

City of Savannah Municipal Archives

Proud Savannah History Project

Interview: Tracy Walden

Interviewed by Luciana Spracher, March 18, 2022, 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.

Luciana Spracher: Okay. Today is March 18, 2022. It is about 3: 38 PM. This is Luciana Spracher, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Tracy Walden for the Savannah Proud History Project. We are conducting this interview online via Zoom. Thank you for joining me today.

Tracy Walden: Oh, thanks for having me.

LS: Great. So, let's start by having you tell us your full name.

TW: Tracy Walden.

LS: Okay. And when and where were you born?

TW: I was born in 1965, and I'm not even ashamed of that. I earned these years. Every one of them. In fact, my birthday was just a couple days ago, on the twelfth. And I was born to an Air Force father, so my, my parents were traveling in the air force. I was born in Germany.

LS: And when did you move to Savannah?

TW: I joined the U.S. Marine Corps in 1985 and got out of the Marine Corps in Beaufort. And so, I got out of the Marine Corps when I was pregnant with my daughter, Lindsay. And moved right over here to Savannah and started taking courses at Armstrong. And there was a hiring thing at the event at the police department, and I put in for it. And that's the beginning of my story.

LS: So, wait what year did you join the police department?

TW: In 1995.

LS: And how do you self-identify?

TW: A female lesbian.

LS: So, this is sort of a very broad general question, but how would you describe your involvement with Savannah's LGBTQ+ community?

TW: I have been pretty involved from a law enforcement standpoint. I had to walk a very fine line because I was with the police department, but I also was part of the LGBTQ+ community. And so, I was always involved with the community back when it was First City Network organization. And, you know, working with them, answering questions they had about why officers do what the things that they do and what was the thought process and what are the policies and procedures. And so, I was able to be part of that group of being able to educate people and, and relieve people's fears when, when something—when information that was wrong would get out there, I was able to step in, and say, “No, this is this is what's going on.” So, I have been part of the—that community since I've been in Savannah.

LS: So, at the time you joined the police department you were already out already? So, as a police officer joining the force, everybody in the police department already knew that you were out?

TW: Yes. As a matter of fact, I was the first out and “here's who I am person” ever to be hired up with that status on the police department. So, that the chief said, “I appreciate you telling me this. That must have been, that was brave of you to tell me this in our interview. And you're the kind of person we want.” And so, he hired me right on the carpet. So, I was the first one to actually be an out of the closet LGBTQ+ person to be hired with the police department.

LS: So, both male and female?

TW: Yes.

LS: And how do you feel that you were received amongst the ranks?

TW: I, I'm gonna be honest, I never had a problem. I never, I—when I was assigned to my first precinct, I said, “I, you know, if you guys talk about your spouse's, or your girlfriends, or boyfriends, I'm going to talk about mine. And so, if y'all have, if you all have a problem with that, then, you know, let me know now.” And I never got anything but support. Just nothing but support.

LS: Was there—over the time—and how long did you serve on the force? So, '95. So, what, that was twenty-seven years?

TW: Twenty-seven years.

LS: Over that twenty-seven years, was there language that you heard or a change in language about how people in the force talked about the LGBTQ community or members of the community? Just in their daily language?

TW: I think that every now and then there would be a, a, a small, nothing really horrific. I mean, they never, they never used slang that was truly egregious or hurtful. But then, you know, I would be able to say, “You know, that’s—here’s, here’s the information about that.” And, and they were always very receptive. But I’m going to say that that was very rare. Very few, few and far between. We all—in my whole career, there was only one person. Not an officer; they were a civilian employee. They didn’t—they weren’t here very long at all. And they were in a, in a supervisory position. And they made a comment that was very homophobic towards me. And I filed my grievance. And I tried to talk to him, and then that didn’t work. And I filed my grievance. And, and it—because of all kinds of things with this particular employee, not just my grievance, but just things, he didn’t last long anyways. And then he was on his way. And that was the only single incident that I ever had that I ever felt uncomfortable.

LS: Okay. So, you also played you—you alluded to it with the education, but you were identified as a liaison that—I mean that was an actual like position or role, right? That you had on the force. Can you talk a little bit about how that came to be, and when that was formed?

TW: So. Back when Chief Gellatly was here, back in the—when I came on, he actually hired me. He was trying to understand this growing group of people in his community. And there had been an incident that he was concerned about. And so, whenever he would have questions, he would call me, and he would say, “I don’t, I don’t know if you can answer this or not, but I’d like to get your take on this. And, and get the feel of what the community take on this is. I’d like to understand a little bit better.” And I always appreciated him when he would call and say, you know, “Can you put on this hat for me and, and talk to me, and talk me through this?”

