

City of Savannah Municipal Archives

Proud Savannah History Project

Interview: Clinton Edminster

Interviewed by John van Cott, September 21, 2021, Zoom

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

Start of interview.

John van Cott: Today is September 21, 2021, and it's 9:34 AM. This is John van Cott, representing the City of Savannah Municipal Archives as a volunteer. I'm interviewing Clinton Edminster for the Savannah LGBTQ+ Oral History Project. We are conducting this interview via Zoom from my home in Mount Dora, Florida, and Clinton is in Savannah. Thank you for joining us today. Let's start off by telling us your full name, and you can spell it if you need to, but I think it's pretty obvious. Where you were born, if you weren't born in Savannah? Where'd you come from, and why? And tell us about the pronouns you used to identify yourself.

Clinton Edminster: Great. And thank you, thank you again for, I guess, asking me these questions and recording this. I think that's, you know, that's important. And I kind of want to talk about that a little bit later because the importance of memory, especially in, in a community setting. My name is Clinton Edminster. I grew up in Homer, Alaska for about seventeen years in a fishing family up there in the north. I moved down to Savannah in 2009—September 2009—to attend SCAD, the Savannah College of Art and Design we all know and love. And I've been here pretty much ever since. I—what was the other question? Yeah, my—guess my pronouns are he/him. And I think that covers the opening.

JVC: Sounds good. Long way from Alaska. Better winters.

CE: Yeah, we're about three thousand six hundred and sixty-six miles away as the crow flies. And it is much colder up there, but the houses are better insulated, and you're always more prepared. So, honestly, I feel like my coldest winters have been down here in the South. It was just like, it's just so much—I feel like it's psychologically colder. You know, up north, it's like warm and cuddly winter time, and down here it's like frigid and cold and drafty. So.

JVC: Well, let's talk a little bit about the Savannah history since you've been there since 2009, you say, right?

CE: Mm hm.

JVC: Can you describe your involvement with the community, the LGBTQ community there in Savannah, and what your relationship is with them, plus in the business community, and had—how have the changes—what kind of changes have you seen over the years?

CE: Well, I guess I'm a member of the LBTT—LGBTQ+ community. I'm a gay man, and I've been gay since—for a while. [laughs] As long as I can remember. And my involvement in the community has been through the people that—people that I date, friends that I have, the types of advocacy I've tried to work on (although I think we could talk about that later as well) and—and also, I'm a business owner as well. I'm not like—definitely not the first gay business owner by any means, but I am a part of—I guess definitely like a smaller subset of business, of local business owners in town that are gay. At least publicly out.

And you know, I've just been doing all sorts of different stuff. I've been, I've been—my main advocacy for the last decade down here has really been about art and transit and kind of, you know, I like to think about like, land use planning and zoning. Not necessarily in, in, in—not necessarily, and I would say like LGBTQ+ advocacy so much. And I think a lot of that comes from the lack of obstacles that I've encountered being a gay person and trying to do the things that I want. I have, at least not consciously, really come up against any obstacles here in Savannah that I would have labeled as being, “This happened to me” or “This didn't happen to me because I was gay.” Honestly, it's been the other way around. It has only ever been a, a positive note, and I am—I pray to God every night thankful that I ended up being gay. I just think it's the best thing going on in the world right now. And it, you know, it brings me, it brings me so much joy and so much—I don't know, just wholesomeness. It feels very good to be able to be myself and unapologetically so. And—yeah. I, you know, it's a—I, I, I think it's—what's changed in Savannah is maybe, has less to do with Savannah and more to do with just like the whole world. I think the internet has played a large part. I think, you know, gay marriage being legalized in—God, when did that happen? When did that happen? It was like 20—

JVC: I can't remember.

CE: Yeah, it was like 2015, 2017, 2016. Something like that. That was huge. And, and I feel like it's—I was thinking about some sort of like things to consider or to bring up during this conversation. And, and to start, I think—you know, I entered Savannah as a SCAD student. You know, I was very young, naive SCAD student. And really, you know, that was—I was away

from my family. I was an entirely new environment. And that was the first time I was able to be like, openly gay and not really worried about not being who anybody thought I was.

