak up in northern Michigan, so when I came down to visit, it was like "Oh my goodness, what is this? People are, are living their lives free to be who they are." And, you know, just kind of went from there. And then when I moved here, you know, there were plenty of places that that were LGBTQ friendly and business owners, you know, that were LGBTQ. And I frequented those businesses, met some friends here, I got involved in the scene, went to the Savannah Pride several times. And then, you know, of course, running for office really got involved into the LGBTQ scene here in Savannah.

LB: So, the scene brought you to Savannah. So, what were some of those places that you were visiting when you, when you came? Can you, can you name some of those places—

KP: Sure.

LP:— that you felt were friendly or—

KP: And I, I gotta, and I gotta remember the name of some of them [laughs]. But some of them—I remember one, at one of the places—one of my favorite places was B Matthews, a little eatery on, on, on Bay Street. I got introduced to Club One very quickly when I came down here, which was a, you know, it was such a cool place. It was—I've been to other clubs throughout the eastern part of the United States, and Savannah's so unique, and that club is so unique. The atmosphere there is like nothing I've ever experienced in any other club, so it was very, so weird. It's like a hometown feeling, but it was just a place for anybody, and everybody could come, no matter who you are, you're welcome.

Chuck's, Chuck's Bar was another place on River Street, that place, you know, has since closed. And there was another bar, and I cannot for the for the life of me—I cannot remember the name of it. There was also another bar that briefly was LGBTQ friendly, and I want to say it was Venus de Milo. That was over by Lulu's Chocolate Bar [laughs], so you get the best of both worlds; you get, you get to go have some dessert, and then go next door and have a couple drinks. But yeah, some of those places—it was actually—it was so unique and so cool.

You know, when I came down here, it was really before the age of social media. Myspace was starting to become a thing. I think the early to mid 2000s, so, you know, people—you could, you could make friends that way. People are starting to post about events that were going on in Savannah. And the locals here, you know, you start talking to some of the locals and say, "Well, you got to go here." They're a group of LGBTQ folks meet at Forsyth Park on Sundays, and they, they play kickball, or they play volleyball, or they do all kinds of different things. So, you

know, it was kind of neat to see a city back then, you know, like Savannah, that size to have that—what I consider large population of LGBTQ folks here in the city, and, you know, being just as open as ever about it and being able to connect with each other and connect with community members. And there was no issues in the community whatsoever when they were out doing their, their thing. So yeah, it was, it was really, really awesome.

LB: When you first—well, when you were in college—well, when did you come out? I mean, when and what was that experience like?

KP: It—I was—I guess for, for my generation, I guess it might have been normal. Kids now, they say, so late in the game. But I was twenty-three at the time, so it was, it was a little bit later for me. You know, I grew up in a household that was very religious. Mom's side of the family was, was Methodist and some Baptist. Dad's side the family was Pentecostal. We had a lot of preachers in our family, a lot of ministers, so. Especially with the last couple years of my high school, growing up in a rural area of Michigan, it was something that I kept hidden. I, I was, at the time, ashamed of who I was. I was made to feel ashamed, but that's—you know, for me being who I was then. So, that was, that was I guess one thing that kind of drew me to Savannah when I came down to visit many years ago. It was like, "Oh my goodness, it doesn't matter who you are. People celebrate you for being you." And it was shortly after I moved here that I came out. And, you know, it was—.

Anybody that is part of the LGBTQ community has their own story and, and everybody's is unique. And to some folks, it's traumatic in many ways. And for mine, it was a sense of relief, a sense of, of me coming to terms with "but this is who I am." And, you know, most, most of my friends at the time accepted it. Some didn't. Their loss, you know. But I can tell you that the folks in the community that I knew or that I know now just embrace it. And, you know, it's—that's, that's what means the world to me.

LB: What is your occupation? What, what do you do?

