

City of Savannah Municipal Archives  
Proud Savannah History Project  
Interview: Roger H. Smith  
Interviewed by Lacy Brooks, November 5, 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 Friday, November 5th, 2021. It is 10 o'clock in the morning. I am Lacy Brooks, representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives. I am interviewing Roger Smith 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.

Roger Smith: Okay. Roger Smith. R-o-g-e-r S-m-i-t-h.

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

RS: I identify as a gay man. Is that what you're after? Yeah [nods].

LB: And when and where were you born?

RS: I was born on July 11, 1968, right here in Savannah at the old St. Joseph's Hospital that back in that time was located in a now demolished building on Whitfield Square on Habersham and Taylor Streets.

LB: Right, Savannah. So, can you talk about your experiences growing up, your life here in Savannah? What it was like?

RS: Yeah, so even though I was born in the Historic District, my parents (my young parents) took me very, very quickly to what they would have perceived as a safer part of the city. Not really suburbia. But to a house—their—the very first house that they had ever owned as a newly married couple on East 56th street near DeLesseps Avenue. So, definitely not an upbringing of what I would call privilege, or fancy address, or anything like that. But we certainly had everything that we needed. I have one brother who was born just sixteen months after I was. I was the planned child, coming along completely appropriate three years after the, the wedding.

My brother was a surprise. There would—there should have been—they, my parents, thought more than just one school year between their two sons.

And so, we started school in the early 1970s. Kindergarten for me was 1973. And at that stage of the game, my parents—who were both products of Savannah's public schools—did not think at all that Savannah's public schools in the 1970s were a place that they could, that they could trust to have what they would consider the proper order and discipline in the schools. They were—I don't know that there were outright racist overtones to, to that ideology about school. I—what they would say to us had all to do with—. They would put it this way: we get exactly one shot at your education, and we're not going to gamble on—. And it—I presume sometimes it was chaotic with busing and integr—forced integration and so forth. There probably was some chaos in the public schools. Do I think my parents could have shepherded us through a public school education in Savannah in the seventies and eighties? Sure. They could have done. But they sent us instead to private schools. And, again, not fancy ones. We went to the schools that my parents could afford. And so, my brother and I both had a private school education, a middle-class private school education, in Savannah grades kindergarten through twelve.

And I elected by the time I was a senior in high school, I had so many friends and so many things going on in Savannah that I really didn't have a strong desire to leave the city. So, I elected to attend all four years at Armstrong State College, it was called then. Eventually, of course, it became Armstrong State University. And now Georgia Southern University-Armstrong Campus currently. And as soon as I was done with my four years of undergraduate school, I started teaching. I, I went to school to—I had—my degrees are in English and French. And so, I taught American literature and French language at another private school, Savannah Christian Preparatory School, for about eight years.

And after I left the regular classroom, I had the wonderful opportunity to be a museum educator, working for the Savannah Chatham County Public Schools, but with the very unusual and kind of rarified assignment of museum educator at the Massie Heritage Center. Which is a nineteenth century school that was turned into a museum in the 1970s. And the school system still owns it and operates it. And so, I had the best teaching job in the whole district, I'm convinced. To be able to work in that museum.

And then I thought I would be there a really really long time, but after only a couple of years, my new friends at the Georgia Historical Society had taken note of my work. And I did many projects with them. And they lost their director of education, who left Savannah and went to another position in Virginia. So, they asked if I would join their team. And so, for six years, I was director of education for the Georgia Historical Society, loved that. And fifteen years ago—a little over fifteen years ago—again, I thought I would be at the Georgia Historical Society for a really, really long time.

