

City of Savannah Municipal Archives

Proud Savannah History Project

Interview: Mark Kreuger

Interviewed by Carla Johnson, August 31, 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.

Carla Johnson: Good morning, this is Carla Johnson. I'm a volunteer with the Savannah Municipal Archives LGBTQ+ Oral History Project. Today, I am doing my second interview with Mark Krueger, who is going to grace us with our second interview. But just for the sake of the recording. Where we left off last time, we had talked a lot about your personal work in terms of some of the issues that you found very, very important and difficult at the time that you moved to Savannah and certainly for years after. So, upon reflection about our last conversation, was there something that you wanted to focus on today?

Mark Kreuger: Yeah, I think you brought it up: have things changed in Savannah? And I think that they have changed for most people, especially young people, but they haven't changed completely. I told you about all of the anti-gay incidents at my house and the last police officer who showed up said, and this is a quote I'll never forget it, "Look, I'm going to be honest with you. Your house is known as a gay house, and we are not going to do anything to help you." And then the black female police officer laughed and drove off. So, I realized then that the police were totally useless. In fact, they were often encouraging this sort of activity. So, I'm not religious. I went to talk to Reverend Ralph Bailey, a minister who lives up the street, because I was depressed, I didn't know what else to do. And he was wonderful and understanding. But he said, "Mark, you need to move."

So, when I left his place, I decided to do the opposite. I wasn't going to let these guys drive me out of my home, so I began going after them. I began chasing them. Not in high-speed chases. I held a neighborhood meeting at a church. It turns out there were a lot of incidents of people being beaten up, having things stolen. There's a gang in my neighborhood called the South Side Posse. All white, all male teenagers. I got the leader of the gang kicked out of the neighborhood, etc., etc. So, the things the police could have done to help me and to help my poor neighbors, who it turns out didn't trust the police either. One little gay faggot took down the South Side

Posse, so I'm very proud of that, but I'm very embarrassed by the inability of our police to do much of anything, so.

CJ: And when was that? Mark, do you remember right around the, the era that, that was? Was it late nineties? Mid-nineties?

MK: No, that would have been early 2000s. 2005, maybe 2010 at the latest. So, because I took action, almost all of the actions against me (verbally and etc.), most of them stopped. But there are two things I do want to talk about. There's a fellow who I don't know if he lives in my neighborhood or works in my neighborhood, but he's a fellow who puts up fences. And I've used him to put up four of my clients' fences because he does a good job. But he let me know right away he didn't like me because I was gay, and I said, "I know you don't like me. I don't like you. Just do a good job." But the last job he intentionally drove over my landscaping, and I said, "that's it." Well, I used to eat lunch at the restaurant at the Village at the Landings, along with many contractors. And every time he would see me, he'd walk by and say, "faggot" or "queer" under his voice. I was outside with my dog, and he drove by in his work truck and yelled "faggot", and I thought, "I didn't hear that." Well, I did because he repeated himself, and I thought, "Oh well, I hadn't heard that in quite a while." A week or two later, he tried to drive me off the road, tried to drive me into a ditch near my home. I had a couple of seconds to respond. I thought, "he's not going to sacrifice his truck or himself," so I kept on going. And the next time I saw him, he was at a convenience store getting in his truck. I stood behind him with a piece of paper and wrote down his license plate number and made sure that he saw me do that. So that happened two years ago.

The last pride in Forsyth Park, my friend Mark Hill was the head of it. I was watching the band, listening to the band on stage. It was a good band. I didn't know them. They were loud; the crowd was loud. I was at the very front, and they had portable metal barricades, which I was holding on to. I don't dance; I'm sixty-something. But I do move. All of a sudden, an arm came around and grabbed me by the neck and dragged me backwards through the crowd to the edge of the crowd and dumped me on the on the ground. I looked up and I thought, "I know you." It was a police officer. And I thought, "I know you." I said, "Why the blank did you do that?" He said that I was moving the metal barricades too much, and that he told me from behind to stop doing it, but I ignored him. I thought, "You could have tapped me on the shoulder. You could have come to my side; you could have come to the front of me." But I'm sure it's one of the officers I've dealt with before and he didn't like me, so he wasn't picking on any gay person—he was picking on Mark, the uppity gay person.

