

**City of Savannah Municipal Archives
Proud Savannah History Project
Interview: Todd Mauldin
Interviewed by Lacy Brooks, November 4, 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.

Lacy Brooks: Today is Thursday, November 4th, 2021. It is 10 AM. I am Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Todd Mauldin 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.

Todd Mauldin: My name is Todd Mauldin. t-o-d-d, and the last name is M-a-u-l-d-i-n.

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

TM: I identify as a gay male, and my pronouns are he and him.

LB: And when and where were you born?

TM: I grew up in Albemarle, North Carolina. It's a small little town about an hour northeast of Charlotte. Lived there until I was—gosh, nineteen or twenty. I went to school at Pfeiffer College, which is just right down the road from Albemarle. A little town called Misenheimer. So, I was able to live at home while I went to school, mostly because I was afraid to leave home at that point in my life. Bob and I met in 1991 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and we lived there for a couple years. We moved to Chicago, and we were there for about two years, as well. From Chicago, we migrated to—I tell people Philly, but it was really Jersey. Right outside of Philly. And we were there almost a decade. And we've been in Savannah since 2004-ish.

LB: Okay. When were you born? Do you mind do you mind telling?

TM: I don't. It's not a secret. I was born in 1965, so I am fifty-six years old. That part you can edit out [laughs].

LB: And, so, you said you moved to Savannah in 2004. Why did you choose to move to Savannah, Georgia?

TM: Bob and I had been together for quite some time, and his mother lived on Tybee. And I tell people that for a decade, our vacations had been to come down and tackle her to-do list. So, we were familiar with the area. And in 2003, I lost my job. And Bob and I both kind of wanted to make a life transition. My family was still in North Carolina, and my parents were aging, and Bob's mom was here. So, it was easier to be closer to our parents in case we needed to do anything with our families. So, a four-hour drive to North Carolina was way better than a twelve-to-sixteen-hour drive from Jersey, depending on the traffic. We had a very long transition, though. I made the transition first. I came down; we actually lived out on Tybee for a little bit. Bob got cold feet and wasn't quite ready to leave his job yet so, we did a long-distance thing for a while. We sold our homes in Jersey and took an apartment up there. And he would travel up; I would travel down. Or vice versa. He would travel down; I would travel up. And finally, he made the transition as well. We bought our house in the Parkside neighborhood in 2004. I think we renovated for a while. We moved into 2005. So, we still live in the same house on the east side of town behind Daffin Park.

LB: So, when you first moved to Savannah in that 2003-2005 time frame, what were your experiences like in Savannah with the community?

TM: When I first came down, I was, I was kind of scared. I mean, obviously grew up in the South. But we had been in much larger cities for a long time that I felt not only offered more in the way of cultural things and activities and social events, but also, I felt that they would be more progressive and accepting. And I did not really find that to be the case. We've had a really great life in Savannah, Georgia. When we first moved down, we sort of immersed ourselves in the community. We got involved with First City Network. We got involved with Standout Youth. Savannah Pride a little bit later on. We hosted some of the First City Network socials. We participated in a gay bowling league that was taking place at Victory Lanes, which is not even

there anymore. And so, that's sort of how we developed the social circle and met friends and became a part of the community, I guess.

LB: So, can you talk to your—about your involvement with the First City Network?

TM: Sure. I was a board member for a few terms. I was actually the treasurer of the organization for a couple of terms. We, you know, participated in all the events and helped organize them, from the annual oyster roast to—we did a, a fundraising event called Savannah Weekend, which was sort of a three-day event spread over a week. And I don't remember the time frame. It was hot, so it probably was July or August or June. But it involved like, a welcome party at someone's house. There was a, a trolley tour that took you to a lot of the gay-owned businesses in town on a Saturday afternoon. There was a brunch on a Sunday morning. So, it was, it was just a great event. We helped to do a Savannah prom here in conjunction with the Pride organization one year. And gosh, it was—it just was a way to meet people. It was—you know, we went to those First City Network socials the first Saturday of every month for years. And, you know, it was just a great way to meet people and develop relationships and a community.

LB: So, you were saying that you would go around to different gay owned businesses. Can you name some of those particular businesses that were—?