But about fifteen years ago, a woman who was a friend of mine—still is a friend of mine—who is executive director at the organization I now work for (called Senior Citizens Incorporated) told me that there was a, a, a prospective job. That a grant that she had secured for this organization to identify people fifty-five or sixty years of age and older in the Ardsley Park Neighborhood, and how senior citizens could serve them. That the results of that survey had indicated that what

they wanted was a strong, academically rigorous serious lifelong learning program that didn't yet exist. And although Senior Citizens, Inc. had and at the time and still does have a very impressive staff of people with master's in social work and the ability to deliver all kinds of hard services for which this organization has been known for all of its now more than sixty years of existence, there really wasn't anyone who could have the academic background and the contacts to make this project happen. And so, that's the job she had in mind for me. It was very, very difficult to make that decision. I loved my work at the Georgia Historical Society. But ultimately the opportunity to create something that didn't exist before was irresistible. And looking back, that could have gone wrong at so many different times. We could have built a beautiful program that nobody wanted to come to. But that's not what happened. It's been a vibrant strong program. And fifteen years in, I'm still really happy that I made that decision. That was way, way more than what was like to grow up in Savannah. But that's, that's the whole biography up to this point. So, we can backtrack into any of those areas that you want.

LB: That's good. So, when, when did you feel or think you were maybe different? What was that like for you?

RS: Yeah. That's a good question. I think that gay people very often fall into one of two broad categories: those of us who always knew that there was something different (whether we had a vocabulary for it or we didn't), versus those who for whom this information, this realization hits them like a ton of bricks at a much later time. As an adult perhaps. I'm in the first category. And so, you know, without going on and on with examples—again, I didn't really know what—how to describe what I was feeling.

But as early as kindergarten, I remember having a great affinity for another kid who sat next to me. We sat at tables rather than at desks. So, this kid named Matt who's—I don't even remember Matt's last name. I have no idea where Matt is today. What happened to him, no idea. But I remember just looking back, I probably paid an excessive amount of attention to Matt. I just thought he was cool, and cute, and funny, and nice, and all of that. And, and I don't remember any pushback from that. He didn't—I don't remember his feeling weirded out by that. He also didn't really reciprocate. But he—you know, it was not, it was not anything that was intrusive. I remember the summer after—he had a summer birthday, like I do. And his family maybe had a little more money than we did. His, his house had a pool in the backyard. And so, I was invited to his birthday party. And my mom dropped me off. And it was a great pool party. Great, fun. And I remember his—I started crying at one point at the party. And his mom took me inside, and sat me on the kitchen counter, and tried to figure out what was wrong. And maybe she, you know, gave me something to eat, or drink, or whatever. And I think that she believed that I was crying because I wanted my mom to come pick me up. I was really crying because Matt wasn't paying sufficient attention to me at his birthday party. So, yeah, and, you know, moving forward, I could give you a dozen more examples like that. I knew, I knew whom I was attracted to. I knew who I wanted to spend time with. And yeah, it just—I, I never had any doubt where, where my orientation was.

LB: And can you talk about when you decided to come out? And talk—are you able to do that? Are you able to do that?

RS: Yeah. Actually for someone who had this realization so early, my actual coming out was extraordinarily late. So, if we're talking about the first person, you know, that you utter these words to, like, you know, make a confession, whatever, make a disclosure about yourself. I was, I was definitely, I was out of high school, for sure. College age. And well—and it was even longer than that before I mustered up the courage or had the opportunity. You can look at it either way you want to. To actually—I have a first boyfriend. So, the way that I put it sometimes is: I had a college degree, was working on a graduate degree, owned my own home, had my own classroom where I was a professional teacher before I ever had a boyfriend. So, you know, easily I was ten years behind what I perceive most straight kids doing with their dating lives, you know. So, yeah, I was a full-fledged adult by the time I—.