KP: So, outside of being the, the City alderman, I'm also a police captain. And I started in police work twenty years ago. I'm thirty-nine years old now, so I started twenty years ago when I was nineteen, fresh out of high school, my first semester of college. And I'll tell you the unique story about being in law enforcement, especially twenty years ago. It's supposed to be this, this macho profession where, you know, you hide your emotions, and you have a wife, and you have kids, and this and that. And that's, that was one of the biggest reasons that I didn't come out, even at the age of nineteen. You know, it was that, that persona, that, that culture of "this is how things are supposed to be." So, I had it really double hard, I guess you—so-to-speak. You know, with growing up in that religious background, growing up in that rural community, and then being in police work. I had what I considered everything stacked against me to begin with. So, I was in

law enforcement here in Georgia when I came out, back in the early—I was twenty-three, so that would have been—I can't do math in my head. Two, three—2005, two thousand—yeah, 2005. So. Remember it like it was yesterday.

And, you know, and I won't say which places, but some law enforcement places, a couple folks suspected. And, you know, there was some some bullying that came into play with that. There was some, some subtle bullying that, that happened. And, you know, like, people leave notes in your locker, leave notes in your mailbox at the office. It's just, it, it was a different culture even twenty years ago. But, you know, like I said, folks, folks have come to accept it and embrace it, and I'm happy and much happier the position I'm in now, so that's a good thing.

LB: So, let's talk about—now you're with City Council and your role with Savannah's Proud Task Force. Explain what that is.

KP: So, the Proud Task Force takes folks from every different walks of life in the LGBTQ community, and we look at how we can make things more welcoming, better for our folks that do identify, you know, with LGBTQ. And my biggest thing was we have something called the Municipal Equality Index, and it's something that Human Rights and Georgia Equality puts out. It basically rates our city. And it looks at how, how, how are we doing as it comes to resources for those individuals? How are we doing when it comes to equity? What sort of resources do we provide individuals, and how do we protect the rights of LGBTQ members? So, I took that one, you know, close, close to heart. That was, that, that was a big. That was a big endeavor that I was happy to be part of. I mean, you know, here I am, the, the first openly gay male to serve on the Savannah City Council. And now I have this—what I thought at the time, and I still feel it—is a burden. I am the voice for, for that LGBTQ community.

So, where do we start? Where do we look at? What, what sort of things can, can I do? What policies can we put in place? What resources can we provide to our community members to make our members feel, feel more welcome here in the city? To make them feel as if, you know, they don't have to belong to just one class, but they're just a community member, like the next person? So, I'm happy to, to sit on that committee. I'm happy to sit on that task force. There are times where I work my fingers to the bone, typing up emails, and researching things, and working with other colleagues throughout the state in Georgia and throughout other areas on the East Coast to see what other cities are doing, to see what, what we can do that's in our legal means to be able to enforce some of these equal rights for our individuals here. As a matter of fact, I'm getting ready to attend—I think it's the week after next—there's a Human Rights Commission that, that I'll, I'll be part of and be attending. And folks from all over the state of Georgia, and some folks from the Human Rights Campaign. So, I'm excited, you know, as we talk about what, what opportunities are here in our community for LGBTQ folks.

LB: And, also, in the process last year, there was the—was it the non-discrimination ordinance? That was approved July 23rd, 2020. Is that—?

KP: That's correct.

LB: And that was part of that—chat—I mean, the, the Task Force mission was to update the current ordinance?

KP: Yes.

LB: Can you talk about how, how you think that has changed maybe our community? Because it's been a full year now.

KP: Right. I, I can tell you that it's, it's put the message out there to our business owners, to our community members, to folks within our community that we expect that people be treated fairly. We expect people to be able to gain the same access to things, regardless of who they love. You know, so to me, the updated non-discrimination ordinance is a steppingstone. It's, it's better than what we had, but it could be a whole lot better than where we are now. And you know, we're still researching on what we can do to make things better in that ordinance. If you look at—I don't want to compare us to Atlanta, but if you look at a city the size of Atlanta, theirs is—it's pages upon pages of things that they offer, that they protect, that they do. Ours is modeled after a couple cities close to our size, but I still think that that Savannah is a growing and developing city. Savannah's really unique, so we kind of need to tweak our own just a little bit more to be, you know, all-inclusive and to have those, those protections in there.