TM: Sure. There was a great little gift shop that I actually used to work at sometimes called Simply Irresistible, right on Wright Square. Owned by my friends, Charlie and David. It was the best place in town to get gifts. And then right down the street from them is the Wright Square Café. And so, that was a place that was frequented. There were several other gift shops. There was a clothing store. I don't remember all of the names. Most of them are no longer, you know, in business, unfortunately. But—and not only just gay or lesbian-owned businesses, but, you know, businesses that were friendly and supportive to the organization. Like, you know, 24e Downtown and just so many venues that would welcome our business and our dollars.

LB: So, you also said that you were involved with Standout Youth. Can you tell us about that organization? Or that organization and your involvement?

LB: Sure. Standout Youth was the organization that helped kids find a safe place to be and just, you know, commune with one another. It occurred on Friday nights at the First City Network

Center when it was over on Harris Street many years ago. And they had moved venues a couple of times as that—as the church, you know, sold those, those buildings off that we were using. But my husband was the executive director to Standout, so he was far more involved than I was. But I am—served as a facilitator for them, so that means on Friday nights I would be there to be there to facilitate the meetings and make sure the kids behave themselves. We would do movie nights for them. We would have topic, sometimes games, sometimes it was just for them to get a chance to get together and hang out. But we did—I guess in the beginning when Bob first started with the organization, there were Friday nights that there was one child there for—and I said child, but obviously, you know, a sixteen-year-old—for months and months and months. And then there were two, and then all of a sudden there were fifty or a hundred, you know. So, it was—it was really rewarding to watch it grow and watch these, these young people develop relationships with themselves and come into their own, you know, and, and just become more confident in who they were. And share their own life experiences, share their experiences with their family, ask questions about coming out, ask questions to us about our coming out process.

We managed to take them on a trip to March on Washington—for the Gay Equality March on Washington—Marriage Equality March. I think that was in 2009. We—it was just really rewarding to, to be around them. to hear their experiences, to see how things had changed since I was that age, you know, and how I, I think even for the most part, how much more confident in themselves that they were—when I was—could have ever experienced or imagined being at that age.

LB: So, speaking of your youth, can you speak to your experience in coming out and what—how you were received? Do you remember?

TM: Sure. With my family, it was very easy. I, I guess for the most part for me—probably not common for a lot of people in the South—it was it was easy in general. I always knew, even before I had any concept of sex or sexuality or, or any sort of orientation. I always felt different. As a child, you know, my best friends were always female. I preferred to play with dolls than bats or balls. You know, I begged for a Dreamy Drowsy Baby Doll when I was, you know, six years old. I loved my sister's Easy-Bake Ovens. You know those—I would just gravitated towards those things. And I remember like, we would play house as children, and I would always wear a long sleeve t-shirt on my head so that I could have long hair. And, you know, the sleeves would hang down so that I would—I could, you know, flip them around. But, so, I always felt different. My mother was extremely supportive. My parents were divorced when I was six or seven years old, and, so, it was just me my mom and my two older sisters in the house for, for the majority of my growing up years.

I never really experienced problems in school, though. And I'm not proud to say this, but I remember there was one kid in particular who was a year older than me in high school. And the other kids at school were relentless. You know, teasing him and, and pretending—or calling him gay or—and even more derogatory terms. And I remember just being thankful, honestly, that, you know, they weren't coming after me. So—and I was a smart kid. I kind of hid behind that persona. You know, I could squeak by by being popular and, you know, being involved in every activity that I could possibly immerse myself in. Outside of athletics because that wasn't my thing. But, you know, student council, and band, and any club that I could become a part of. And just to, to throw any, you know, possibility that someone might suspect that I was different. And, and it worked.

I came out when I was eighteen. I told my mom. We were coming back from somewhere. I was driving, and she was in the passenger seat. And I told her that I was gay. And I remember clearly she said, “Oh, I don't think you're that way.” And, and that was sort of the end of that conversation. Probably six months later, you know, we had to sit down, and I told her again. And all she ever said was, “You know, I want you to be happy. You know, I want you to be happy.” And I think she was concerned about how I would be treated in a world that can be cruel, especially, this was, you know, in 1983, 1984, and, you know, the AIDS Crisis was just kind of sort of coming to fruition. And so, I think she was concerned, but she was very supportive.