And another thing is because I taught in a very conservative religious environment—and that was my choice. Nobody made me teach there. But I, I had to have a super level of care that I brought to my social life. So, this is a little bit of an exaggeration perhaps, but not much. I did nearly 100% of my socializing, going out, being brave enough to go to gay places in Atlanta. I didn't really believe in the early 1990s that my hometown would afford me anything, like the freedom and the, the ability to tell the truth that it actually has. And it's because I sequestered myself, again, voluntarily. You know, product of private school, went to a public university, of course. But the minute I got done there, I was back in a private school environment where it wasn't arduous on a day-to-day basis, but I knew what the boundaries were, and I knew that I had to be super careful. So, I put restrictions around myself that I didn't really need to. And as a result, I ended up thinking in the early nineties—and it was a different time, of course, you know it's different than today—and maybe even in private conservative schools, it's maybe a better experience today than I was having thirty years ago. But I believed that my hometown was maybe this much opportunity [small hand gesture] when the reality was this much opportunity [larger hand gesture]. And so, I'm delighted that Savannah has, in my opinion, made an A+ as time has gone by. And frankly, I've done a lot of growing that since then too. And I've learned what to say, who to say it to. And there are very, very few people in my life (my professional or personal life) today who don't know about me. And if they don't, it's not because I'm trying to hide it—it's just, we haven't had that conversation. So, it's, it's an extraordinary transformation. And all for the better.

LB: So, what actually influenced you, though, at that late time to make that decision to change that for yourself? Do you remember what it was? Or was it just time?

RS: It was just time. And it's not quite—it was—it came in phases. And I would say in some ways, you know, you've got to come out however many times there are people that you interact with. It could be scores or hundreds or thousands of times. But for me, the important ones were saying those words and making that disclosure to—it turns out to be two very, very close friends, whom I knew. One my age. One considerably older. Then to ever-growing circles of family members, but not my parents. Then when it was not that first boyfriend, it was a second serious relationship. One which I believed, at the time, in the mid 1990s, was actually going to take me out of Savannah.

And my brother and I have a very, very close relationship with our parents. And we're a family that will just discuss the pure living heck out of anything. You know, anything big. A choice of

college. Buying a house. Even buying a car. You know, whatever comes along that seems like it's—[phone rings] sorry my phone is ringing. We can just ignore it. Anything that seems like a big deal, we talk about. And these—this was a very big deal in my personal life that I was avoiding. And I even had to avoid talking about things like vacations and, and, and real estate. You know, real estate trips to—this was supposed to be Michigan. The secrecy was hollowing out what, up to that point, had been a really vital and robust relationship with my parents. And I thought, “Alright. I can either just go through life and not tell the truth—or not tell the whole truth and have a hollowed-out relationship, or I can just own up to this.”

And, and, and I was still teaching at the time. I was obviously planning on teaching someplace else if I had actually moved. I used to think that coming out to parents and being out at work were about fifty-fifty percentage points of importance. When I finally came out to my parents—and that was not an easy thing to do. But when I finally did it, I remember thinking that I was wrong about the fifty-fifty. Coming out to family was about ninety percent of the, of the benefit. And it's not like I didn't need my jobs, like I didn't care about my job, it's not like I wasn't still careful. But what people at school, what people in the faculty knew, what parents knew at school mattered a lot less to me after I successfully crossed that bridge with family. That was an interesting realization for me.

LB: And once you came out and you decided—so, you were out, not at the school, but when you changed positions, did you decide at that point to be out?

RS: I, I actually didn't change positions. No offense to the guy that I was with back then. And he, he moved—he was in Savannah at a job—he—that was not appropriate for him. It was dead-end situation. Michigan was home for him. He had not lived in Michigan for a couple of decades. But I thought it would be really an adventure for me, as, you know, still living in my own hometown. I thought it'd be an adventure to try something different. So, I, I encouraged him to take a job back home in Michigan. And he did and he went. And I went up and visited for a full year, you know, once a month or so. Getting certified to teach in Michigan. Looking at real estate with him. Spending time with his family. Putting all the pieces into place. I did not find a job. I learned that to find a job in a desirable school district in Michigan—because it's a unionized state for teachers and because they pay so well—somebody almost has to die before a good teaching position comes available. So, they were not there for the picking at all, in my experience. But I also realized over that year that I was looking forward to just about every aspect of moving to Michigan, except living with him. So, it was a good thing I didn't go. So, I didn't leave my job. I left him. Or we, we had already parted basically. We just had, you know, we just had to put the formal announcement on “I'm not coming. You know, this is not going to be a good thing if I did. We would not be good for each other.”