JVC: Right.

CE: I could sort of start fresh. And I—what was the point I wanted to make? Yeah, it's—being LGBTQ, being gay has, has just been great, especially down here in Savannah. Going through this list of questions, starting up for it. I think the questions about LGBTQ are always sort of couched in awaiting a negative response, and I don't have much of a negative experience of it. And I think that in part has to do with me being not super flamboyant or necessarily on the edge of the LGBTQ spectrum. And I definitely think there's a lot more work to do for those individuals in our community in terms of acceptance and access and opportunity. But me, personally I've been—I just think blessed in this town.

JVC: Well, as an older gay person, that sounds wonderful. That sounds wonderful.

CE: Yeah.

JVC: Really great to hear that we've made that kind of progress, so I'm glad to hear that. That's refreshing.

CE: Well, I think, I think it is. And, and, and I think that's, that's part of a like, things have changed a lot, you know, in the past five years, in the past ten years, in the past twenty years. You know, really sort of any way that you look at it, we've just had these, you know, major advancements, you know, in terms of access and openness and, and opportunity. And a lack of, you know, people being marginalized in our community.

And, and I think when you talk to younger people—even when I talk to people younger than myself—it just seems to be—it's like it's, it's like the fight has shifted from being able to do things. You know, I feel like first, we didn't have the opportunity or the access to do really, you know, anything. A parade, a business, a relationship. And now it's turned towards “Okay, now we do have access to this whole, you know, new type of ability to do things, so let's do those things. Let's make the best of the tools that we've been given, you know, the tools that we've fought for.” And I think that transition from, you know, sort of like fighting oppression to “Okay, we've, we've made it. In many ways, we've really made an incredible, incredible achievements. Now let's, let's stand up and let's do this. Let's do the work. Let's own businesses. Let's celebrate. Let's have relationships. Let's be in power. Let's get elected. Let's do the stuff that, frankly, we're really great at doing.”

JVC: I agree. [both laugh] So, what would you describe since you've been in, in Savannah—have you belonged to any organizations specifically?

CE: Yeah—

JVC: —Organizations. Is there a business organization down there? Chamber of Commerce? Gay Chamber of Commerce, or anything like that?

CE: I don't believe there's a Gay Chamber of Commerce. Actually, I know that for a fact; there's not a Gay Chamber of Commerce. I am a member of the Downtown Business Association. You know, you know, I'm a member of the Chamber of Commerce. I've sat on the board for Visit Savannah, which is the destination marketing organization for town—for the city. I've currently sat on the board for the Downtown Business Association, and I do know that part of my position on there—on both of those boards—was due to me being LGBTQ+. But also, and I think—I don't know like, more or, or just different—but also just the location of the business that I have. It's in a relatively newer area of town that's growing a lot. And both of those entities were very interested in getting a take on or having it represented from the Starland District. And, and I think, you know, that's part and parcel of the same things that I've been actively involved in, you know, growing a community in the Starland District, also known as the Thomas Square neighborhood. And I think that has been a very, a very safe gay space, a very, you know, very accessible gay space. I think Savannah and in all, you know, especially the downtown core of Savannah is just almost gay by default. It's just, just assume that it's super gay until further notice. And, and so—but in the Starland District, you have that, but on a smaller more local scale. I think one that's a little bit more accessible for people trying to start a business or do something fresh or new or just cheaper. And, and that has been really exciting, is being a part of, you know, really creating this community, supporting this community. Where it's just, it's just already, you know, we don't even—it's, it's just, you know—“yeah, well, of course we're gay friendly. Like, why would you not be?”

And, and I think that goes back into, you know, kind of what I said earlier. This transition from, you know, fighting for rights and then using those rights. And that can be, I think, sometimes a difficult challenge for really any marginalized or oppressed community is, is when do you stop fighting to—and when do you start switching to using the tools that you fought for? And that can be tough. And there's also, you know, absolutely an element to, just, you know, you never stop fighting because oppression is never done. And that's very, very real. But I think I play the part, specifically myself, as being—is trying to use the tools that we've got to do stuff.