My sisters have always been fantastic. I was in a relationship when I was a very young man. And I took that guy home with me, you know, to holiday functions and stuff. And when Bob and I met in 1991. We met in September of 1991. And the first Christmas I took him to my parents' house would have been the same Christmas, so just a few months later. And he was flabbergasted because my mom would be like, “Let's get your pictures. You know, stand closer, put your arm around him.” And then, you know, it was just my family has always been like that supportive. And so, for me, that was, was very easy.

Work experiences, pretty much the same. When I got out of college, I graduated with a degree to teach high school English. I never really did that. I did my student teaching, but, you know, I was at the time twenty-four years old, 5'5". I looked like I was twelve. You know, it just wasn't a good fit. And I worked in retail for a very long time. And then I kind of migrated into the accounting field.

And I've never been in the closet at work. And I'll tell you, when we moved to Chicago, I transferred with an insurance company that I was working with in Charlotte. And I think maybe the folks in Charlotte have already, already told the people in the office. But Chicago was a very different, you know, animal than Charlotte was at that time. So, it was great.

And when we moved to, to Jersey, Bob had been married, and he had worked for this company ADP (Automatic Data Processing) for a very long time already. And when we were moving there, you know, he told his boss. He said, "Well, there's some things that you need to know" because I had also interviewed with that company. I could not transfer with, with the insurance company that I was working with. And they hired me. You know, he's like, "You know, we're a couple. We—you know, this is our relationship." And I think at that time at ADP, especially in this support development house that we were working in, it was kind of—there was kind of a good old boys network there, you know. And I think Bob and I both were concerned about the perception of me, and the perception of us as a couple. It was super easy because I think once those folks who had known Bob for years, but once the people who worked there met me, and saw my work ethic, and that I was qualified to do the job, and that, you know, we had a life just like everyone else, it was it was easy. You know, they, they were completely on board with, you know, just being friends. I mean, they might not have understood our relationship or wanted. I wouldn't even say that because we were as a couple, we were invited to every function that people at work might have had, you know. So.

So, I don't know that like, since eighteen, I don't know that I've ever been in the closet. Obviously, there have been experiences where you were called fag or some other derogatory term, you know, by complete strangers. I remember like, being on a city bus in Chicago, and, and some guys got on the bus, and they looked at me and Bob, and they said, "They were fags." And I said something back to them, you know, because I can't always keep the mouth shut. And anyway, the bus driver ended up putting them off, so that was a Godsend. We have been downtown early in our history here in Savannah, Georgia. And Bob and I have never been shy about holding hands or having some sort of affection in public. Nothing inappropriate. But, you know, and, you know, people, you know, driving by because it's the coward's way to, you know, say something to you without having to confront someone. But for the most part, like just—and I know it's not common for every, every person, especially hearing some of the stories of the kids from Standout. But work experience, family experience, social experience—it's all been pretty darn positive for me.

LB: You touched on a little bit, just a minute, about the eighties and the, the rise of the AIDS Crisis. Are you able to speak to that? And how it was—what was going on in Savannah when you got to Savannah?

TM: I can tell you that I tested positive for HIV in 1991. This was before Bob and I met. I think it's only like, through crazy chance that I'm probably still alive. Because when I first found out, I just totally ignored it. Like, I didn't want to deal with it. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to pretend like it wasn't the case. So, it took me quite some time to, to go to a doctor and get on medication. At that time, the only thing available was AZT, and that was toxic to your system. And I've been compliant and non-compliant on and off for many, many years. Like finally I got my, my stuff together and started doing what I needed to do. When we moved here—I had a really great medical team in Jersey. And I was so afraid to, to leave them, that I would travel back, you know, every other month, every three months to see my doctor there and his team, rather than looking for medical experience here. Because I imagine, in the South, what can they possibly do for me? I know that sounds horrible, but that was my mindset at the time. At some point, I came to the realization that I needed to find a doctor here because traveling to Jersey for medical care, or in the event that something were to happen, like, just wasn't really feasible. So, I did find a doctor here. I have since transferred to another medical team here.