And so, so it was, it was unofficial. It was informal. And that’s the way it would go through several more chiefs. And they would just call me up because I was still, for a long, long time—though we had LGBTQ+ people on the department, there was very few of them really that was “here’s who I am.” Because there were still, there was still fear that there would be problems. I never experienced them. But you have to understand it was still the nineties, in the early 2000s, and there, there was still that fear of it still wasn’t overly accepted. So, the chiefs would call me and say, you know, “Well, what do you think about this? And can you reach out to these people, and can you let them know that I’m—my door is open and that they can call me?” And then when Chief Burko came in, he—members of the LGBTQ community, including Pam.

LS: And that would be Pam Miller for the record.

TW: Yes, yep. And, and Kevin Clark, and, and, and those folks, went to the chief and said, you know, “We really would like this to be some a formal thing. We would like it to be on your website. We would like for our people to—our members of the community—to be able to reach out to an officer that they trust when they have questions about encounters with officers.” And so, Burko agreed and made it an official position. And it went on to our website.

LS: So, now you’ve retired. Do you—have they—are they going to appoint a replacement, that you know of?

TW: I had a brief conversation with Chief Minter, but I, I, I couldn't tell you one way or the other where that was concerned.

LS: Okay. So, how, how do—you would you describe Savannah? Just the community in general. So, not the police department. How would you describe Savannah's current relationship with the LGBTQ community?

TW: I think that Savannah is an incredible environment and the city as a whole is an incredible environment for, for folks from the LGBTQ+ community. Savannah overwhelmingly is open. And, and not just tolerance, but accepting. And there's a huge difference between those two words. People can be tolerant, and then people can be accepting. And with the City of Savannah, we are just so incredibly diverse. I mean, we have every imaginable walks of life out there. We have, you know, we've got Savannah College of Art Design, which has brought a lot of acceptance in our—like I said a minute ago, the police department, in my opinion, has always been very open and accepting. And so, I think that this is just an amazing community for folks from this segment of our community to live in.

LS: And have you always felt that way since you came in '95, or has it changed? Has it, you know, become more accepting?

TW: I, I was never disappointed or anything. I mean, I was never—you know, there was never a time that I thought, "Oh, this is not good." But has, has society—not just Savannah, but society as a whole—become more accepting? Absolutely. I—you know, now, you know, when my—when I came on, it was, you know, acceptance of the Ls and the Gs in that acronym. I think we're way past that now. And the Ls and the Gs are fine. It's, it's the Ts that we, that we need to, you know, focus on, and we need to bring awareness to, and education to the public. And, and I think that that's happening. But that wasn't the case when I came on. You know, I, I—they, they accepted me. And I think that the broader Savannah accepted LGBTQ+. But, you know, there, there's always room for growth. And, and I think that we are growing still, and, and in a, in a good direction still.

SP: Yeah. Yeah. So, you—Mayor, our current mayor Van Johnson has set up a number of task force as part of his administration. One being Savannah Proud Task Force. And you're, you're appointed in the first group of members of that task force. Talk a little bit about that task force and what its role is in you know pushing the Savannah community forward.

TW: So, just to give you a little bit of background. Years ago—and I can't I couldn't tell you the exact year—probably about ten, maybe twelve years ago. The Human Rights Campaign came through and did a, a survey. Or that they—we got a report card on what—even though the City of Savannah was inclusive, more inclusive than most other communities, how are we doing as far as employees, LGBT+ —LGBTQ+ employees, what were our policies, what kind of trainings did we do. And we didn't do well. In fact, the fact that we had the LGBTQ+ liaison with the police department were—gave us the only points that we had. So, it was pitiful. Not that we weren't doing well, it's just that we weren't—we didn't have policies in place, and we didn't have things to help give us a focus on how we were going to move forward.

And so, when, when Mayor Johnson came on, he wanted to fix that. He wanted to make sure that we were in line, and that we were doing all the right things that we possibly could for the citizens of our, our community. And so, he put together this Pride Task Force of members of the LGBTQ+ community, citizens, members of the different departments within the city, the fire department, my—myself with the police department, with the goal of “How can the city of Savannah do it better? Not only for the citizens, but for its employees also.” And so, we had several meetings. We wanted to get the word out to the community that, you know, this was happening in the City of Savannah was, you know, we were being very progressive where this was concerned.