You know, one thing that, that, that we were lacking and that we were able to gain was the mayor appointing an LGBTQ liaison with his office, which was great. You know, one of our city employees. Also, you know, we're lacking in, in areas for transgender inclusiveness when it comes to health care issues within the city, what the city offers for its benefits. So, we're looking at how we can tie that stuff in together, and, and create that more equitable resource for folks out there. So, there's, there's a lot of work that needs to be done. But, you know, I think we're getting those steppingstones, we've got them in place; we just need to build that bridge now. We'll be doing a lot better.

LB: And kind of bridging an idea that you said earlier, when you first came to Savannah and how open and you felt that Savannah was very friendly, do you feel that the businesses and local people have been very—have been receptive to the change and understand the necessary—the need for this change in the non-discrimination ordinance?

KP: Absolutely. I'll tell you that the unique thing about Savannah is, you know, a lot of folks say, "Well, it's the Bible Belt of the South, and it's that old southern charm city. You know, there's a, there's a lot of very close conservative folks." I don't care if you're conservative, if you're liberal. Folks here in the city—and, and I talk to everybody. Folks here in the city recognize that everybody just wants to be treated fairly, and, and that's what it is: everybody wants to be treated fairly. And business owners promote that. I can tell you that there's so many business owners or businesses that I walk into, and you can see, you know, stickers, pride flags, stickers of human rights stickers in there. So, I think that we're headed in the right direction. I'm very excited to see where Savannah is now, compared to where it was when I first moved here. When I first moved here, it was yeah, I thought it was pretty inclusive. But, you know, here we are seventeen years later since I've lived here, and we're really rocking and rolling with this inclusiveness. We're really putting forth time, energy, and effort as a city council, as a community. Everybody wants to be involved. And that's the thing, it's all about inclusiveness and involvement. And folks in the community recognize that, and if they feel it's important, that's just gonna—all it's going to do is, it's going to exhibit that, that mentality. You know, folks want to feel that inclusiveness is, is what it's all about. People are going to mirror that. And I think that's where we're at with our businesses. Folks that visit here—I mean, we, we get, we get all these different articles. And I'll read articles about Savannah in travelers' magazines and what have you, but people write in there that Savannah is such a welcoming city and it doesn't matter who you are, who you love, Savannah is the place for you. So, that's what gets me excited about Savannah.

LB: So, looking back on the early time when you first came to Savannah, do you feel like there are specific events or traditions that were going on? Or even now, for that matter? That need for the LGBTQ community that need to be documented, events, places that need to be recognized?

KP: I think, I think the more, the more time goes on—I think we're starting to see areas that maybe weren't really addressed. I can tell you that when I first moved here, you know, it was kind of like, "Okay, well, if you're gay or lesbian or whatever, you're, you're fine. You don't have to talk about it. You know, we're cool with you. You don't have to talk about it." But now as we progress, it's okay to talk about it; it's okay to have those conversations. I, I think there still needs to be, you know, community educational opportunities where folks get out there and talk about some of the issues in the LGBTQ community.

And, you know, some of the big things that—I'll even go back to the transgender—. You know, for a while there, I want to—I can't remember how many years ago. There was a transgender movement when Bruce Jenner was transitioning and, you know, that, that made national headlines. And I remember folks, you know—I remember working with folks or being around folks, they're going, "Oh, I just don't understand it." Well, you know, I think that there needs to be some talks and some conversation about, you know, here's what's going on, here's—it, it's not

just about being gay or lesbian, there's, there's, there's gender identity things going on. There's, you know, there's specific issues out there, specific to the LGBTQ community. We're not just a set of acronyms or letters. We're not just either "you are, or you are not." You know, it's, it's, it's very fluid in many senses. And I think that, that as we, as we progress as a community, as we've gone farther these past couple of years on Council, we've had a lot of these conversations. And, you know, working with Mayor Johnson the past couple years, you know, he and I have had these conversations.