So, I stayed in my teaching job. I met someone else. And so, I, I, I never really did come out at my school. But I was kind—want to think about a streamlined way, I'm not—there's nothing that I'm not that I'm unwilling to tell. But it can be an excessively long story, which we don't need to get into.

I, I left my teaching job for a sales job, actually, that I learned—that I knew almost right away was not for me. And I was pretty unhappy. Similarly, the school was dramatically unhappy with

the person they hired to replace me. And so during that entire school year, the, the principal of the school would contact me pretty regularly to see if I was ready to come back. Because he was ready to show to the door the person they hired to replace me. And I didn't do that during that school year, but by the time the school year was coming to a close, I was pretty convinced that I wasn't happy in the position that I had taken. And so, I, I signed a contract to come back to my same classroom, my same teaching load, everything the same, the following school year. And I did that.

I don't know what changed because I had rocked along just fine for eight years prior. But the Friday before the Labor Day holiday, the long weekend, that's right, you know, pretty much at the beginning of a school year. We've been back in school maybe two weeks. He pulled me into his office just as I was leaving to go home for the long weekend. And he closed the door, and he said, he said, "I'm just—I want to make you aware of something." He said, "No big deal. I just want to make you aware that for the last couple of weeks, I've gotten a whole bunch of phone calls from parents saying, "Rumor has it that Mr. Smith is gay." Now I know that's not true," he said. "I know you're as straight as an arrow." Said, "I've told them it's total foolishness. And, and, you know, that if they want to throw around accusations like that, they better have a lawyer. And, you know, this is defamation, this is libel, this is..." So, he was doing a whole lot of talking, and I was doing a whole lot of listening. And I said to him, I said, "I want to ask you one question." I said, "In what measure is this job threatening?" "Oh my goodness, it's not job threatening at all. I'm just letting you know. You know, just people have idle gossip. No, there's nothing to worry about. I just wanted you to be aware." And I said, "Okay." And I walked out of the office and went home. And I was resolved at that point. And it was heartbreaking because I had worked kind of hard to get back into this job. They worked kind of hard to get me back into this job. There was also a little salary negotiation. I got a better deal for coming back. So, there was all kinds of irony on this situation.

But ironic or not, I told my then-partner (now husband) that I, I never ever wanted to have a conversation like that again. And I would never be in a position again where someone could hold this over my head. And that I felt backed into a corner and threatened from a professional standpoint. So, I started right then looking for something else to do. And it took me about ten weeks to—I interviewed here, applied there, sent a resume to another place, whatever.

And this is how I ended up finding the museum educator position with the public school system. And even back then, even back then in 1997, the Savannah Chatham County Public Schools had a non-harassment and employment discrimination policy that included sexual orientation. Which I thought was extraordinary for the—for that time. And so, I felt utterly and completely safe going into Savannah's public school system on that count. You know, on that issue. So, I interviewed, interviewed again, got the offer. They were ready for me to start on the first Monday after the new year in January.

By this time, it was getting close to, it was getting close to Christmas vacation. Early December. So, on a Friday afternoon—and I didn't do this with any level of spite or anything like that—but it was the same day of the week, same time of the day that I had been called in ten or eleven weeks earlier. So, I walked into the principal's office and closed the door, and I said, "Do you have a minute to talk to me?" And he said "Yes." And I said, "So, I'm sure that you remember

some weeks ago having a conversation in which you told me what parents were saying about me.” And I said, “I left that day feeling completely and totally unhappy about that. And nervous about that. And not feeling secure in my job. And I don't like feeling that way. So, what I have done in the intervening weeks is constructed found another position for myself, which I'm about to accept. And I'll be starting first Monday of January.” “I told you this wasn't job threatening. Why in the world would you go do something like that? I told you this is fine. I told you that I'm telling these parents that they better get their facts straight if they're gonna—.”