Part of that was two things happen at the same time. Pride wanted—Mayor Johnson’s Pride—wanted to make sure that we were getting the word out that we were inclusive and progressive, but we also—Georgia Post, which is the facilitated oversees police certifications, came out and said “Officers have to have community-oriented policing training every year. So many hours. Two hours. And part of that had to be centered around LGBTQ+ issues.” And so, now here we are saying, “Okay, well this is cool. So, now we need to create training sessions for the police department, and for the fire department, and then on to other departments.” So, we started—I know from my point, we started teaching that. We created a PowerPoint lesson plan. We started teaching it in the Savannah Police Department. So, that was something that I don’t know would have happened had it not been a push from Mayor Johnson.

LS: Okay, good. So, I want to talk a little bit—well, actually before I go on, are there specific places or organizations (you’ve mentioned First City Network) that you would describe as safe, or inclusive, or accepting as you mentioned for the community? Specific organizations, places that we need to document and record, you know, that that need to be noted?

TW: Well, there’s, there’s so many organizations out there that are proactive for, you know, this segment of our community. The colleges all have organizations that help with that. The city as a whole has—you know the, the First City Network that has evolved into a full functioning—. And I’m, I’m remiss in, in telling you what the exact name of that is, but I’ve talked to them several times, and it sounds like they’re really coming together. And they’re bringing all of these different organizations together. And they’re getting the word out there. And they’re getting, they’re, they’re getting the information out there and education out there for people. So.

You know, when I first came on the department, we didn’t have a Pride celebration here in Savannah. And then when they first started trying to have a Pride, it was tucked away over there at the Roundhouse Railway Museum. And look at it now. Now, of course, in 2020 and 2021, those were not normal years. But prior to that, I mean, it was down there in Ellis Square. And, you know, it was huge. And, you know, I will tell you that the police department supported it all the whole time. And now, you know, we’ve got vendors coming in that would have never come in before, would have never been asked before, and there would have been room to have them. Anyways. And now we’ve got things like the Savannah Police Department’s recruiting tent out there. So, you know, that that’s—. So, we have come a long way.

LS: Who do you think, either were or currently are, some of the important leaders in the community and their, their comfort—contributions that we need to acknow—acknowledge?

TW: Oh, well, obviously Pam Miller. You know, she's, she, she's been here since when I came on. And she has helped push, push things. You know, Kevin Clark, obviously. He, he worked hard to move things forward. And, you know, I would—I could keep going, but my fear would be that I would leave people out. So, I will just say that you have had people—. Candace Hardnett is, is, you know, it's—got her hands all in moving this thing forward and, and, you know, keeping it going.

SP: Would there be one person that maybe you—and this doesn't even have to be somebody from the LGBTQ community—but a person that you might think of as a, a mentor in your life that you look up to, in any aspect? Whether it's your policing career or to be a leader that you would just like to acknowledge.

TW: There are several. But I will tell you that, again, you know, I came on the department as the first open and out LGBTQ+ person. And there were people that were not part of that, part of the community, that welcomed me, that supported me. You know, retired Captain Joy Gellatly was always right there, you know, behind me. Retired Major Jerry Long was always very, very supportive. You know, I, I mean, there have been people who have supported me all along. For the longest time, there was just a few of us that were out there. As you know, Pam and Kevin and myself. And we were just trying to, you know, keep this information from being—get from getting out there. Keep some of the folks that did—didn't care about what the truth was, but just wanted to cause fear in our community and the LGBTQ+ community. Some activist-driven people. And so, it was just us trying to do the right thing and get the correct information out there. And so, you know, I—towards the end of my career, I kind of started backing off a little bit and trying to give it to the younger people in my, in my department. But there have been some amazing people. And again, I, you know, I, I fear that I will forget naming people who absolutely should be named.

LS: Okay. Well, you mentioned two other female officers, Jerry Long and Joy Gellatly. And one of the questions I did want to ask you just about your service was from the female perspective. So, it doesn't really have anything to do with Savannah Proud. But just I think it's important to acknowledge being a female police officer. And, you know, I'm sure that wasn't always easy at times. You're—you know, it's still a majority male force, I'm assuming. Do you—can you speak to that?

TW: Well, you know, I, I since 2000 have been an instructor of certain topics within the police department. And one of the things—and we have a—once you graduate the academy, you now have to go eight weeks (I think it is, it is fluctuated, but I think about, about eight weeks) in-house learning about how we specifically do things. And so, you know, when I have that group, and I'm talking about community-oriented policing, and I'm talking about crime prevention, and I'm talking about LGBTQ+ stuff, I always get asked by, you know, the female members, you know, “How do we—how is it going to be when we get out there?” And really, it's very basic. Go out there and pull your weight. You know, don't expect—you've come into a male-dominated field, so don't expect to go out there and be afraid to chip a nail. You have signed up for a very physical job. A very—. You have to have your wits about you. And so, don't go out there and think that you're gonna expect the men to pull you up. They're not. And they're gonna be looking

for that. Now, if you go out there, and you are—you might not be able to help win the fight, but if you're in the fight, when it, when it needs—when that officer needs some help, if you're, if you're in it, that's what, that's what the male officers are looking for. They just want to know “Are you going to be there for them?” And if you do that, you're not going to have a problem.