The singer in the band came up to me afterwards and said, "Why did he do that?" And I don't remember what I told her, but I wasn't in a good mood. I did tell Mark Hill, the head of Pride

that year, what happened briefly, but he was so busy, and we never talked about it again. So, those are two things that happened to me that the police got away with, my neighbor almost got away with.

So, things like that still continue, but much less than in the past. You now have gay groups, you've got gay student groups, so you've got visible gay people all around. But you still have a lot of Georgians (and about half of them still don't approve of gay marriage) that you kind of have to watch out for. But again, if you're not an uppity gay, if you don't wave the rainbow flag, if you don't confront the police, you're going to have a pretty good life in Savannah.

CJ: So, what are some of the other things that are, are big issues in Savannah, as far as gay people go? And, and we haven't really addressed some of the other groups besides gay men. We have addressed the some of the issues around racial separation between, between gay people. But what about the trans community? What are some of the issues that you think are facing the trans community in Savannah?

MK: They are a minority within a minority and there are a good number of gay people (and I include LGBTQ+) who don't like transgendered people. It amazes me. They don't. Some people don't want them included in the gay movement, and just don't like them. I don't, don't understand that. So, even within the gay community, some gay people put down transgender people. But I think transgender people in Savannah are some of the strongest people. They're willing to live their lives, even though they will face harassment, even within the gay community. They haven't had it easy. I know transgendered people who've been fired, who haven't been hired. So, they have it rough. And I admire them for standing up and being who they are.

CJ: Yeah, I was interviewing Mark Hill the other day, and, and he talked a lot about how the political situation of the last four, five years has really made it even more difficult for transgender people and for gay people in general. Since the last election would you think—would you say that people are a little bit more optimistic or hopeful?

MK: Well, I was definitely optimistic. If our former president had been reelected, I wouldn't have moved. But it would have been very depressing and maybe I would become even more politically active. But yeah, things don't always move forward. They can move forward and then they can move backwards for a bit. So, who we elect as leaders makes a big difference in how gay people, transgender people are treated. But it's tough being, especially a black transgendered person in Savannah. But I have to admire Lady Chablis. Lady Chablis—I don't know if she had the sex change or not; I don't remember.

CJ: Well, tell us a little bit about Lady Chablis because even I know about her. From not only reading the, the book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, but also, I actually met her at a

fundraising when I was in Savannah once, where I met some of your friends. Tell us a little bit about Lady Chablis because she's quite famous in the community.

MK: Lady Chablis was the first what people would consider openly gay person in Savannah. She didn't back down from anybody: the police, the society people. So, I admired her for that a great deal. The difference between her and Lawrence Marley: she wasn't doing it to broaden acceptance of gay people in Savannah. She was doing it for herself, and I don't blame her for that. She realized she had power, and she wasn't going to let anybody put her down. So, she stood up to people. But she wasn't necessarily politically active in changing entire community. But I give her credit for being the first visible gay person in Savannah. and I knew her fairly well. She had her, her issues. She was a unique character, and she—anytime I asked her to participate in one of my fundraisers, charity events, she was always there. Always an hour late, but she was always there. I admired her a great deal. And they had a great event at the Savannah Theater on Broughton Street for her, and it was wonderfully done. And there were hundreds and hundreds of people there remembering her.

CJ: Where is she today?

MK: She's dead.

CJ: When did she pass away?

MK: Within the last five years.

CJ: Hmm, yeah.

Mk: But, so, she wasn't forgotten. There were many people there who were remembering her.

CJ: Ah, at her memorial service. Yeah, she was, she's somebody that I would have loved to interview for this series as well, given her reminiscences and, and her experiences, and—you know, I'm hoping that I can interview some people from the trans community and also some lesbian. And that's why I'm so looking forward to talking with Pat because I think all these perspectives are really interesting. Now, I was informed that the mayor has, has a pretty diverse community representation for, for the LGBTQ+ community in terms of a advisory panel. Is that true?