And we've been able to pull groups of folks together in our task force and talk about some of these things. Like what, what really are people struggling with in our community? And, you know, sometimes it's, it's, it's—and I'll go back to my public safety thing, it's the police interaction with transgender individuals. You know, that was one, one issue where we, where we saw issues because police officers would encounter transgender individual and not know how to address that, not know how to respond to it. So, that was at my level in my department, that was one thing that I automatically and immediately identified as an area where we needed training. And that happened all throughout the southeast part of Georgia. You know, there were, there were folks that, that were encountering transgender individuals and not knowing how to address them. You know, they would find them on a traffic stop, hand them their license, or license would say one thing, their identity would say another, they might go by a different name. So, there was a lot of issues. And I think we're still battling that in certain areas throughout the state. But I think it's all about an educational outreach, is what it is. I think the longer, you know, or the more that we have these conversations and the more that we really bring different, different groups together to have those conversations and put it out there, I think the more people are going to understand why it's important, you know, that we include everybody, especially in these conversations.

LB: So, transitioning to, or going back to, your, your relationship with the church and how you were raised, locally do you attend church?

KP: Absolutely.

LB: And how do you—so. Which church—do you mind saying which church you are attending?

KP: Sure. And I'll boast about them for a minute too. So, you know, I was, I was raised Pentecostal Methodist. And for a while (through my high school and college years) I, I lean more towards the, the Methodist religion. When I moved to Savannah, I had a couple of friends tell me, "You got to come to this church on the corner of Henry and Waters." And I thought, "Okay, I'll go to this church. It's a Methodist church, you know, I'm used to Methodist churches. I'm a Methodist." So, we're not, we're not that bad, we'll check it out. I get there, and I meet the pastor,

Billy Hester. And within a couple of months of going, after sitting quietly in the back, you know, and being back and forth to church, I fell in love with that place. And it's so unique.

Billy, Billy Hester is a pastor that—he's so inclusive. He's such a social justice warrior. He, he fights for people's rights, doesn't matter if—what race, what sexual orientation, gender identity. It doesn't matter. We have straight couples, gay couples, lesbian couples, we have transgender folks. We have everybody and anybody that comes to our church. And he's got a door that's painted as a rainbow, and it sits in the narthex of the church, and it says, "God's doors are open to all."

And the unique thing about Asbury (on the corner of Henry and Waters) is for the longest time, the Methodist religion would not allow same-sex couples to marry. So, our pastor took a stance: "Well, I'm not marrying anybody until we get this changed." And he went to the South Georgia Conference and fought and fought. 'Till one day he said, "Folks, I got an idea. Let's just leave the Methodist religion." And it was such a hard pill for some of us to swallow. But then I thought to myself, "You know what? It's just a denomination. It's a denomination that doesn't accept me for me. And our church told us that God loves everybody, and Jesus loves everybody. We should love folks that Jesus loves us." So, we, we voted in a huge majority to leave the Methodist religion. And now we are a non-denominational Christ-loving Asbury Memorial Church here in Savannah.

So, I am, I'm very active in the church. I chair one of their committees at church, and I'm part of the Council on Ministries. So, it's, it's, it's a blessing. It's, it's very different when I tell folks how I am religious and how I'm a Christian. And they'll—and some people go—well, well they look at me, "But you're gay!" Well, you know what? It is what it is [laughs]. So, there's more in the Bible about love and forgiveness than there is about being gay. That's what I tell folks all the time. So, yeah.

LB: Are you married?

KP: Was married. Once divorced, and I'm now partnered. My partner, Jacob, and I have been, we've been friends for years. We've been together for two and a half years now, actually going on three years. I think it's close to three years. Time flies when you're having fun. So, yeah, partnered now. And, you know, we met through a friend. And he's a physics major in, in college. He does a lot of freelance work. Wanted to get his degree. And I know nothing about physics; I know about criminal justice and theories, but he knows about physics. So, together we have very interesting conversations.