And I use that very loosely: do things. I think that's, you know, it's just important to activate your

community however. Picnics, walks, trash pickups, opening businesses, going on parades, biking, riding your bike. You know, like, just engaging in public space and in public life openly and safely. And I think we have an ample opportunity to do that here.

JVC: That's wonderful to hear. Let's see. Well, who do you think some of the important leaders are in the LGBT community down there now? Does anyone stand out?

CE: I think the members of the first, First City Network have done just some fantastic work with keeping LGBT advocacy, you know, at top minds of city officials for, for decades now. And, and, and really making sure that there was really no space for, at least locally, for City Council to kind of step back. I—my—so, kind of to skip ahead a little bit and this might reframe some of the questions moving forward, but I was diagnosed with HIV in 2010 and—oh. And, and that has been a really interesting experience as well, kind of going through—and again, my experience of that has thankfully been relatively very positive the whole way through. And so, you know, one of I think, the one of the unspoken heroes or unnamed heroes in just keeping people alive in general is Dr. Debbie Higgins over at the Chatham, Chatham Care Center. And the work that her and her army of nurses do to keep people healthy, mentally and physically. They've seen a huge change, I think, in the last twenty years as drugs and treatment have developed for HIV and AIDS. And talking with them, it just seems like this overwhelming—it's like an overwhelming amount of, of an overwhelming amount of improvement in the last couple of decades. And I'm trying to find the right word, but they just seem very—their job has shifted a lot. From more of like, end-of-life care to just care. And I think that's, that's been huge. And so, you know, [laughs] I think I'm, I'm a big fan of all the folks down at Chatham Care for the, you know, for the work that they've been able to do for the whole community and just keeping us alive and healthy.

Another person is John Deaderick from Starland Café, who in 2001 was part of the two-person duo that kind of worked on coming up with this concept of the Starland, Starland District. And John was openly gay and business owner, you know, relatively fresh college student. And he did a lot of work, I think, to kind of set the tone of, of the community of environment that I inherited, in a way, as again, this district where just assume it's all gay until further notice. And I think what John did was, he was gay, but that was never, you know, the reason that something was happening. He was just, you know—he had this idea; he had this vision. Him and Greg Jacobs both, you know, just had a good idea. And it was like, “Oh, and they're gay!” you know, it wasn't that they're gay and they're doing this; they're just doing this. And I think that's sort of again, that's sort of the shift from we now just all have the capacity and the rights to, to do the things we want to do.

JVC: The only other questions I have are, are there any pivotal points or events that happened in Savannah that relate to the community positively or negatively since you've been there?

CE: The [pause]. The marriage equality that the Supreme Court passed. Sad I can't remember this—I think 2015 or '16. You know, again I think—. If, if I can kind of scoot back, a lot—there's—I think we tend to focus on the cities that we're in and sort of look at, you know, what has happened in the city, who are the players in the city. But I think using a local lens for talking about extremely large blankets of people or communities is, is not always a really effective way of looking at, you know, how change has been made, who made—who locally made these changes, who or like, what events happen locally. And, and I think, you know, because of the internet—because of, you know, social media and the ability that we have where everything is local and global all the same time, all the time. And so that has had just as much of an impact on being a member of the LGBTQ+ community as, as I think, you know, almost anything else. And, you know, the people that we're seeing, the people that I'm engaging with on a day-to-day basis are thousands of miles away or right next door. And the ideas that I'm coming into contact with are coming from all over the world. And, you know, the challenges that I see people are having the, you know, the, the creations that gay people are making. I'm seeing this, I'm being notified, I'm being, you know, brought to speed on a global level all at the same time.

And so, I really do think that, you know, everything kind of is happening all at once, everywhere, all the same time. And that is not just a theory for the LGBTQ community but really for everything, you know. And anytime there's any sort of analysis of any situation anywhere, I think it's so important to take into account the change in the connectedness that we've had as a society in the past twenty years because it is, it is unparalleled in history, you know, how connected we all are. I mean, you're, you're what, a couple hundred miles away right now and speaking in real time, having this conversation. You know, I was on my phone earlier, watching a video by Little Nas X, you know, that was produced almost entirely digitally. And he's famous only because of, you know, the sort of social network that we have. It's, it's very much—it's taken off. And there used to be, you know, I think absolutely, fights used to be, you know, very local. You know, focused on like neighborhoods or bars. But that has, you know, that has sort of eroded I think, for better or for worse. Well, this could be an interesting turn. That has eroded for better or for worse, sort of the, the, you know, any space for oppression. And, and, and any need for a safe space.