And I said, “Let me stop you right there.” I said, “This is coming out at work. This is what this looks like in this scenario.” I said, “If you think that these accusations are false, then you have completely mis-assessed the situation. And as I understand libel, and I'm no lawyer, but I think libel is only liable if it's untrue. And this is true. They're right.” And I said, “And I think deep down you know they're right.” I said, “I know that in your own backhanded way, you're defending me. And I appreciate that. But here's what I need you to do: if I'm going to stay here and continue teaching with the school, what I need you to say the next time—and every time this question arises—is ‘I don't know, and what difference does it make?’ That's what I want you to be able to say. Can you tell me that you can say that?”

He said, “I don't know why I should have to say that.” He said, “I'm working this out the way I need to work it out. And I want you to be satisfied.” I said, “But I'm not satisfied with that. Because it's not true. And, and it's—not there it's not any of their business. If they can tell you a reason that this information (whether true not speculative confirmed) matters one bit to my teaching their child French, or teaching their child American Lit, then we can talk about that. But I don't think they're going to be able to say what that reason is.” So I said, “Several weeks ago on a Friday afternoon you gave me something to think about. Whether you realized you did or not, you gave me a lot to think about. And I'm giving you something and—.” I said that I wasn't being snarky, I hope. But I said, “I'm giving you something to think about over this weekend: whether you can answer that question in the future the way I need you to answer that question in the future. Which is really true support, not obfuscation and dodging the question. And if you can, then I will strongly consider not taking this other position and I'll stay here. But if you can't, then I have a plan. And I—you know. I know what I'm gonna do next.” So, he said, “Okay.”

So, on that next Monday morning, I went into the school with a letter of resignation and an envelope in my inside coat pocket. And I stopped in his office first thing in the morning. I said, “Have you thought about what we talked about?” He said, he said, “Roger, it's 1997, almost 1998. This is Savannah, Georgia. This is Savannah Christian School.” He said, “I can't, I can't say what you want me to say. It won't fly.” And I said, “Then I can't stay.” And I pulled out the letter and handed it to him.

And I mean, I did everything right. I worked out a notice. I, I was the yearbook advisor. I worked through the Christmas vacation getting the, the whoever the new person would be in a really good place with page deadlines and all. I didn't leave the school in a lurch at all. I kept my key during—key to the school—during this Christmas break. I graded all my final—all my midterm exams. The very last thing I did with the school on, on the Monday morning that I started my new job after the holidays were over is I let myself into the school really early one morning, left my grade book on my desk, closed the door behind me, and shoved the key under the door.

So, you know, we left on as good enough terms as we could have left on. I didn't break anything, or, you know, they didn't bad mouth me in the community, or anything like that. I actually ran into that—I ran into that principal at a family wedding, a wedding in my family, about six months later. It wasn't even that long because the school year was still going on. And I saw him. I talked about the reception. And he said, he said, “You know, I sure do miss you at school.” He said, “The person we got to replace you just doesn't manage the classroom the same way you did. I'm worried about the yearbook when I never worried about the yearbook before.” And, and I said, I said, “Let me stop you right there.” I said, “No hard feelings, but I don't need to hear that you're unhappy with my replacement. You had an opportunity to play this differently. So, let's just enjoy the wedding reception.” Sorry for that really long story.

LB: That was good. That's good. So, as a young man in Savannah, you've, you've moved on now. And can you talk about any specific places or organizations that you remember during that time that were helpful to you?

RS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, First City Network was already in place long before I came on the scene. I want to say that the founding date of that organization is in the 1970s. Is that correct?

LB: Eighties...