LB: So, I—going back to Asbury, I do know that because of them—it was five years, the moratorium. And they recently did a virtual marriage ceremony. So, do you think that's

something that people are looking forward to, going back to the church and being able to participate in the marriage? At Asbury—

KP: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. The thing that, you know, the thing that's kind of stalling us right now is this: the unprecedented pandemic that, you know, that, that we're in. Nobody would have, have imagined in years and years that we'd been going through a pandemic like this. So, we're still social distancing, not quite back to our full services, but we're still meeting at the church. Trying to think—we have, you know, we might have five hundred folks in the congregation, but we might on a Sunday right now, it's pandemic, have eighty folks show up. You know because we got to make sure that, that we're still keeping folks safe. And then, of course, with a lot of our senior citizens, you know, we want to make sure we take our precautions there. So, I know folks are excited to get back to a new normal where everybody in church can shake hands, hug, and get married. And that's, that's the big thing. We are, we are truly excited about that, you know, it's just that it's such a huge blessing for us to be able to do that.

LB: So, what—going back to your desire to to be a part of the city council, what made you decide to run for council?

KP: Wow. A whole bunch of different things. [laugh] So, at the time, I'd been in public safety for—I don't know sixteen, seventeen years. And I was constantly, even in public safety, I would talk to city council folks. I would take an active part of my community. I would talk to some of our state legislative folks. I will talk with some of our congressmen. And I've always had an interest in helping my community. And, you know, as a police officer, I could do that only so much. But there's more that I wanted to do, and I felt that somebody needed to step up and be a voice for folks that were being largely underrepresented. And I thought for sure that, that I could be that person. And I still hope I'm that person. But, it's been—. It was a thought years ago and it went away the busier I got at work, and then that thought came back again.

And I remember kind of a tipping point was I worked a lot of child cases, a lot of child sex crimes cases and homicides. And one of my cases in particular, without giving any names, a child was, was being physically abused. And he was an LGBTQ person. And I tried to provide him with resources, and they're just—there were some folks that were able to help, but that bothered me for the longest time because I thought—. And then his mother passed away shortly after this, so it wasn't like he had a lot going on in his life. He had just a few people to be a support system for him. But I remember thinking, I couldn't imagine growing up like that, especially as an LGBTQ member in the community, being a victim of a crime, enduring the loss of a mother, not knowing who your father was—and how do you, how do you have someone there to mentor? How do you have someone there to, to be able to help? And for some reason, you know, that stuck with me. And it's always gonna stick with me, probably for the rest of my life. There's a few cases I remember very well, and that's one of them.

But I remember taking him to a couple different organizations, taking him to meet some folks in the LGBTQ community, and exposing him to, to what LGBTQ community members are, you know. He didn't think that was normal. He was embarrassed. He was ashamed. When he was, when he was physically abused, it was because of that reason. So, that, that bothered me. He seems to be doing well today. I don't, I don't get a chance to talk to him much. It's been years ago since, since we had this encounter. But, you know, that's just one person. And I'm sure there's plenty out there like that. I've talked to, I talked to younger, younger kids who've been left homeless because they're gay, have been kicked out of the house because of that. And, you know, we have to look at what resources do we have in the city. And it's one thing to be homeless; it's another thing to be homeless and be gay. And it's, you know—you're already dealing with one traumatic thing, and now you have a stigma attached to it. So, you know how, do we fix that? How do we help with that? How do we provide the resources? So, that was—that in the back of my mind, it was all about providing resources and helping people in the community.