But I think that there weren't a ton of resources when I first came here. That has changed. I, I, I didn't get immersed in the community that, you know—for HIV or HIV support here right away. But we did. Gosh, I can't even remember the time frame. But—there we did have an AIDS walk here one year, and, and sort of a rally, you know, at the end of the walk. And I spoke about my experiences with HIV. And, you know, when I was diagnosed, it was pretty much a death sentence. Like, you kind of just felt like there was—you know, whatever that time period was, that the end was finite. There was no opportunity to, to really get better, or to survive. And with the advances of science and medication and, and care tactics, that's all changed. But—so, I can't, I can't say that I can really speak to it.

I know that My Brother's Home used to be an organization here in Savannah that is now defunct. But there is another organization here, as well as the the health department, and just a slew of resources here in Savannah, Georgia that can assist with HIV and HIV care. And, so, I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful that things have changed. I, I can't speak specifically to my experience of HIV here in Savannah.

LB: And in relationship to—and going back just a little bit, I apologize—to Standout Youth. Is the Trevor Project part of that, or is that something totally separate?

TM: The Trevor Project is separate. The Trevor Project is a national organization that really provides support services for suicide prevention for LGBTQ—QIA youth. I have had some involvement with the Trevor project as well. And, and the Trevor Project was sort of a resource that Standout had available to them, you know, when a child was in crisis. But I, I was fortunate enough—I do drag here in town. I've done drag for many, many years. and October 2014, I was fortunate enough to win the Miss Gay America contest and—which means for the next year, I get to travel around the country, presiding over prelims and stuff. But I use that opportunity to help raise money for the Trevor Project. And I say I—all I did was provide the opportunity. Like, we did raffles and giveaways and at every pre-lim and people donated money. So, we were able to raise over fifteen thousand for the Trevor Project that year, which was very rewarding because that money is desperately needed to help protect our youth.

LB: So, you touched on just there for a minute about your female illusion. Will you speak a little bit more about what you do—

TM: Sure—

LB: —your experiences.

TM: I, I started performing back in the late eighties. And it was—I guess I, I'll just take a step back. When—the first time I ever went to a gay bar, I was in Charlotte, North Carolina. And some friends that I had met, one of them happened to have been the high school drum major of my marching band when I was a freshman. Took me to a bar. And I was petrified. I—you know, I, I was pretty sheltered as a child. I'd never gone anywhere. And I just imagined this dark seedy, you know, scary place. And it wasn't like that at all. Was beautiful, you know, it was a vibrant club. People were laughing, and dancing, and chatting with one another, and having a great time. At midnight, they cleared the dance floor, and they started the show. And these beautiful entertainers came out and that—there was no real like stage like we had a Club One. You know, more of a theater kind of thing. But they cleared the dance floor, and people were kind of in a semi-circle around it. And I was just taken aback by it because I always, I guess, had a desire to, to want to perform but no, never any real talent to do it. Like I can't sing, you know, I'm certainly not a trained dancer. But I was just—the costuming was beautiful, you know, the hairstyles were extravagant. Like, I was just really taken to it. And, and I thought—I clearly remember sitting on that floor thinking, “I could, I could do that.”

And, you know, it took me quite a few years later to find the confidence and the resources to help me do it, but once I did it, like, it was you kind of get hooked. I want to say it's an addiction—but I don't know. It certainly is—has a draw to it. I loved the applause, and costumes, and the hair. And, you know, it was an outlet for me. You know, it was an opportunity to step outside of my, you know—pursue my own life and, you know, just be someone else, and, and have a great time.

I got involved in pageantry. I started working at the Scorpio Lounge in Charlotte, North Carolina. I won the Miss Gay North Carolina America contest in 1991 and that provides you an avenue to go to Miss America. And the year prior to that, I went to Miss America on the fluke. Like, I, I competed at the Miss North Carolina contest for several times. Couldn't even crack like, the top ten, you know, because I was just overwhelmed when I got there. But they had a preliminary contest to Miss America at the bar that I worked at in Charlotte, and no one showed up to do it. Like, I think they had one contestant. And the bar owner called me and said, "Can you do this? I know you just did with North Carolina, so you have a package." And I said, "Sure. I'll come do it." So, out of two people, I was second. And, and I went to Miss America that year and placed thirteenth overall out of like sixty contestants. Something just clicked for me while I was there. You know, I like, I learned how to compete. I watched people. And I came back the following year, and won our state pageant, and went back to Miss America, and was really rewarded to place third that year.