MK: The mayor has set up an advisory panel of some good people, some people I'm not wild about. But what is the panel going to do? The mayor and I have known each other for a long time. He's very pro-police. He has not done anything to help the gay community in terms of the police. They did set up (not with him, but a prior administration) a gay liaison to the police

community or police liaison to the gay community. A lesbian police officer. And as I told Van, it's totally useless. They didn't do anything. They didn't help one gay person. He said, "Well, isn't it good that we at least have this liaison?" I said, "If you want window dressing, it's fine. But if they don't do anything, if they actually don't do anything, it's, it's useless."

So, I think this new committee that he put together—maybe it's a step in the right direction, but I don't think Van is ever going to come up against the police. He's going to say the right things, but he's not going to do what needs to be done to change the police department at all.

CJ: So, what do you think needs to be done to change the police department?

MK: Well, I think that they need to hire—they hire a lot of ex-military people who know how to shoot guns, who know how to deal with bank robberies. They don't hire people who know how to deal with the average citizen, with domestic violence etc. So, I think that they need to change their hiring practices. The people on top at the police department say the right things, but as I've had officers on the street tell me, they don't listen to those blankety blank people downtown. So, it's got to start from the top and the bottom, and they've got to change the culture in the police department.

CJ: Okay.

MK: I do want to say a little bit about when I was assaulted downtown, and he told me just to stop my whining and go home and forget about it. And I did go and get the police report a couple of weeks later, and it was just totally, totally inaccurate. He said that I—that alcohol was a part of it. I knew I wasn't drunk, and that's why I went out to the EMT building to get their file on me because it said no alcohol. And that was fifteen minutes after he saw me. In addition, if he thought I was drunk, why did he tell me to get my truck and go home and drive home? Which he did repeatedly. So, he was willing to lie, he was willing to make me—try to, try to make me look bad. And usually, they get away with it. So, anyway, they need to change the culture in the police department and just hire—the person on top isn't going to do it.

CJ: Okay. What are some of the other issues that we raised during our last conversation that we wanted to continue. I know we were talking about challenges for the future. How have things changed? And from some other interviews I was hearing that, that in general most gay people feel pretty good about going to most venues in the city. Are there any neighborhoods where gay people still are not welcome, would you say? Especially if they're openly gay?

MK: My neighborhood, Pooler-Port Wentworth, the suburbs. The city where I lived for many years, I never had any problems. But the suburbs, you have to watch out. You know, and it's not just the teenagers; it's the parents who teach their kids it's okay to harass and, you know, bother

gay people. So, you know, I've known people who've had graffiti spray painted on their house, on their driveway. Anti-gay people living in Richmond Hill, etc. So, I'd be careful. There are no real pure gay bars in Savannah anymore, so I don't know if the college-age, military, the teenage kids who used to go out on a Saturday night, look for a queer beat up. I don't know if they have as many visible places to go anymore. The gay community is more spread out. So, maybe that helps a little bit.

I would like to talk about religion; I think I've got an interesting story. It's a little bit pornographic at the end, so if there are any children watching and listening to this, they might want to change. But religion is the other thing, besides the police—churches in general have been putting gay people down. There are only a few a handful of churches in Savannah that are considered gay friendly.

Anyway, there's a church—big church, Bible Baptist. And the minister, Reverend Cecil Hodges had a column in every Saturday religion section of the newspaper (the local newspaper), and it looked like a column, but it was actually a paid advertisement. And he would occasionally, you know, bring down gay people. “They were bad, with this, that, they were horrible.” So, I got kind of tired of it, and I thought, “Where does this son of a bitch live? He's profiting off of us. He's got this big church.” So, he was in the phone book, and I was just gonna drive by his house. But when I saw the property; he looked on his own little private island, and he had a long causeway going to his own little private island. And that was okay, but what bothered me was he had sign after signs saying, “Keep out. Private property. You will be prosecuted” sign after sign. and I thought, this man, supposedly he says he speaks for God, and yet he's telling all these people to stay away. So, I drove down the causeway and I said, “Don't do it, Mark; don't do it.” But each sign just prompted me to, to go all the way to his island where he had the luxury travel trailer. Not a trailer, travel trailer where you drive it. He had a putting green with a golf flag and a luxury car. And I said, “Mark, don't do it.” But I went and rang the doorbell. His wife came to the door, and I said, “I wanted to talk to Reverend Hodges.”

