

City of Savannah Municipal Archives

Proud Savannah History Project

Interview: Van Johnson

Interviewed by Samuel J. Alai, May 17, 2022, City Hall, Savannah, Georgia

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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.

Samuel J. Alai: Today is Tuesday May 17, 2022. It is 2 PM. This is Samuel J. Alai, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives as a volunteer. I am here interviewing Mayor Van Johnson for the Savannah Proud History Project. We are conducting this interview in City Council Chambers at City Hall. Thank you for joining us today. Let's begin with some biographical information.

Van Johnson: Sure.

SJA: Please tell us your full name, how you self-identify, and what pronouns you use.

VJ: My name is Van R. Johnson. I am a straight male. And I identify he, him, and his.

SJA: Thank you. When and where you were born, Mayor Van Johnson?

VJ: Brooklyn, New York.

SJA: And when did you come to Savannah and why?

VJ: 1985 to attend Savannah State College at the time.

SJA: And how long have you been an elected official for the City of Savannah?

VJ: [laughs] Far too long. I've been an elected official now nineteen years. Sixteen years as city councilman. And I'm in the third year as mayor.

SJA: Thank you. Now, let's turn to the subject of today's interview: the PROUD Savannah Task Force. First, can you tell us what PROUD stands for?

VJ: Sure. PROUD stands for principles, resources, outreach, unity and education. But it was also a play-off of Pride, saying that we're proud to be in Savannah. And then that people are proud to be who they are in Savannah.

SJA: Wonderful, thank you. And what is the overall scope and mission of the task force?

VJ: Well, when I was running for office and ultimately in my inauguration, I talked about creating seats at the table for people where seats were not before. And to be very, very intentional about that. You know, Savannah is a city that people of varying sexual orientations love, and I think we want to be intentional about creating a seat there. We want Savannah to be this—the place where people of all orientations love to be and that they're accepted for who they are. You know, we're not judges or we're not—you know, we are we are city of people. And so, in that we wanted to make sure we did that. So, soon after I got elected in the middle midst of a pandemic, I created the PROUD Savannah Task Force to be able to create liaisons from both within the city and outside the city to make sure that we were keeping in good communication, close collaboration, close coordination, and close partnership with our LGBTQ+ community.

SJA: Thank you. You've touched on this a little bit in this, just this previous answer, but when was the task force formed and what prompted its information?

VJ: [laughs] I don't even remember to be honest with you. I just remembered it was, it was 2020.

SJA: 2020.

VJ: And so again, we were in the midst of a pandemic. But it was an opportunity for us—I reached out to some of our major organizations and some people that I knew were LGBTQ leaders and floated the idea of having a task force that would help promote better communication. I've been witness to times where things would happen in LGBT community and where, you know, they're running to the City of Savannah trying to create communication. It's like, "No. Let's formalize this relationship." And so, PROUD Savannah was the formulation and the codifying of this relationship in which we would have people in our community—these warriors in the community, if you will. The LGBT community would have an open door to the mayor's office and thusly to City Hall.

SJA: Thank you. What was the public's reaction to the formation of the task force?

VJ: Well, actually, it was it was overwhelmingly positive. You know, obviously, we had heard from many LGBTQ people that were excited that the Savannah took this very, very forward, intentional step. We've heard from parents of people who are LGBTQ+, and they talked about how they appreciate the fact that we were doing some active outreach. We know we got some negative comments as well, but we get negative comments about everything we do. So. You know. But I felt overwhelmingly, the response was positive.

SJA: I'm happy to hear that. So, how many members comprise the task force, and how are they selected or appointed?

VJ: I believe it was twenty. But I'm not—I can't really remember now. You know, it's now been a little bit of time. But most of it was just I selected them. I selected them based off relationships that I had. And then some based off of relationships that they had with the LGBT community. So, for example, Pastor Candace and elder Erika Hardnett, our LGBTQ leaders in our community, particularly in the faith side. So, I knew them. And so, we want them to be a part. Dusty Church was the, the leader of Savannah Pride. And he's well known and respected the LGBT community. We wanted him at the table. Mark Hill and Pam Miller are LGBTQ+ veterans in Savannah. Everybody knows them. They have been out there. So, we definitely wanted them to be a part. Nick Zoller, who is our public information officer. He's the mayor's liaison to Savannah Pride. And then we had Savannah employees that have identified as LGBTQ+, and they are liaisons within the organization. So, if someone within the organization is having an issue, we've identified individuals within the organization that they can go to, to venture them for assistance and for help.

SJA: Thank you. What are some of the task force's accomplishments so far?