I never had a problem. You know, did I have officers that were stronger than me? Yes. You know, did I have officers that could run faster than me, male officers? Yes. You know, could I, you know, I was a very soft-spoken, level-headed person. So, could I get people out of a jam sometimes? Yes. So, you just give and take your talents. But that's it all, any officer, male or female, is looking for when we get a new officer on is: are you going to be there for me? Or, or am I gonna have to pick up slack? If I don't have to pick up your slack, I never had a problem.

LS: Okay. That's probably good advice for any profession [laughs].

TW: Yeah, I think so.

LS: Okay. We talked about the Savannah Pride Festival. Are there any other specific events or traditions in the LGBT community here in Savannah that we need to document for the future?

TW: Well, that's the big one. Pride is the big one. And I'll tell you a funny story. Is—it used to be that our Pride here in Savannah was held in September. And so, for the longest time, we had it in September. And then it got moved to the weekend of Halloween. And so, I was called in because of other specialties that I have. I was called in to help with the planning of the security that was going to be surrounding the, the Pride Fest in Ellis Square. And so, we went in there. And, you know, they said, “Well, it's going to be the weekend of Halloween. Closest to Halloween.” And I said, “Well, why, why are we moving it to Halloween?” And they said, “Well, the Pride committee said well, you know, first of all, September is a very busy month. There's all kinds of—. I think Susan G Komen has that—has a weekend thing. Event. And Help the Hoo-Ha for Ovarian Cancer has an event. And so, September is a very, very event-filled month.” And so, they didn't want to—they wanted to get away from the competition. And they—it had always been in competition with Susan G Komen, so they want to move it.

And so, I said, “Okay, well why did we move it all the way to the end of October to around Halloween?” And one of the Pride members looked at me and was like, “Are you—is that a serious question?” And I said, “Yeah. I'm—yeah. Yeah. Is it a serious question? I'm not sure, whether I need to retract the whole question.” And they said, “Well, you know, the Halloween is a huge LGBTQ+ holiday.” And I said, “I had no idea.” I said, “I've been—I mean, I've been this way like most of my life, and I had no idea that we had—we claimed the holiday. Wow. That's, that's pretty cool, you know.” And they said, “Well, yeah. Because this is the one time of year that a lot of people in the LGBTQ+ community can be themselves. And nobody is, you know, ridiculing them. And nobody”—and how sad is that. That people feel like they have to wait for a specific time before they can, you know, be who they are. But I thought that that was funny that as old as I am and as long as I've been with the police department and doing this, I had no idea that we had a preferred holiday. We do.

LS: Well, and I think it also maybe shows the range of people and experiences and—that fall under what has maybe become an umbrella for a lot of different situations. So. Have—do you recall any pivot points or major events that were turning points in Savannah that affected the community? Either positively or negatively? And they might not be things that happened just locally but maybe national pivotal events?

TW: Well, I think that obviously the Matthew Shepard incident was a huge wake-up call just across the entire nation. That we had, you know, that this was really going on. And I think that when that hit national news, there was a lot of people who didn't realize that there was a bias. That there was people who would do harm to folks in the LGBTQ plus community. And I think that that drove a lot of people back underground. It drove a lot of people back into the closet. Because they were afraid. And so, you know, with the City of Savannah, I think that that became a big deal to try to make our community feel safe. And, you know, Mayor Edna Jackson was a big proponent of making this group of people—and really all groups of people—feel safe in our, in our communities. So, you know, that was a big, big deal.

I think as more education came, and obviously, when the Supreme Court had their battle, and they, and they made LGBTQ+ marriage legal in June of 2015, that was a huge, huge step in, in the right direction. And I think that when that happened, there was a big sigh of relief. Maybe all the way from all sides. It's just, "Okay, now this battle is over. Now we've, we've reached this, this place. And now it is what it is. And we're gonna move forward. And these, these folks now have the same rights as everybody else." I think that that was a huge. I know it was in my life because I was finally able to—though I had been with my partner, who used to be with the City of Savannah, I had been with my partner for so long, for years and years, but now we were able to legally get married. I think that that started bringing people back out and, and, and willing to speak up for themselves and for other people. So, those are, those are some, some big moments.