I took a year off because I thought honestly, maybe I could win, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to or that I was prepared to. That whole fear-based thing I guess. And I took a year off, and then I went back the following year. I did not have a great experience. I ended up placing fourth that year. But I, I was—it was not a good experience for me, and I just decided that maybe I didn't want to do this anymore. Like, it really—you know, my heart was hurt, my soul was hurt. I felt just broken a little bit from the experience that I had there. So, probably, I don't know, six or eight months later, I did take a break. And Bob and I moved to Chicago. So, that break turned into almost fifteen or sixteen years because I focused on my career, and our relationship, and the animals that we accrued over the years. You know, and life just changed. Drag in, in Chicago and the drag in the Philadelphia area at that point was very, very different from the drag that I had been accustomed to doing.

When we moved to Savannah, there was a benefit and I'm gonna guess it was for First City Network. And a friend that I had met knew that I used to do this, and they were like, "Hey, would you like to perform at this, this event?" And I'm like, "Well, yeah, I would like to. But I

haven't done this in sixteen years. I don't own anything. I have no idea, you know, what to do.” And I asked at the bar, at Club One—and I didn't even really know anyone there except this one person who worked there—if I might be able to do a number one night to kind of get my sea legs before I had to do this event. And they said, “Sure. We never say sure to anybody. Like, we never do that.” And so, I, I got to do a number on a Friday night. I remember the, the folks that were working there at the time. Justin Michaels and Layla Fox and Emotion and [illegible]. They were all like, “Well, you still know what to do on stage. But, you know, that makeup style, you know, all of that's twenty years ago. So, we'll help you with that.” And they did.

I was asked to, to be on the cast of what was going to be really a once a great while kind of thing for me. You know, once a month, once every other month turned into every weekend pretty quickly. And in 2011, a friend of mine—2010—had been—that I knew from a previous life in North Carolina. Cody Collins had won the Miss Gay America contest. Came down to our bar to perform. And we also had a film festival here at that time. And the the closing film for the film festival was a documentary called *Pageant*, which is about the Miss America system. And it followed several competitors through their journey, and, you know, at the national competition. And I—his name is David. David and I were sitting there watching it. And he was like, “You're not over this.” Because I just had sort of a visceral reaction to it. He's like, “You're not over this, are you?” And I'm like, “No, not really.” And, so, he encouraged me to go back.

And so, after I don't know, a little while, I did a preliminary contest in Florida. And there were three of us in that contest. And I placed second. I was horrible. The only thing that got me through, that actually let me be second was the interview. And because there's, you know, an interview category, and making that. So, my goal that year to go to Miss America was not last minute. You know, I was committed. I've got a spot, so I was gonna go. And I worked really hard, and then I placed fifth. And then I placed—I went back the next year, and I placed second. And I went back the next year, and I placed second again. And the year after that, I won. And then—so, it was a very long process for me. And I was probably one of the oldest people to ever win Miss America. I was forty-nine at the time.

And—but, you know, I was—I just got a great deal of support from everybody. And I think that I made an impact because my whole story was about, you know, kind of not giving up and, and following your dreams, and, you know, making the adjustments you need to make because you can't just expect something to happen to you, and hard work pays off. And, so, it was, it was a really rewarding experience.

And Savannah was fantastic. There was an article in the *Savannah Morning News* or articles in *Connect*. The bar has been fantastic to me here at Club One, where I still work. I've been there for thirteen years now. And not only do we get to educate people a little bit about female impersonation, but we get to entertain people at the same time. We—over the years that I've worked there have been able to support, you know, so many organizations through benefits, and fundraisers, and, and providing opportunities for, for organizations to come in and, you know, be seen. And so, I'm grateful for everything the club has done for me. And, you know, I guess if I had never moved to Savannah, I wouldn't have had that experience either.

LB: And what is your stage name?

