

**City of Savannah Municipal Archives
Proud Savannah History Project
Interview: Gene Graves
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 Monday, November 22nd, 2021. It is 10 AM. I am Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Gene Graves for the Proud Savannah History Project. We are conducting this interview in Savannah, Georgia via Zoom. Thank you for joining us today. Let's start by having you tell us your full name, and please spell your name.

Gene Graves: Okay. It's, it's actually Billy Eugene Graves, the second. Gene Graves. G-e-n-e G-r-a-v-e-s.

LB: And please tell us your pronouns and how you identify.

GG: [illegible].

LB: And when and where were you born?

GG: In 1953. I was born at Fort McPherson, Georgia, which is now, I think, Tyler Perry's studios in south Atlanta.

LB: And when did you move to Savannah and why?

GG: I moved to Savannah in 1995. Middle of '95. Actually, I moved to Tybee Island. I was forced to retire due to an AIDS diagnosis. I had lost my partner of thirteen years that, that—in '94. And I retired at the end of '95. And moved down to Tybee Island, where I had relatives on both Tybee and Wilmington Island. Favorite relatives. And it was one of those deals. I wanted to live while I was live—it was before the cocktail. So, that's why I moved and when I moved to Tybee Island, yeah.

LB: So, what were your first experiences like in Savannah? What do you remember when you first got here in 1995 about the community?

GG: Well, I—what surprised me, I guess—I, you know, I've been in a committed relationship for thirteen years, lived in the same home in a cocoon, I guess, you know, in, in Atlanta. And what was interesting to me was I felt like I was, I was afraid. I was like coming out again. When I, I—one of the first things I did to try to connect to the community was to go to what they call Boys Night Out. It was a dinner gathering. They, they did back, back in the day. And my hesitancy, I actually sat at the bar rather than going to the table. I was—the whole, the whole time. And I couldn't believe that. And so, it just kind of reminded me that, you know, it's a lifelong process. You know, coming out, being yourself. But I do remember that. I started going to the First City Network, which was the organization that was—started way back when. In large part, I believe in response to the AIDS Crisis of the time. And they were my outlet. They were wonderful. And my, my aunt and my uncle, they, they would go with me, so I had someone to join me. And I came to know some, some good people. And I was—got rather ill in '96. But the cocktail came out—I actually was on a clinical trial. The cocktail came out in '97. And got my health back. And I, I said—I was enjoying going to the socials. Also, I was checking out the town and going to the bars. The, the whole thing. I was a single man. And I, I felt Savannah would be very, very welcoming. Very, very welcoming. Yeah, I—very welcoming.

LB: So, what places specifically can you remember that you visited in Savannah? Was there one specific that you feel like needs to be recorded? Or any others that might be gone now that need to be remembered? That you visited?

GG: Well, yes. This bar comes to mind. It was a bar I loved. It was a good place to hang out. Just hang out and, and meet people and of all rank and file. But let me get back to the First City Network. I—after going to the socials and, and, and then finally, you know, making it to Boys Night Out. And I decided to get involved. And, and, so, I started—I think it was in 1997 when I ran for the board. And, and they were—it was a very small board and a big transition time for, for, for First City Network. I think I became the secretary right away and got my first computer through FCN, sitting in my house because we didn't have a place.

And so, back to your question, in 1999, First City Network and the gay teen group that I was highly involved in found a home. And we—and our first meetings were held at behind the Jingle Bell Church on the Harris Street. And our First City Network offices and where Standout Youth, Standout met for a number of years. Many years, actually. So, that, that was it was a unique place. And a special place. And it was the first time First City Network had a home outside of someone else's, you know, dining room table. And so, that was a big transition time.

And, and we had work. I was working with some very committed activists at the time. Kevin Clark and, the late Henry Frost, his partner. They, they lived it. I—you know, and Henry, I, I think had the same—was coming from the same place I was. He, he was a dealing with HIV. And, and, and he—so, he retired. And he came to Savannah with, you know, with football [?] and intention he was going to use his time, you know, in, in the area that he felt like he could be most effective.

And so, anyway. First City Network—*Network News* newspaper, I did the advertising. I worked with Henry in distribution right around—. So, one point in time, you know, we're hitting all the

bars, putting out the *Network News* newspaper, you know, every month. Worked with a great editor. A, a straight, retired gentleman, Mr. Parker, for a long time with the newspaper.