And so, one thing I've kind of noticed, I haven't thought about this for a while—and maybe that's because the pandemic has kind of taken away the capacity to be together. But there are no—you know, other than Club One, which is a, you know, super great bar—there are no other really like, gay bars downtown. There's no—there aren't any sort of like, gay safe spaces in Savannah, other than like, the LGBT Center and Club One. And, and, so, you know, I've talked to different people (straight and gay), and they say, “Well, why do you even need a gay bar anymore?” And that's a really great point. Why do you need a gay bar anywhere, you know, if you can just be gay, and make out with dudes anywhere at any time and nobody's gonna really make a big deal about it? Then why is there a need for a safe space, or for a, a bar that is “only

for gay people”? And so, I think what you've seen is that like, there's only one gay bar in town. And it's the—one of the oldest running gay bars on the, you know, on the East Coast. And all the other gay bars that have been in Savannah (and there are—been a whole lot) are gone. They're just, they're absolutely gone.

And, and I think a part of that is because the way that we meet the need for—you know, if I wanted to meet somebody, if I wanted to like, have a relationship or a one-night stand, how am I gonna do that? I'm not gonna go to a bar. I'm gonna go online. I'm gonna find connection online. And that is, you know, not so great, but that's the reality of the situation, is that the economics of my time and how I use it has changed dramatically. And, and, and I think that is, that is because of social media. That is because of, you know, sort of—maybe could use that more broadly but of, you know, social apps where people are connecting in specific types of communities.

And so, you know, so again, you've got this sort of national—you've got this global change in how we connect that is built on platforms that are expansive and immense and that has very real local impacts for, you know, the economy here locally. And the ability for a bar to carve itself out for a small group of people and to be able to make, you know, a profit on that and therefore keep the space going. And I think that's been—to be honest, I think that's been kind of a bummer because I do love the idea of like, going to like, you know, cute little gay bar. But so far, you know, it hasn't really happened here in town.

JVC: That's, that's interesting. That's an interesting perspective because oftentimes when I was living in Savannah, was sort of like time, time had forgotten about Savannah. You know.

CE: Yeah.

JVC: Now with social media, everyone knows about everything, so you don't have those kinds of barriers anymore.

CE: Everything knows about everything; everybody knows about everything all the time. And it's—I really don't—. We, you know, we've only had these devices for like sixteen years and who knows where they're going to take us and what kind of communities we'll create with them.

[laugh] I think also, to change—to sort of share a story. So, I work with this young man at my store at Starlandia. He comes in a lot. We'll have him like, sweep or organize stuff. And he's in high school. He's like an early—he's like, freshman or so in high school. And we've—I've known him for a really long time. He just sort of just hangs out in the neighborhood. His grandma has a house a couple blocks away from the store. And we've been good friends for a long time, and he was telling me that all of his friends in school are, are making fun of him

because he's not gay. And [laughs] I think I was like, "Oh, that's so sad. Like, you're being oppressed for being straight." And I gave him a hard time about it, which he was pretty cool with. It was just kind of generally funny. But it's like—that's crazy, you know. That's wild. Like, you've got like young man who's growing up in, you know, Savannah public schools and his friends are making fun of him because he's straight. And that's just wild, you know, like that's—what does that mean? You know, what does that mean, sort of like the next ten years or for the next setup of everything?

You know, I think like as different generations have, have, you know, sort of embraced, you know, sexuality and identity and gender in such strong ways and in such different ways. You know, I think over the course of the last couple of decades, it seems like so much that is dissolving very quickly. And, and that's, that's good because I don't think it's right to, you know, to, to marginalize or oppress people for a gender or for an identity or for a sexuality that, that they might have. But it is also—it's to the point of like, it doesn't even matter. And, and I think there is definitely sort of a bit of a tragedy in that. You know?