I remember my grandfather was involved in politics years ago in Michigan. And I remember being a little kid, watching him. And he was—when he was involved in politics, he was also part of different nonprofits, like the United Way. They would go be—build these wheelchair ramps for older ladies and younger kids at their house, so they could, you know, get in and out of the house with ease in a wheelchair. So, it was all about accessibility. And that was, that word—accessibility—stuck with me for years and years and years. And I always thought, “You know, I want to be that person that's accessible to people in the public, to my community members. I want to make sure people have accessibility to things that they need.” And that was just kind of the motivating factor behind it. It was just—it was almost like an Aha! moment. Everything just kind of piled on at once.

You know, and, and there was a, now can I put this in better terms. I never put anybody down, but there was a lot of, a lot of issue with the last alderman in my spot. And I felt that people deserved a lot better, and deserve someone who was honest, open, and transparent.

LB: So, speaking about people that are at risk—homeless and then, like you said, you know, in a situation where, you know, they're struggling to understand their identity—are there places that we need to document? In other words, know that those places existed to give that community support to younger people. Are there specific organizations that we can, you know, document?

KP: There's, you know, there's there's been a lot of organizations—helpful. I'm trying to remember some of them, and some of them have changed. Years ago, one was called Stand Out Youth. I don't even know if they exist anymore. You know, First City Network is, is a huge help. I can tell you that the Pride Center, the First City Pride Center downtown is a huge help. You

know, there's, there's various doctors' offices. I'm trying to remember the name of the doctor—Dr. Martins. He runs, I think it's Starland Practice in Savannah. He's a great resource for folks to go to. Big advocate of the LGBTQ community. You know, that's, that's another thing, why we've set up the task force too. We want to be that group that if there is an issue and something happens, we want to be able to pull in resources or get that name of a person and push it to the right resource. So, yeah, there's there there's, there's folks out there that can help. I wish I had my book with me because in my book, I've got like, this whole list of resources. But, but, yeah, there's, there's plenty out there. There's plenty out there.

LB: And what do you—what future do you imagine for Savannah, as it relates to the LGBTQ community? Where do you see us possibly going with our inclusive?

KP: You know, it's hard to say. I, I think that—I think that we're on the right track to become that all-inclusive city. I think we're on the right track so that when we have conversations, you know, we're not talking about “Well, we need to fight for transgender rights and healthcare because we don't have it.” I think that everybody will have equity among, you know, among everything. And LGBTQ folks will just, you know, they'll just, they'll be attached to that, to that acronym, but it doesn't mean that, you know, they're lacking in something. It doesn't mean that they're still fighting for something. Because many times I think we are still fighting for some things. You know, what's scary is every time a different political figure gets into a—the presidential office, where we start to sweat because we're thinking, “Oh my goodness, you know, what's going to happen? What's the Supreme Court going to say about gay marriage? What's the Supreme Court going to say about businesses denying services for LGBTQ folks?” That's the big thing right there. When we start, we start seeing some consistency among fairness at our levels—at that level, I think that everything else just falls into place. But on the Savannah level, I think that we are modeling what other cities should be doing. And that's what's really unique about Savannah.

You know, it's cool because I had Macon, Georgia—the City of Macon reached out, and we were part of a conversation. They were excited; they were getting their non-discrimination ordinance. City of Statesboro was getting theirs. And, you know, people were calling me, and I'm going, “What am I supposed—I'm just a guy. You know, what am I supposed to do?” “We want your opinion on this. What do you think? What do you think?” And, you know, the only thing I can tell folks is: look at where you're at now, look at where you want to be. What are the common conversations you're willing to have in a public setting? You know, what are some of those tough things you're willing to say? Because not everybody's going to agree with, with being gay or, or being transgender. You know, and it's like, it's like the different religions. Not everybody agrees over which, which denomination they prefer in a religion or which religion they prefer. But we have to be respectful about it. We have to be respectful. We can't, we can't discriminate. We can't hate. And we can't burden people because of who they love or who they are. And that's the big

thing. You know, people just need to be accepted for who they are. And that's where I see us down the road. I, I definitely see it. I'm excited to see, you know, an openly gay mayor for Savannah at some point, or even a congressman at some point. You know, not saying that, that's going to be me. But who knows down the road? [laughs] You never know. But I think that, I think that we'll see that stuff. We've got plenty of businesses that are gay owned and operated. We got plenty of, plenty of advocacy groups out there. We've got plenty of resources for our folks here in the community. So, I think at some point soon, you know, we're gonna see, we're gonna see some all-inclusive movement.