RS: Certainly before I came along. Maybe the eighties. So, yeah even—I had forgotten about the timing of it. Even when I was still teaching at the really conservative private school, I was going to First City Network events. Some of them social, some of them kind of meeting oriented. And I remember meeting all kinds of nice people. I didn't meet anybody to date there, and I don't even know if I would have been ready for that anyway. But, but yeah, really nice people, very welcoming. Warm, warm people. There was a Sunday afternoon gay church the—aw shoot. It—CCC or CC community—it in—MCC Metropolitan—that's it. Metropolitan Community Church. There was a—an arm of that church that met in maybe in the Unitarian Church downtown when it was on Columbia Square. Which the building is now the headquarters of Historic Savannah Foundation on York Street, I believe. So, I went to went to church with gay people in the 1990s. That was nurturing. And then as far as social places to go, my—there were probably more places than just these. But Club One was already open at number one Jefferson Street in the City Market area.

And then there was a smaller place—much smaller place—on Lincoln and Bryan Streets called Faces. And I haven't really kept up with what that place is now or whether it's even still open. The most recent I can remember, just to give people listening to this today a little bit better geography, I want to say it's called Abe's. It's a, it's a straight bar on Lincoln and Bryan Streets. And by the way, to call that Abe's because it's on Lincoln Street is real—that street is not named for Abraham Lincoln. It's named for a different Lincoln. But anyway, whatever, whatever works for them.

That little place. It was the ground floor, yeah, I think you even stepped down into a really low ceiling. This is the garden level of a really old, early nineteenth century house. Wooden house. It was called Faces. And I found Faces to be kind of like the, the *Cheers* of the, the gay bars, you

know. Club One is “loud, disco dancing, you know, can barely be heard over the music.” I think Faces was—there might have been music at Faces, but it—you could have a conversation. It was much more of a bar. It was not a dance place at all really. And it had a, an outdoor space I guess for smoking, but also for, you know—there was a pool table in another room. So, there was a bar. There was a room with a pool table, and then there was a, like, a patio, I would say. And the, the person I eventually ended up with, Kevin, who's now my husband. We've been together twenty-five years, and we're married eight years ago. He couldn't stand Faces. He never ever wanted to go to Faces with me. He felt like it was—everybody, all eyes were on the new person to walk through the door. He's also six feet four inches tall, which is a lot taller than I am. And I think he found that low ceiling—that low, you know, 1810 ceiling—not workable. So, he never liked going to going to Faces. So, we would go to Club One together much more often than that. And now in our old age, we really don't go out any place at all. That's not just because of COVID. We were not going out for a long time before COVID.

LB: Can you or do you have any experiences that you can speak to regarding the AIDS Crisis in Savannah? Did you have any experience with that?

RS: Only a little bit. I'll start by saying that I never knew a time as an adult without AIDS. Like, there was never any pre-aids pandemic AIDS epidemic dating for me. There was never any glorious 1970s, crazy 1980. There was—that wasn't—I didn't come along at the right time for that. Or you may say it came along at exactly the right time to avoid the, the lack of knowledge that people who died in big numbers didn't—the knowledge they didn't have. So. I'm grateful for that. But I never ever had a time that I wasn't careful. And probably because I was so sequestered, I really barely knew anyone who was sick.

I, I attended a church—Lutheran Church of the Ascension, which had its shortcomings on the gay front, for sure. But at the same time, it at least cooperated—this is in the nineties—it at least cooperated with an AIDS outreach. It was not the church's program, but it cooperated with a tr—with a program that I want to say was called Phoenix House, if I remember correctly. And it was a ministry, I think a Christian ministry. It might not have been Christian. I can't remember. Anyway, I went as a representative of the church on at least a couple of occasions to, I want to say, they were maybe Sunday afternoon or Sunday evening gatherings of people with HIV. I didn't establish any long-lasting friendships with any of them.