JVC: Well, we'll see.

CE: Oh, yeah. Time will tell.

JVC: Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about? That's kind of, pretty much answered all of my questions. I did understand—you started the kickball league.

CE: Yeah. Okay, I wanted to talk about Gay Kickball. I think that is important to put in the Municipal Archives. Gay kickball is awesome. It is so much fun. And it has—it's just been one of the best things we've done. So, I started gay kickball in November of 2019 after hearing about like, a gay kickball—I think a gay football league when I was visiting some friends up in New York. And I just thought the idea was just like, spectacular and, and in many ways, it is sort of my own little fight against the digital—the digitization of gay culture, where it's like, okay all of this is happening, you know. It's sort of like, gay culture just sort of like, took off and it's now in the clouds. And it's very, you know, you might hang out with somebody you met online, but the rest of gay culture is just, you know, happening online. And so, gay kickball was this idea to sort of like, bring that back down. Literally to the ground, to a sports field, where you have a structured situation. Where you can just be outside with like-minded gay people or, you know, LGBTQ+ advocates or allies. And, and just play kickball. And it's been really spectacular. I think it's honestly one of the best things that I've been involved with, and, you know, had the honor of helping to, you know, bring to the community. Because it's just so chill, and it's so stupid, and it's so fun. And we play—we—you know, I've got this big loudspeaker, and we play ABBA at like volume eleven, and we play a really crappy game of kickball. And we all suck at it. And we're at Forsyth Park every Sunday at three.

And Forsyth Park, I think, is an important location for us because we've considered going to other parks where it might be, you know, we've got way more space, or, you know, there might be less people. We can just, you know, have some more space. But I think it's so important that we're at Forsyth Park. You know, it is—I think it's so important that people walking down, you know, the promenade in the middle of the park see this bunch of like, super queer people in tank tops, you know, dancing and playing kickball kind of badly. And, and that's sort of like, “Okay. We're here. We're doing this. We can do this. Screw you, if you think we can't come and play kickball.” And yeah, I just think like, the location, Forsyth, it's very civic location. It's very, you know, like if you were, if you were having a demonstration about anything, you would either do it at City Hall or Forsyth Park. And there's not a lot of grass at City Hall, so we chose Forsyth Park. It is a quasi-political, you know, action to be able to—

JVC: Absolutely.

CE: —take up space and use it the way that we want.

JVC: Fabulous.

CE: It's, it's super fun. It literally is like, such a hoot. And anybody's welcome to come play. So, if you're watching this in the future, you know, hopefully we're still at it. [laughs] Anything else?

JVC: That's all the questions I have. What would you like to add for future generations?

CE: I think this is, this is an interesting, this is interesting, you know, time to at least for, for you know—this is an interesting situation to be in because this could be seen by people much further down in time. And so, I would just consider, you know—I think it would be interesting to, you know—. A couple things I would share is that, you know, 4G is like, the current network we all have. Fifth generation cellular telephones are coming out, which I think is going to be kind of crazy. Self-driving things on a car yet. Joe Biden is president. You know, like, what's gonna happen in like five, ten years? And what's gonna happen for, you know, LGBTQ people?

I can really only see it becoming more. I do not think it is possible right now for things to step backwards in any—you know, maybe a little bit here and there because I think that's just part of, you know, what happens with any progress being made. You know, some progress is going to go backwards. But it's just like, the concept of identity, concept of sexuality and genders is just changed, is changed entirely. And I think that is part of, sort of, you know, the digitization of ourselves and the way we present ourselves to each other through our digital avatars on Instagram and Facebook. And I think that is, that has changed, maybe not for the better but it's

changed forever. And it'll be interesting to see how that unfolds for us and for the future. So, good luck out there, whatever year you're watching this in. I'm praying for you.

JVC: Well, that's—

CE: That's all I got.

JVC: Thank you, Clinton. It was really interesting talking to you today. You're a very dynamic person. Thank you.

CE: [laughs] Thank you. Have a wonderful day, and we'll hopefully see you soon, thank you.

JVC: Take care. Bye-bye.

CE: Ciao.

End of interview.