And it's kind of put—the pandemics kind of put a stall on some of the things we're trying to do. But I think we're getting there. It's going to take some time. What we don't want to do is we don't want to flip a switch and just make the change all overnight. You know, we want to make sure we do it deliberately. We want to make sure that we do it in a manner that, you know, informs people “this is what we're doing, this is why we're doing it.” And basically, what we're doing is trying to instill in people to be good people. You know, love other people, or accept other people for who they are. And that's, that's the basic premise behind it. Really, that's all it's about.

LB: And what would you say to young LGBTQ people today, or those who are coming along in the future? What would you like to tell someone that maybe is trying, you know, to decide where they're going?

KP: You know, it's funny, ten, ten years ago, fifteen years ago, ten years ago I had a conversation with a man that was seventy years old and had not come out of the closet. Still struggling with his identity. And a great person, very successful. One thing that, that he regretted is living life to the fullest and being true to who you are. And that is it. Accept it, embrace it, and enjoy it. That's what I will say. Accept it, embrace it, and enjoy it. You know, the—a lot of, a lot of young, I guess a lot of young kids now—it's, you know, the age of social media. They're not used to face-to-face talking; everything's done online. And I think it's all about that personal connection. Get out there, talk to folks face to face, make those personal connections, enjoy life, enjoy what our city has to offer. You know, just go out and, and be part of that inclusiveness in our community. That's, that's what I would offer. Just embrace it, love yourself for who you are because you can't change who you are, and you need to embrace it. And in order to, to make a powerful impact, in order to have a meaningful relationship with somebody else, you need to love yourself for who you are.

LB: And do you have any other things that you'd like to share about your memories, about Savannah's LGBTQ history? Is there anything else that you can think of that maybe you haven't spoken? Those first few years when you first came to Savannah?

KP: You know, it's the connections and the people that you, you talk to, the connections that you make, the friendships that you build. I will tell you that Savannah lost a great man last year. I had a—two friends that went to church with me, Bob and Bobby [laughs]. And one of them was one of the—one of the original members of the Stonewall Riots. And he, he was one of the the go-go dancers there when the police came in and stormed the place. And I, I didn't even know that. And WTOC did a wonderful special on him. I think it was a couple years ago. He passed away this last year due to COVID complications, and his husband was in rough shape as well. But believe it or not, I met those two at Asbury Church. So, it's, it's amazing. That's why, that's why I tell younger folks to get out there and make the connections, talk to people.

You know, I think every generation says, “Well, we had it harder. We paved the way for you.” There is some truth to that, but I have some mad respect for a lot of the older generation—older than me because I think I had it rough, but a lot of those guys had really rough. They were persecuted just for being gay. They were persecuted by police officers just for being gay. And I couldn't imagine living in a society like that. I think we've come leaps and bounds beyond that. But any chance you get, learn your history; learn your LGBTQ history. You know, one of, one of—the biggest, most influential gay members, Harvey Milk. You know, I don't know if younger kids know who that is now. But, but looking—research that stuff. Get to know these individuals, get to know the story behind these folks and understand what struggles people have, have gone through just to ensure that we have a better today and even better tomorrow. So, that's all I've got.

LB: Well, I have one other question. When you said you went back to Asbury Park—excuse me, Memorial—I was thinking, when you did come to Savannah and maybe in the last seventeen years, have you felt that there was a difference in the LGBTQ community between native Savannahians versus people that came from outside of the community? Did you get any pushback at any point?