LS: Yeah. Can you speak to them—to the impact of the AIDS Crisis in Savannah at all?

TW: That was before I came on the department. That had pretty much gone—you know, the treatments had become lifesaving, and people were living their ordinary lives when—by the time I came on to the police department. And be—prior to that, you know, when, when that first hit, it was—I was still in high school. And then I went into the Marine Corps, and it wasn't an issue in the Marine Corps. And then I came out, and it was, you know science had done what science does and, you know, created ways to make these people live, you know, a long life and a healthy, you know, life.

LS: Okay. Are there any specific landmarks, like buildings, sites, businesses that we should pinpoint recognize?

TW: Oh, I wish you had told me that question beforehand because I probably could come up with some, some—you know, Club One, obviously, has been a huge part of it. I mean, they had Lady Chablis was their headliner before the book ever came out. He—you know, they were already drawing crowds with the show that they have there. And I, I'm gonna say that I didn't spend a whole lot of time there because I'm more of a homebody anyways. But Club One really was instrumental in bringing acceptance about in our community because their shows were so

phenomenal and so well-known. And then really after, you know, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* came out, and we had people in droves coming to see Lady Chablis there. And they were coming on the weekends when she wasn't there either to see the other ladies because they're they were incredible.

We had all of these heterosexual folks that would never have ever thought that they would walking be walking into a quote-unquote “gay bar” were standing in line to come in there and see the show. And they were walking out with a whole new perspective of, you know, you're not—you're not going to just get hit on because you walk into a bar. That, you know, you can go in there and watch the show. And I think that they it caused folks who would have never been in that group to to look around and go, “Wow. These, these folks are no different than me. They're, they're—you know, there, there's a couple over there. And, you know, they're dancing over here on a dance floor. And they're doing everything that—you know, they're having conversations. And they're doing everything that everybody else would do. They're no different than us.” And I think that Club One needs to be noted for their, their role in, in bringing a group of society into their doors that would have never done it before.

LS: Absolutely, yeah. What kind of future do you imagine for Savannah as it relates to the LGBTQ community?

TW: I think that we are gaining steam. I think that the, the folks they're the up-and-coming leaders (that are too many for me to name, but you've probably already talked to a lot of them) are bringing awareness. I think they have bright, new, fresh ideas. You know, you—Pam and I go way back, and everybody knows our name. But we're tired. And we, we did our time moving us as far as we could move us, along with other people. And now, we've got this new energy that's coming in, and they have their new ideas, and they have—they're thinking of things that folks from my time never thought about. And they have the new age of social media and, and technology that they can get the word out. And they can do so much more than we were able to do. So, I'm looking forward to seeing what we do moving, continuing because I see good things happening.

LS: Okay. And so, for those young people, do you have any words of advice you want to give them? After your years [laughs]?

TW: Don't get flustered. Pick your battles. Don't get hung up on a tiny battle when there's a bigger battle to be had. So, you know, one of the things that I had to pull myself back off of is if somebody said something that was a minor thing, but it was maybe not true, or maybe it was against me or whatever—as far as my LGBTQ+ status, I didn't have a whole lot of that—but don't get hung up on those little itty-bitty skirmishes. I mean, there's a there's a much bigger wind to be had. And you just have to let the little stuff go and keep your sights on the big stuff. And the big stuff is, you know, getting protections for the folks that still aren't fully protected. And we still have that.

LS: Okay. So, those were all the questions I had. So, is there anything else that you want to share with us? Either about the LGBTQ community, the Savannah police department just in general? I

mean, that you've got a wealth of information about those experiences. Anything about Savannah? We'd love to hear what you have to say.

TW: I just think that Savannah is a beautiful city. And I think that, you know, Savannah's got the same kind of issues that other cities have. And we can't focus on that because you're focusing only on one, maybe two percent, and the rest of it is good people. They're good people that will reach out a hand. They smile at you when you're walking down, you know, the sidewalk. Savannah is, you know, you—there's nowhere you can go where there's not somebody walking their dog and you get to pet them. I mean, we real—it's beautiful. It's a beautiful city to see. And I think the more we bring people in and we show them who we are, the better it's going to be. And, and we're getting, like I said, new energy all across the city. And so, I think that I'm—I mean, I'm, I'm excited to see what happens.

LS: Well, this has been great. I appreciate you sharing with us today and contributing to the project. So, if you don't have anything else, I think we are good.

TW: Well, thank you for allowing me to come on.

LS: Great. Okay. I'm going to stop the recording.

End of interview.