And then and—to move on. In 2000, late 2000s, there was a gay teen group that had been started within FCN by Martha Womack, a clinical psychiatrist, and Jamie Murray, who was the department head at the School of Social Work at Savannah State. They had a monthly group. And that had been going on for—since they've been—not been nineties, I guess. And they hadn't made some money at one point in time, a couple of thous or so. At some booth, you know. And, and had given it to the youth group, the FCN. And that became the seed money to actually get our—that space. It was like three months' rent. And so, we got the contract with the Unitarian Universalist Church. And, and the youth group had a place to meet.

And Orlando Montoya who was also—who had arrived in Atlanta at a similar time and had gotten involved on the board. He—well, let me back up. Martha and Jamie, after inviting me to help facilitate a few times, they, they were ready to turn the thing over. You know, they were very busy professionals. And I was retired. And so, Martha knowing my background in Atlanta—working with many, many young gay folks, as it was a mecca, and I worked for a number of years for a restaurant company that was also a mecca for gay people once they moved to Atlanta from all over the southeast. And so, among other had a lot of experience with, with young, young gay folks. And, and so, we—for a year or so, we did that. And, you know, and people's memories—if you're, if you're fifteen, sixteen, eight—you know, your memory, a month is a lifetime, you know. So, it just never got really off the ground. There was never anybody coming.

And so, Orlando came—had a, a youth named Joe Florenza, who was another of many co-founders of the youth group there for First City Network. He had gotten in touch with Orlando Montoya. And Orlando had come up with a, like, a three-part plan of how the youth group would grow and become a more professional with, you know, with our folks that—on, on the boards that, that we would be accountable to, that were professionals in the field. And, and the beginning thing was to go weekly. And so, we started a weekly, a weekly youth group. And that was Orlando. I don't think, you know, he was there in person, but it was his, his, his plans on, on the—and we followed. And, and Joe. Who was sixteen at the time. Lived in Richmond Hill, which was, you know, out of the boonies. His father was in Iraq. He was—he came along at the right time. And, and with his promise that he would be there every week. You know, it's a youth here that there would be someone there, you know, other than just a couple of adult facilitators. We started a weekly group. And it, it did very, very well. And grew. After a couple of years, I left. And for a short time, Ernie Lee—who was one time Georgia Teacher of the Year—he briefly took over. And at that point in time, the group became incorporated.

From the very beginning, Robert Dunn, Bob Dunn's, mother, Mary—Marianne, she was there. I had met her. We were both on Tybee. And she actually helped me. I, I, I thought I was, you know, not gonna live very long, and I quit filing my taxes for a couple of years. And she was one of—she kind of got me out of that. And so, we became friends. And, and she was there twenty years with that youth group, being the treasurer and helping with mapping out with our successful grants along the way.

And then her—once the youth group was incorporated, in like 2005, somewhere along the way, Robert “Bob” Dunn came along. And he really—part of the plan was to, you know, have a full-time person, you know, running this youth group. And I was, I was, like, even an interim director, you know, from the very beginning. I was never meant to be the guy that ran the place. But he, he came into it and put all his energy and, and expertise, and, and really, really grew the group. And I can't say enough about the work he did with the youth here and the people he was able to bring in from SCAD, from Georgia Southern. I can't even begin to mention their names. But there was a core group of people there that made the youth group really alive there for, for some time. And, and it still prevails. I—goes under a different name now, and it has gotten back under the umbrella, I thought, of the Pride Center now. And I believe it's a weekly youth group. And that and—there continues to be a need for a youth group. So.

LB: So, at one time you sat on the board for—with First City Network. Can you talk about your experience being on the board? And what your, what your level of participation with First City Network was like?

GG: Well, I was very active. Like I say in the very beginning, you know, I'm talking about I, I joined '97, you know. And then we said I was the secretary. And ran around doing the newspaper. It was my, it was my main, main attraction. It was what I did. It was my, it was my attempt at social life. And it was also attempt at taking the time I had to do what was important—I felt was important. That I had the—you know, it's best to have the opportunity to do, which was spend a lot of time volunteering, volunteering. Yeah, it was—you know, I was highly involved. There were some people that I came to know very well. I can men—roll off. Kevin, Henry that I spoke of. Mark Krueger, who is the ultimate activist. A—truly the ultimate activist. And, and Orlando. I could, I could go on, and on. People.

Remember our first little brochure that the youth group put out was a—our teacher named Julie and taught in, in the Chatham County schools. She—we used the old-fashioned. We pasted pictures and, and, and rolled it off in the machine. You know, this was—like I said, I got my first computer, it was FCNs, and probably my first cell phone was when we decided to have a live telephone for any youth that was to call. You know, so often times, you know, it's 3:15 in the afternoon. You know, and so.