She let me in. The living room was all white: the carpeting was white, the furniture was white, the walls were white, she was dressed in white. I thought, “Oh, they've created their own their own heaven in their, their house here.” And he came out, and I explained why I was there. And things turned nasty real quick. He began yelling; I began yelling. “You know, your perverts are going to hell, etc. etc. etc.” And I brought up the signs and how he was profiting off of his anti-gay rhetoric. And so, I slowly backed up to the door. And as I was at the door, he said something that he thought he would have me on, that I couldn't respond to it. I would have to say, “Oh, you're right, Reverend Hodges.” And I had a retort. Normally, I think a bit of blocker a day later. But I had to retort immediately, which I was sort of proud of. But he said, “You put your penis in a man's shithole.” And he shouted that. He shouted it. And I said, “You put your penis in your wife's pisshole.”

I thought at that there's nothing more to say, so I left. As I got to the street, a police car showed up, and I just kept on going. I drove by a couple of blocks—a couple of weeks later, all of those signs had been removed. So, if nothing else, I did something. And to the best of my recollection, the anti-gay columns were diminished or ceased. We got the newspaper to require that it's a pad-paid advertising up on his column. So, that's one religion story. But I have others.

CJ: Any positive ones? Because you were telling me that there were some religious leaders and churches that were really helping.

MK: The Reverend Michael Elliott. He was the head of Union Mission, homeless shelter. Did all sorts of good things for people with AIDS. Women, men, everybody. He was brilliant. He was the most Christian person I've ever met because he was willing to help anybody, and he didn't judge. So, Michael Elliot is brilliant. Unfortunately, he has cancer now, but he's a brilliant fellow.

Asbury Church on Waters and Anderson was gay friendly, but they wouldn't perform any ceremonies (would it be called? Not the marriage ceremony, but the commitment ceremonies) or anything like that. So, they accepted gay people as their congregants but wouldn't do anything to signify that they were, you know, gay and in a relationship. There were a few small churches but, no, in general, it was the police and the churches and some politicians that made our life, my life especially miserable.

As an example, Independent Presbyterian Church is a beautiful church on Bull Street. Prominent corner, beautiful church. And an acquaintance of mine said, "Mark, they're going to ask the county commission to pass an anti-gay resolution, identical to what Cobb County did before the Olympics." So, I looked it over and said, "Yeah, gay citizens are not acceptable in Chatham County."

CJ: So, this is back in the nineties?

MK: Right after the Olympics, right around the Olympics.

CJ: Uh huh.

MK: I called Terry Anderson, Rev., and Anderson and said, "Is this really going to happen?" And he said yes. I said, "What do your gay members of your congregation think about this?" He said, "We have four hundred members. None of them are gay." And I said, "Well, one of them is obviously, because he's the one who gave me this." But it let me know how out of touch he was with his own congregants. And the same sort of thing: I looked him up in the phone book, went

to his house. Big beautiful house, expensive house. Rang the doorbell. His wife came to the door, and I explained why I was there. She said, “Well, he can't talk now. We're having a party for one of our daughters, and it would be inconvenient.” And I simply said something like, “You're trying to make my entire life inconvenient. I don't appreciate it.” And I left. There was no shouting.

But one reason gay people in the past, especially, have been beaten up, have been picked on—it's because the people who do it, get away with it—it's because people don't confront these jackasses. So, I don't know what's in me, but Lawrence Marley's the one who got me started on this. Realizing that you have to confront these people, hopefully diplomatically at first. But if that doesn't work sometimes, you have to go further. And Lawrence Marley is the one that did that. I'm a shy person all in all. Lawrence Marley, who started the gay community, he wasn't here at the beginning; he was the beginning of the gay community. At one point said, “Mark, I need somebody to stand with me in front of the TV cameras or whatever, in front of a reporter.” And I didn't want to; I was reluctant, but he was a good friend, and I realized what he was doing had to be done. So, that's how I got involved in it through Lawrence Marley. Standing at his side, usually not saying anything. But he needed some—somebody to stand with him. And little by little, we got more people to stand with us.