TM: Blair Williams. And it's kind of interesting. People ask me, "How did you pick that name?" all the time. And for me, like back in the nineties, like, I guess, I guess stage names sounded real. You know, they weren't so elaborate or extravagant. And I honestly wanted a name that I wouldn't be embarrassed by if someone saw me, and knew who I was, and screamed it across the mall, or something, you know. So, Blair sounded pretty much like a unisex name. And, and Williams just sounded like a real name, so it's like, probably going through the phone book when they existed, making your last name.

LB: Okay. And other than the things that we've talked about, are there any other organizations that you're active with, or help to organize, or?

TM: Not really, not at this time. You know, Bob and I have done a lot of things over the years. I guess maybe we're taking a slight break, you know, to focus on, on aging and, and all those things that come with that. We—I think the first big thing Bob and I ever did was we worked with the Names Project in Charlotte and the AIDS Memorial Quilt. We actually saw the quilt in its entirety in 1996 in Washington, D.C. the last time it was displayed in full. We took the Standout kids to the March on Washington, and I think that was in 2009. And, and then, you know, we've done a lot with Standout Youth, First City Network, Pride over the years. I'm still supportive of all of those organizations. We have done some fundraisers for Pride at the bar. We have done lots of fundraisers for Standout Youth over the year, which now has, has morphed into another organization. The First City Pride Center has sort of umbrella now for all of the organizations here in Savannah. I think Jeffrey's Place might be the youth organization now. I can't exactly recall what, what it's—what the name of it is. But while we're still supportive—both monetarily and, and emotionally—we haven't been as physically involved as we were.

LB: And just a quick question. what do you think about this particular project, the Proud Savannah History Project? What does it mean to you?

TM: I was super excited to be a part of it. I was a little leery about being interviewed because I guess like a lot of people, you think, “Well, what do I have to offer?” You know, a relative newcomer when it comes to Savannah. We’ve been here, you know, since 2004. But I think it's important to document history. I’m excited to have seen so many people that I admire, and I consider really, you know, Savannah icons having been interviewed. And some folks unfortunately are no longer with us, like Laurence Marley and Julie Blocker, who really were instrumental in setting up First City Network in the first place—which is, I think, the oldest LGBTQ organization in Savannah, Georgia, or in the state of Georgia.

So many people have, have contributed to this community. You know, Pam Miller, Kevin Clark, Mark Krueger. That—just so many people have, you know, really just put their themselves out front to really make a difference in this organization. So many Pride directors that we've had the pleasure of working with—Gary Hartman, and Bobby Jeffries, and Patrick Mobley, and Heather Byers. Like, just for—or Cole Buyers. I’m sorry. Just so, so many people have done a great job. Gene Graves who really was instrumental in Standup Youth in the beginning stages. And, you know, we've had great support from the majority of our mayors when you think about Otis Johnson, Edna, and Van now who's doing, you know, a really great job with just trying to, to create an environment of equality and unity. So, I think Savannah's been pretty darn lucky to have not only these community leaders, but political leaders as well that really are supportive.

LB: What would you say to young LGBTQ+ people that are coming behind? What would you say to them about picking up that torch? Maybe for the next—?

TM: First thing I would say to them is be patient. Be patient with yourselves, and with your families, and, you know, your peers because there's something to be said for maturity. And that comes with age and experience. I would encourage them to always be true to themselves. I, I think there are a lot of opportunities left in Savannah to, to—for them to take up: gender equality, gender identification, racial inequalities. I, I think there's, there's so many things that still affect our community and, and the larger community as well that there's so many opportunities for them to pick that torch up and move forward. So, it takes a lot of courage. It takes a lot of support from your family and your peers as well. But to, to not be afraid or ashamed or fearful of, of not just being the norm or what's considered to be the norm. To actually be able to stand up for what you know is right, stand up for any injustices that you see, to

develop the community and the networking to, to actually see a difference. Which is very important because you can't usually go it alone. You know, it takes a village, as they say. And I think Savannah offers the opportunities for, for people to develop those networks and to create an environment where you can be seen and can be heard. And we have leadership in the city that is willing to listen.

LB: So, in the fifteen years that you've been here—fifteen plus maybe—do you see a change from that 2004 Savannah and to today Savannah? And then maybe where that could carry Savannah forward in its relationship with the LGBT community?