Anyway, that, that was a long time ago. But I, I left Savannah actually in October '99. And so, basically my first five years, I lived fifty-five miles south, just north of Brunswick in Darien, Georgia. Is where I live now. And have for twenty-two years. But my first year—my first five years down here was, like, three, four days a week up in Savannah, you know. It was, it was my world. And, you know, those we still don't have a red light in this county. And—but the beer got too expensive on Tybee, and so, I moved down here. And it's, it's been, it's been nice. It's very secluded. It's lonely sometimes in Eulonia. It's the, the exit.

But the youth group following me down here. And, and, oh gosh, they don't—yes, it's been ten years ago, twelve years ago. We had a openly gay student at the McIntosh Academy School here where I am in McIntosh County. And Standout Youth came in under the direction of Bob Dunn and got Lambda Legal involved. And we're prepared to sue the Board of Education down here to get a, a youth group established within, within the school. This guy has, has moved on. He

joined—he was in the army for—the Navy for eight years. And, and now he's, he's trans, transgender—transitioning. So. Anyway, there's gays in McIntosh county, too. So.

LB: Can you talk about your experiences or the experience in Savannah about the AIDS Crisis when you came to Savannah? Do you remember what it was like at that time?

GG: When I moved to Tybee in '95, the cocktail not come out. And so, it was still, you know, pretty much, you know, death, death row. And, and so, that was the state of affairs at that time. I— after a couple of years—say I moved down here in October of '99—I, within the year, I, I had to go to public health for assistance. My insurance, you know, bill was becoming a thousand a month. And, you know, what have you. And, and so, I got involved in a group that's part of the Ryan White Program. And I sat on the board there for several years. And ultimately, I didn't turn out on all of them, I guess, to get too—it—too, too, too involved, too excited, too passionate, I guess. But, so there, yeah. I was very aware of what was going on.

And but then—now this all came along again in the late nineties, and Savannah lost a lot of people. But Savannah was a very blue book. This all under the—you know, it was all very hush hush. The, the gay community was—you know, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* is, is very true. You know, if you, if you didn't live in Savannah, you might think it was overdone. But it's not. You know, it's kind of quiet. And I think a lot of people moving to, to town decided not to be so reserved and to speak of things and push. And, and—that's—.

But then the cocktail came along, and things changed dramatically, of course. I'm, I'm here [laughs]. After going through two clinical trials, I've been—I'm a very lucky man. But I think things did change dramatically. There were six or seven bars in Savannah when I moved here, as far as I know. I haven't been to a bar in Savannah in a dozen years. But I—when I was there, there were a lot of them. And now, I think it's just, just one. Another significant time was 2000. The year 2000 when Savannah had their first Pride Festival, and, and maybe one of their best. It was very well taken done. A guy that never gets credit for all he has done, you know, literally, physically done for the gay communities is Bobby Jeffries. Who was a co, co-chair along with a lady named Carol Ryles that did that first Pride Festival. And, and there's been, of course, our presence there over the years. And I'm glad to know that it's still it's, still, it still goes on. And it's still a need for such. Yeah.

LB: So, you were talking about how Savannah was very reserved and quiet, but then there were new people that moved to town that were more active. Do you feel that Savannah has opened up more to the LGBTQ community, or not? Do you feel like there has been some progress, or do you feel like there's not been enough progress?

GG: Oh, there's been tons of progress in the last twenty years. And, and I don't mean to diminish any local, native Savannahians that, you know, might have been out there, you know. But it's as overall it was a very reserved place. And, and, and if you didn't die of AIDS, you died of something else. You know, if you—somebody passed away—. And yes, come a long, long way. And, and, and the First City Network was a vital part of, of that, that changed. That it was a vehicle, I think, for so much of that change. Georgia Equality, which Kevin Clark is very, very involved with. They and, and a number of other ones. Bobby Jeffries one comes to mind. They—

again, there's so many people that got involved in the politics. First City Network, non-political of the town. And there were, you know, city proclamations that we—that—non-discriminatory proclamations that were pushed through that might not, you know, not might not have made it, you know, had it not been for people that weren't born here. You know, they decided to make it home.

But no, Savannah is—I, I found to be, to be very gay-friendly. And things have changed so dramatically. You know, five years ago, you know, couldn't get married. And, and, you know, now every, everybody I know is married and been together forty years. And, and all that. And so, it's been dramatic change. But as far as the city goes, I, I think it's, you know, it's open as any large urban area, for an area, a city of its size. It's got, it's got the concerts. It's got the tourists. It's got the, the transitional people, you know, just due to the water. You know, it's, it's a, it's a wonderful place. And, and, and I think the gay community is a very vital part of it and has been for, for a long time. So. Yeah, I think it's, it's, it's great. It's unbelievable to me, especially young people. They just [laughs]—it just doesn't matter anymore. It's somewhat, you know, in large part. But, I mean, Savannah, you know, there are parts of town, you know, like, in every urban area, this places where, you know, there's acceptance of diversity. And then there's places where there's not. Just, like, all the other minority lack of acceptance. So.