KP: You know, when I first moved here, it was—the, the native Savannahians that were born and raised here. It was kind of like the—I'll use the phrase Don't Ask, Don't Tell. You know, it's okay if you are, but let's not talk about it. And as time goes on, I think folks have grown to understand it or accept it even. And now the, the native Savannahians, they're okay with it. I say most of them are okay with it; the ones that I talk to are okay with it. But yeah, you could definitely tell there was a difference. There was a big difference. Like, it was—it wasn't quite taboo, but it was something you just didn't talk about. You knew it was out there, but you just didn't talk about it.

LB: And was there a generation difference, even within the, the native Savannahians? So, in other words, the older native Savannahians may—were more resistant—

KP: Absolutely.

LB: —versus younger?

KP: Yeah, absolutely. It seemed to me that, that the older generation, the, the native Savannahians were, were more the type that just didn't want to talk about it, didn't really want to acknowledge that, that, that was going on. And even if they did, it was one of those “Hey, let's not discuss it. That person just a little funny” is what they would say. You know, so, that's, that's kind of, kind of the, the thing you'd hear. You know, when I when I did come out when I was twenty-three and I came out with Savannah, a lot of folks that I talked to back then—you know, sort of your middle-aged individuals I worked with, they were the ones that opened me, that open their arms to welcome me. And say, “Hey, you know, we're here for you. We're still your friend. It's okay.” And these were some of the most machoistic, rough and tough police officers you've ever met. Granted there was still a couple that, that didn't quite wanna, you know, embrace it so-to-speak. But, you know, it was accepted. But, yeah, you could tell it was a generational thing.

And, you know, what, what makes me wonder is those, those same thoughts, are they passed down from generation to generation? I don't know, but maybe their kids would have thought the same way or maybe even their grandkids. But I think, you know, the society that we live in now—the, the inclusive society that we live in now. The well-connected society we live in now. I think it's become, it's become more accepted—widely accepted. So, it's not that quote “taboo” [laughs] as some of the folks from the older generations might think.

LB: And did you have any other things that you might want to—that I didn't cover or didn't ask that you definitely wanted to include in your oral history?

KP: You know, it, it's, it's weird because Savannah used to have a lot of little restaurants or a lot of little bars that were specifically LGBTQ places to go, but now Savannah seems to be the spread-out place where everybody's welcome, no matter where you go. So, it's not just a gay hangout; it's not just a straight hangout. But, you know, you go to rooftop bars with anybody and everybody's there. It doesn't matter who you are. You have a group of LGBTQ folks, a group of straight folks, a religious group over in the corner that might be doing something. But it's a, it's a place for everybody, and everybody intermingles. And that's what's really cool to me. You know, I'm glad that we still have a Club One around. It's a place for folks to go and, and really hone in, you know, having those connections with folks that identify like them. But at the same time, it's nice to be able to get out there and be part of a community and not have to have that label either. So, yeah, that's, that's, that's pretty important.

LB: All right. So, does it make it harder or—to, to meet up with people to, you know, to connect with an LGBT community person, if you don't have a specific location? Or does it not?

KP: I would have thought maybe twenty years ago, I would have said yes, it makes it harder. But in today's society, not at all, with not with social media, not with connections, not with, with people being connected at the fingertips, with us with the—a computer and a phone. So, yeah, not at all.

LB: And you did say in the earlier in the interview, a couple of places. Can you remember any of the other businesses that maybe are gone now that we need to—

KP: What was it? Was it—I want to say it was Blaine's. I think Blaine's is right. Yes, it's either—I think it's Blaine's.

LB: And was it a downtown?

KP: It was downtown. I'd have to look it up. that was one of them. I swear there was another one. It's been so long [laughs]. And the older I get, the less I go out and do things. So, I kind of, kind of lose touch with that stuff. I'm, I'm just excited now to go to Corleone's and grab a lasagna and have a glass of wine, you know. [laughs]

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

KP: Thank you.

LB: This has been a pleasure. It was really nice to meet you.

KP: Thank you so much. Nice to meet you. Take care. Thank you.

LB: Take care. Thank you.

End of interview.