So, I, I guess you could say that I just wasn't deeply enough involved in the community that I had any friends, anybody in my immediate orbit who, who were, were sick or dying. And, and, so as tragic as that was, I, I can't say that it really touched me personally. Other than just to have a general awareness. And, and I went to Atlanta to march in the AIDS Walk several years. You know, I raised money in, you know, in small—oh, this is something I forgot about. I apparently was a little more nerdy at my school than I thought. When I walked in the AIDS Walk two or three different years, I put the the pledge sheet in the teacher's work room. My fellow teachers were giving—I, I basically, I remember I was kind of daring them to say that it was bad to walk in the AIDS Walk. Like, what's your problem if you got a problem with me, you know, doing—. It wasn't coming out, but it was showing where I was putting my energies in charity.

LB: Are there any other events or traditions in the Savannah community that you participated in? For instance, did you do Pride in Savannah?

RS: I—you know, I'm ashamed to say that I, I didn't. I went out in Savannah. I—but I didn't. I certainly wasn't involved in any kind of organizing of Pride then or, or now. In some ways, I'll just admit freely that I'm a pretty poor gay man in some instances. I, I don't—I don't put myself as actively as I ought to. And probably would enjoy doing. And that's a real, that's a real shortcoming.

This is gonna sound really critical. But since you ask about events, traditions, and so forth. I don't know how long ago this was. This is pretty negative about my experience in the gay community in Savannah. Kevin and I—I don't know if this was ten years ago, or fifteen years ago. It was some number of years ago. Somehow or other, we found out about an entire weekend. A whole gay weekend of events. And it was all packaged. It was really very nicely organized, actually. And really inexpensive, I think. Let's just say there was a Friday evening reception followed by a Saturday morning trolley tour of maybe gardens or something. There was some kind of luncheon. There was a film screening on a Saturday night. There was some kind of celebration at Club One into the night on Saturday. And there was a brunch at a gay-friendly restaurant on Sunday. And so maybe six events. And it was something—it was very reasonable. It's like a hundred and twenty-five dollars per person for all of that stuff put together. So, I said to Kevin—who's not a terribly social person—I said, "We should do this. We should buy tickets to this event. We should support. We should show up. We should support whatever, you know, whatever there is to do." So, we did.

And the sad part is, and I—you know, we were probably in our early forties at that time. And we went to the opening event. And the woman who was sitting at the check-in desk talked to us because she had to ask our names and give us our name tags. And I actually ended up becoming friends with her and did some projects with her later on. And we were on some similar committees and so forth. Not in the gay community, but on, on other non-profit and non-profit situations. So, she spoke to us. It turns out that because of the nature of my work (the Georgia Historical Society), I work with a lot of caterers. I knew the caterer John Nichols, so he talked to me.

Where I'm going with this is those are the only two people who spoke to us the entire weekend. And I don't know if it was the invisibility of age. And the average age in that group was more like twenty years younger than we were. It just seemed to me that everybody in that space knew each other, and they were very busy talking to each other. And, like I said, the check-in lady and the caterer talk to—talk to me because I—you know, they had to, or I knew them. And I said to Kevin, "It was almost, it was almost funny." I said, "You know, I, I have any—I'm responsible for any number of meet and greet situations, by nature of the line of work that I'm in. And when I'm at work, it is my job to work the room, and to introduce people to each other, and to make sure everybody's having a good time, and make sure nobody is standing off to themselves." And I said, "But this is not my event. You know, I don't really want to put forth that effort. I feel like the effort should come in the other direction. And if that—me—you—guess—me—makes me the one with the shortcoming, fine. That, you know. Fine. "

And I will say that by the time of the Sunday brunch, a group of lesbians did ask Kevin and me to sit with them. We, we had our food at this restaurant. And it was an outdoor situation. I think there were, like, picnic tables almost. And there was nowhere to sit. So, these women said, "Come sit with us." And, and we did. And we probably talked a little bit with them.