I do have a kind of a fun story. It's a bit different. Lawrence especially tried to get the gay community to have a presence in the St. Patty's Parade a float. And we were told, “no it's—we're, not Irish, etc.,” even though we had Irish members who were willing to be on the float. And I thought—we thought, you know, they, they have military units, they have tanks, they have the Budweiser beer wagon here. But we're not accepted. And we applied many times.

One time, John Berendt, who wrote the book *Midnight and the Garden of Good and Evil* called me because Lawrence, in his application, did some things that infringed on his copyrights. And he said, “Mark, I'm gonna sue y'all unless you, you take that, that stuff out.”

But the Martin Luther King Parade, they accepted us immediately. The first time, we had four or five, six people who said that they would be in our, our entourage. We rented a horse-drawn carriage, so they put us at the end of the parade because the horse poop, I guess. Nobody showed up but me. And I thought, “Lordy, we had some rainbow flags. I'm gonna put some rainbow flags on the carriage.” Nobody showed but me, and I thought, “Do I want to do this?” But I, I did. So, I don't know how many people in the parade route even knew that I was—it was a gay entrance, entrant. But afterwards, the driver of the carriage said, “You weren't the only gay person in our—in this group because the horse is homosexual.” So, but, then the next year, next year, we had three people the next year, we had four or five people. And, you know, at one point we had ten or fifteen people with lots of rainbow flags. And ninety percent of the people who

responded were “yay” [claps]—a few people were anti, but all in all, we felt very welcome in the Martin Luther King Parade. But not the Saint Patrick’s Parade.

CJ: So, I was talking to a few other people who were mentioning how important this project is. What would you like to see happen with this archival project?

MK: I would love to see somebody like you write a book, make it into a movie. You could have interesting chapters. It could be like *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, which is sort of non-fiction and sort of fiction. So, I don't want it to sit on a shelf and collect dust. I want it to be something that somebody could profit off of, even if they want to. But I don't want the story to be, to die. I don't want it to be the most dominant story about the gay community in Savannah because young people especially, they need to know about that stuff. But I want them to think positively think about the things they can accomplish in life. But yeah, the story needs to be there forever and ever in some form. Ideally a book, and ideally book that you would write, and somebody would make money off of it. And that would make me happy. Hopefully you would donate some to the Gay Community Center. But that would be my, my ideal goal. I’m not a writer. I’m not going to do it. But I’m happy to talk to anybody who wants to do it.

CJ: Yeah, well, as a volunteer interviewer, I’m really enjoying all of the people that I’m interviewing and getting a lot of ideas, which I’m jotting down for the archival project. And I think, you know, in future, we may want to have a meeting about what are some of the big issues that were raised and some of the good stories. Because, you know, we all know that people like to read and watch a good story. So, I’m trying to collect stories, reminiscences, funny, poignant, tragic. All of that are very, very important. So, yeah, I think it's a, it's a, would be a great idea to pull together some resources to actually turn this into something in writing or maybe on film. But for now, I’m really grateful to you for really instigating. I know a few people have thought about this for a while, but you were really the instigator to, to pull together good people from the archives project, like Luciana and Kelly and the folks down at the Municipal Archives. So, I do hope that we're going to see some good things come out of this project. And unless you have something else that you'd like to talk about today, I want to thank you for participating in this interview.

MK: I have lots of more interesting stories, but I think this is it for today. I really appreciate you're doing this—Luciana doing this. You know, I’ve I feel like a little weight is off my shoulders now.

CJ: Ah, that's so, that, well that's really important to me, today, for—you know, because I know you and I know how passionate you are about, about the history and, and all of the issues that are still really impacting the LGBTQ+ community in Savannah. So, I thank you, and I look forward to seeing you soon.

End of interview.