TM: Yes, I—when we moved here, I used to say Savannah's gay community was very quiet. Rather than going out and being seen in public, they would rather commune at someone's house, or at a private event, or you know, I guess more of—and in some ways homogenous because they just wanted to be, you know, amongst themselves. I think that when I first moved here, it seemed more segregated than it is now. Like, the vast majority of I think all of the board members of the First City Network when I first moved here were white, majority male probably. I think that has changed. So, I think there has been some progress in being more inclusive within our own community. I think there's a long way to go. But I have, I have seen change.

I think that people are—and I think Savannah foster's an environment where people are comfortable really being anywhere. Like, obviously Club One is the only gay bar in town. And even on the weekends, I wouldn't necessarily think that we're like predominantly gay because we attract a very large tourist population there. But I think all of the establishments in town seem to be welcoming. There's a organization now called—I think it's called GGB, really gay bar. And they just sort of pop-up events and whatever venue they choose for that month. And, and I've been to one or two of them. And they always seem very well attended. And people are having a great time. And people, you know, who aren't there for that particular event, you know, are, are having a great time with them. We do drag brunch once a month at Moon River Brewing Company, so we stepped out of our, you know, drag by night persona. And it's a family friendly event. We have kids, young kids, and teenagers there all the time.

There's another venue downtown that does shows on the weekends now that I can't remember the name. You know, I think their target audience, like, is, is probably predominantly bridal party. You know, anyone who wants to go out and have a good time in Midtown, BarFood, you know, has events. So, it's—I think, I think that visibility has been raised. And not just for drag. I know I'm concentration on me doing drag. I mean for the community as a whole. The visibility has

been raised. There was a stonewall event in the Bull Street area near the LGBT Center a number of years ago, prior to COVID, you know, that attracted a slew of people.

And, and I think our Pride festivals—when we can have those again—attract a lot of people. And I think that's also something we saw change because when we first came here, the first Pride festival we attended was at the Old Roundhouse, kind of down off of MLK. Kind of away and behind, you know. And then it, you know, it moved to River Street. It moved to Johnson Square. And moved to Forsyth Park. And lately it's been in Ellis Square. But it's in a very visible location, which I think is monumental. And it's supported by the city, you know, and it—so, I've seen a lot of progress in that way. I think a lot of what we still have to focus on are, you know, being more inclusive within our own community, understanding differences amongst people, and, you know, the political climate the last few years has been so crazy that, you know, I think a lot of people have been fearful that, you know, rights are going to start to be taken away again and that, you know, things are done behind closed doors, and all of a sudden, you know, you don't have the same rights or the same comfort level that you've had for for years now. So, I think there's, you know, work to be done there as well. And people have to be willing to, to vote and, you know, make a difference and stand up for, for what they believe is right for equality for themselves and for other people as well.

LB: Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us about your experiences in the LGBTQ community that maybe we didn't touch on? Anything else that you can think of that I didn't prompt?

TM: I just say that, you know, we have made a lot of progress in this company. Bob and I met in 1991. We married legally in Waltham, Massachusetts and—2011, March of 2011, which was on our—the year of our twentieth anniversary. And then we rented out, on September 18th in 2021—or 2011, I'm sorry. We rented out Belford's in City Market for a Sunday afternoon and invited a hundred and fifty people that we knew from across the country for their first real gay event. You know, they, they flew the gay flag for the first time there. And it was great. You know, the staff, the, the management there, fantastic. Most of that's turned over, but when we walk in and say who we are, they still, you know, treat us like royalties. So, I think that also shows the willingness in Savannah to, you know, be more inclusive. I'm excited about this project because I'm as interested—as excited as I was to be interviewed, I'm more interested in watching, you know, everybody else's interviews, and seeing their history with the city, and how it either is different, or, or the same as mine. I'm sure there are some similarities, but I'm sure there are a lot of people—especially people who have been here much longer than we have—who didn't always have the same positive experiences that we have here in town. So, I'm very

interested to see how this all turns out. And thank you guys for putting it together and actually documenting history.

LB: It's our pleasure. Thank you very much for sharing your history today. I really appreciate it. This has been a pleasure.

TM: Awesome. Thank you so much.

End of interview.