But it was a real—I said to Kevin when we got home on one or the, the first or the second night of that weekend. I said, "You know, I am secure enough in my own city that—and I, I guess, I also realized that ninety-five percent of our friends were straight people. You know, we do not lack for friends. I don't lack for social outlets. I, I, I'm extremely happy in my city. But if someone were a newcomer at age, let's just say forty-five, and walked into that event, I wouldn't blame them for thinking that Savannah was cliquish, and snobby, and standoffish. Because if that was your only experience, not a great one. I've got to be honest. You know, I walked out of that—I was in the, in that situation thinking, "I feel like a stranger in my own city. A little bit. Because I don't know any of these people, and they're not making any effort to get to know me." I walked out thinking, "Glad that's over. You know, glad I can go back to the city that I know and the people that I know." But think about it from a standpoint of somebody who is brand new. How lost they must—but they must feel if that is their experience. Again, that's a long time ago. I hope that things have changed since then.

LB: Alright. Well, I'm hoping that, yeah, First City maybe and the Pride Center are places for that.

RS: Yeah, I hope so.

LB: Yeah, so, just a quick question: how—what does this project mean for you? The actual Proud Savannah History Project?

RS: Yeah, yeah. Well, in the same way that I've already said that I would have thought thirty years ago that my city was this big [small hand gesture] in terms of being broad-minded and learning. That it is such a broader, and more welcoming, and happy, and accepting place. I think it is absolutely extraordinary that this isn't just happening in Savannah, it is happening with City of Savannah government blessing and approval. And, and the city isn't just letting it happen, the city is making it happen. This, this particular oral history project, I think that's extraordinary. I bet that we could go to a lot of other southern cities and not find this to be the case. I don't know that. I haven't looked into it. But I have a feeling. And I'm just really proud that that City of Savannah would, would do this.

And I don't want to call out any individual names or embarrass anybody, and I know how it feels—sometimes people are very—they're very kind with their praise of me for things that happen in my program, the Learning Center at Senior Citizens. And a little bit of that goes a very long way with me. So, I'm going to be brief. But I think that without the leadership of Luciana Spracher. I don't know if this project would be happening or not. She is, she is an extraordinary archivist, manager. She has enormous foresight and vision for the City of Savannah Municipal Archives. And she's one of my best friends. So, I'm, you know, praising someone I feel very close to. But I'm not sure that different leadership, other than Luciana's, would have made something like this happen. So, I got to give credit where credit is due. Yes, the city is letting her

do it. But I don't think the city is making her do it, either. So, you know, it's, it's good. It is all very good. And I'm delighted to, to be a part of it.

LB: And what would you say to young LGBTQ people today or those who are coming along in the future? What would you have to say about where Savannah's going? Or—?

RS: Yeah, yeah. I don't ever want to be dismissive of them and act—and act as if they don't have burdens, and hurdles, and worries, and concerns. Those concerns are still there. Family prejudice, discrimination in the workplace, violence on the streets. All of that is absolutely still in place. And I'm not trying to take anything away from a current day struggle. I would say, however, it is just so much better than it used to be. It needs to get better. We're not, we're not where we should be. But we're a lot better than where we were. It is a fantastic city to come out in. And, and and I, I hope that if they—if young people today and in the future don't feel as if the people around them in our city or wherever they are, if they don't feel that level of acceptance, find new people. You know, I know that's easier, easier said than done. But for years, I didn't have the right people. I mean, I, I was putting myself in situations that were almost bound to fail in terms of acceptance and coming out. You just got to find the right people. And if you're not swimming in waters that are, that are, that are warm and comfortable and inviting, find other waters, you know. And I hope that would never mean somebody would leave this city to have to do that. But just put yourself in the right company, and you'll, you'll, you'll get there, you know. And enjoy. Oh my gosh, have a, have a great—don't deprive yourself of experiences like I did, probably, and waited too long to start enjoying life.

LB: Anything else that you'd like to share with us today? That maybe—experiences that we didn't cover? Did you have anything left you could think of that need to be documented about your history? Or Savannah histories?

RS: No, not that I can think of. I think we covered a broad range of things. I really appreciate your doing this with me.

LB: Well, thank you very much for sharing your history today. I really have enjoyed it. Thank you.

RS: Same here. Thank you. Bye.

LB: Bye.

**End of interview.**