VJ: Well, the one I'm most proud of is that within our first year, we raise our Municipal Equity Index from like thirty-five to, like, seventy-seven in one year. The Municipal, the Municipal Equity Index is how—it's a scorecard that rates cities. And so, the highest score you can get is a hundred. So, if—essentially, we went from a abysmal failing score of thirty-five to a pretty respectable score of seventy-seven or seventy—in, in the mid-seventies. And so, that was from us being able to do a couple of things. Alderman Kurtis Purtee, who is our first openly gay LGBTQ council member, was a big part of that process, helping move and push that process along, and worked with me to help move our Municipal, Municipal Equity Index numbers.

SJA: Thank you. What are some of your hopes for the PROUD Task Force in the future?

VJ: Well, I mean, I think they've done some good things already. You know, particularly beyond Pride Month. They've done Transgender Day of Remembrance. They've done a variety of different events. Again, creating those opportunities. And I think it's important for us as a city, if there're issues, if their concerns, if they're ways of access that we can help to provide, then we have a body of people who are already meeting, already collaborating, already have the relationships. And so, we're able to shut down some of those times. Sometimes it's various to everybody. You know, we've even looked at some of our ordinances about how we classify bathrooms. And we've made some changes to allow for bathrooms that are single-use or bathrooms that can be used in a variety of ways for those people who are, you know, who don't identify or non-conforming. Again, it's important for us to become more sensitive. And so, they help us to be sensitive. They—the things that I wouldn't think about—you know. They help me through my ignorance. And so, in that, they, they help train all of us, and I think we become a better city because of that.

SJA: Thank you. How would you describe the current relationship between the City of Savannah and the LGBTQ community? And how would you say that relationship has changed since you've served on City Council?

VJ: I think it's great. Again, I've been around for quite a long time. And from the early days of the Pride festivals here and watch it grow from a small gathering to now something where people come from all over the country. Savannah likes doing things big, but more importantly than it just being a festival or a day, you know, it really has to be everyday relationships. We want to make sure in Savannah that people are able to work, live, and play without the fear of discrimination. They're able to work. They're able to get housing and other things that are needed without discrimination. Because of who they are. Because of who they choose to love. Savannah has to be bigger and better than that. And the fact is we could be everything to everybody. And that's what I've strived for Savannah to be able to do.

SJA: Thank you. What future do you imagine for Savannah as it relates to the LGBTQ community?

VJ: I want to be a kind of a place where people from all over the country just like, "Hey man, Savannah is the place where we want to live." You know because the interesting thing about the LGBT community is that it's all inclusive. I mean, so, you're not talking about, you know, just white folks or Black folks or Hispanic folks or Asian folks. You're talking about everybody. I mean, you're not talking about older folks or young folks. You're talking about everybody. You're not about male or female or anything in between. You're talking about everybody. And so, you know, how we treat our LGBTQ citizens is really a snapshot of how we treat our citizens. If we just love you because you're you, and if we can practice that everywhere, then our city becomes the beloved community Dr. King talked about.

SJA: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the LGBTQ community and its history in Savannah?

VJ: We have a very proud history. I think admittedly being a southern city has not always been in the easy history. You know, there have been people who—and I've known through the years—who might have hid their sexuality because living in the South, living in the Bible Belt, you know, we know that houses of faith sometimes are the hardest on the LGBT community. Beating people with the Bible, you know, and all those types of things. I mean, you go to Hell for a whole bunch of things. We're not—it's not our position to judge people. It's our position to love people. And love them for who they are. And love them and respect their choice in America to love who they want to love. You know, we should not be in people's bedrooms. You know, we want people who are contributing to the betterment of our community. And I'm proud to say that our LGBTQ community, they're everywhere. They are living, thriving contributing Savannahians. And I'm very pleased to be their mayor.

SJA: Thank you. And the final question, Mayor Van Johnson: what would you like to say to the young LGBTQ people in Savannah and those who are going to come along in the future?

VJ: Be you. Do you. Live your best life. Be happy. Live your best dreams. You know, don't let—don't be defined by a small part of you, which is your sexuality. I mean, the sexuality is a part of who you are. Don't be defined by that. And again, you are a whole bunch of things. You're, you're maybe a, a son or a daughter. You might be a niece or a nephew, you know. And so, our city opens their arms. And should. And we want people to be here. Be very happy. Be very

comfortable. Feel very safe and be very safe. And we think Savannah has those ingredients to make a successful community for everyone and, and particularly our LGBTQ+ citizens. We're more than just a great place to visit, we're a great place to live.

SJA: Mayor Van Johnson, thank you for sitting down with me today. And on behalf of the Municipal Archives and Savannah's LGBTQ community, thank you for your advocacy and for joining us in documenting Savannah's LGBTQ history.

VJ: Thank you very much.

End of interview.