LB: So, having worked with youth for such a long time, what would you tell young people today or those coming along in the future that you would want them to know about?

GG: Well. One, one thing. If I meet a youth, and, and they're coming out—you see, I didn't come out till I was twenty-five. And my whole sexual emotional growth, you know, it's stunted. And that's, that's why I went to work with, with young people when I had the opportunity to, to work with—do what I wanted to do. And I was out of high school. As far as I know, I had never met—laid eyes on, on a homosexual. I, I, like I said, I went through college. I graduated from University of Georgia and—before I came out. And so, I was in serious denial, serious denial of depression and blah blah. So, there are some youth have to come out, and there's some that ponder it, you know, how to go about it. And then be like me and float through forever, you know, without—just not dealing with it. Your sexuality.

But, so, back to your question, one thing I would say to any youth that I met was: when you, when—you, you, you've got to be yourself. You, you, you've got to know yourself. It's a lifelong process. We're all coming out, you know, you know, in our own way. It's blossoming as people over time. But when you come out publicly, you have to remember you're dragging your parents along with them. You're, you're actually forcing them out. Their—they don't have that choice that you made to come out publicly or, or to, you know, be who you are. But just keep in mind that it's, it's, it's, it's—it can be just as difficult, if not more so, you know, for, you know, for the parents or the siblings of a gay person. And they need to keep being very sensitive to that, very sensitive, that because you're, you're bringing, like, you're adding a lot of people with you. So, I, I think that's good advice. If there's any good advice. But to just be sensitive to that. But certainly, don't repress yourself. Don't, don't repress yourself. And just appreciate the consequences of what you're, what you're up to. The lower you—the, the, the--well, I won't get philosophical anymore. But that would be what I would have to say to it—to a youth. Get on

with it and be who you are as quick as you can. And, and carry on. You know, like all of us, like all of us.

LB: You said that you had been in a committed relationship before and you had lost your partner before you came to Tybee Island—the Savannah area. Are you currently in a committed relationship?

GG: No. And I've remained single since. We were committed. We lived in the same home. and for thirteen years, he was the school teacher and I ran restaurants. And, and it was a great time. And I, I had to retire at forty-one, forty-two, or whatever. And that's—briefly after that, after losing Michael, I moved—is when I moved. No, I was in a long-term relationship—a long-distance relationship with someone who lived in San Diego, California for about seven years. And that was fun, and we traveled together. And I was spending my late partners' inheritance but while I, while I could live. Live while I was living. And, and, and then that's been about it. Someone like me carry a lot of baggage, you know, when you're walking around with AIDS. You know, when you, you're not—you have no money, and you're not gonna make any money, it's, you know, it's, it's—I'm, I'm very content being a single person. But, but no, I haven't had a—I've not been in a committed relationship since.

LB: What does the Proud Savannah History Project mean to you when you heard about the project? What did you think about it?

GG: Well, I, I, I didn't know anything about it. So, I have looked and seen that it is a project whose intent or purpose is to bring to light the diversity of Savannah, the, the, you know, whether it be the neighborhood, or you know this—the Pride part, history of the politics. I, I think it's a, you know, it's a great project. It's a great project because history is a fluid thing, you know. And everybody has their own perspectives and, and, and all that stuff. So, I think bringing these, these folks together in the way they see the history of Savannah, how it has trans—you know, transpired in our lifetimes. You know, is a great, great project. Happy to be a part of it. Thank you.

LB: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your experiences in the LGBTQ+ community and its history in Savannah? Anything I have not touched on, or that you feel is important to record?

GG: I wish a lot of younger gay people had the opportunity to be exposed to gay couples who have been together for forty years, you know, they're sixty-somethings. You know, my best friends couples have been together for forty-five years, you know, twenty-five years. To sell, you know—because there really isn't—you know, once again, things have changed so dramatically in, in the last twenty years. I can't say enough about the progress. But not, not to say that there's not a long way to go, you know, just like racism comes to mind. But yeah, I, I, I, I, I, I'm happy to see that, you know, there are couples out in public, you know, that are middle-aged men. Yeah, and, and I'm glad to see that. I'm glad to see that. That's good for everybody, especially the youth. But thank you. Thank you.

LB: Thank you for sharing your history with us today. I really appreciate it.

GG: Thank you. I'd say I enjoyed it.

End of interview.