

HemphillMitch_20200617_transcript

LIZ BRADBURY: -- do -- great, and there we are. So, I have to start out by saying this project, with this project, the Bradbury Sullivan LGBT Community Center and the Trexler Library at Muhlenberg College will collaborate on 40 years of public health experiences in the Lehigh Valley LGBT community, collecting and curating local LGBT health experiences from HIV/AIDS to COVID-19. And so, I start out by saying, and this is all on and everything -- I'm supposed to, let's see, I want to be sure I'm going to do the right thing here. Yes. So, this is the first one I've done. So, that's why --

MITCH HEMPHILL: Oh, okay.

LB: (inaudible) [a little hesitating?]. My name is Liz Bradbury and I'm here with Mitch Hemphill to talk about his experiences in the Lehigh Valley LGBT community -- oh, this is the wrong one. (laughs) No. During this -- oh, I see, the LGBT community, during this time of the COVID-19 epidemic as part of the Lehigh Valley LGBT archive, our project was funded from the Lehigh Valley engaged consortium. We're meeting on Zoom and so today's date is June 17th --

MH: June 17th, 20--

LB: -- 2020. And thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us today. To start, can you please state your full

name and spell it for me?

MH: Certainly. My full name is Mitchell Hemphill, spelled
M-I-T-C-H-E-L-L H-E-M-P-H-I-L-L.

LB: Great. And will you please share your birth date?

MH: Yes. September thirteenth, nineteen sixty.

LB: Okay. So, this is the consent part. So, do you consent to
this interview today?

MH: I do consent.

LB: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed,
digitized, and made publicly available online in searchable
formats?

MH: I do consent.

LB: Do you consent to the LGBT Archive using your interview for
this -- educational purposes in other formats, including films,
archives, websites, presentations, and other formats?

MH: I do consent.

LB: Do you understand that you will have thirty days after the
electronic delivery of the transcript to review your interview
and identify parts you would like to delete and/or withdraw from
your interview from the project?

MH: I understand.

LB: Great. So, here's the deal: we're just going to start right
out. And so, what I'm going to -- just start with this little
prompt and then say in the midst of the current health crisis

that we experience-- we want to take this opportunity to look back and reflect and to capture the stories of those who lived through the worst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the nineteen eighties and nineties. So, we just have three things to prompt you. I'm going to start you right out to say do you remember the first time you became aware of the disease and just talk about that?

LB: Sure. I may have heard of it before but I wasn't really aware of it until about nineteen eighty-four or nineteen eighty-five. That's at the point that people that we knew were starting to get sick. And I believe -- and in nineteen eighty-five, when Rock Hudson, when it was on the news that had HIV and then died shortly after, I think that really brought it to the attention of a lot more people. Honestly, even at that point, still, it wasn't very much a part of our life, it seemed, you know? It was still happening to other people, more so before that, too. And it seemed like it was happening more so to other people. It was only happening to people that were very promiscuous or using drugs and so -- even at that point. And I have to admit, at that time, I was very young. I was in my early twenties. I had only really come out a few years before that. And so, I was exploring my own sexuality and really kind of self-focused on my own life and what was going on with me, with work, and relationships, and things like that. But in

eighty-four, I started working at the Stonewall and that's really when I -- by working there, that's when I started hearing more about it, although it wasn't -- there wasn't a lot of focus, still, yet and I didn't see much about it.

LB: Yeah. So, at what point in the crisis were you living in the Lehigh Valley? So, you were at the Stonewall, you were living there -- here the whole time and can you speak -- so, talk about that and then also talk about -- can you speak to what resources or communication or attitudes were going on at the time?

MH: Well, I actually lived in the Lehigh Valley all of my life with the exception of three years where I lived in Florida, which was from nineteen eighty-seven to nineteen ninety. So, actually, right in the middle of the peak. But before that, before moving to Florida, in the -- like I said, around eighty-five is where you started hearing more about it. There didn't seem to me -- I didn't see a lot of information out in our area at that time. And it may be my own guilt of not noticing things that were out there but I wasn't paying a lot of attention to. And I know a lot of people like myself and my circle of friends, we were more focused on partying (laughs) and enjoying each other's company than we were about the issues. Also, at that time, I wasn't much of a news watcher and things like CNN were still in their infancy. So, you weren't hearing

about it on the news and it was considered still a gay disease, you know, that was affecting gay people only. So, you really didn't hear anything and you didn't get any support from the government about it. In the early days, there was an organization I was aware of, the AIDS Service Center, although I was not involved with them other than seeing some of their literature and things like that. The time, as far as the way people felt at that period of time, and this going -- before eighty-seven, when I moved, in the early years. To be honest with you, I think, like myself, a lot of people were still of the opinion of this was an isolated thing. It wasn't something affecting me, it wasn't going to affect my lifestyle, and as long as you weren't -- if you were in a monogamous relationship where you weren't sleeping with somebody that looks sick, you were fine, you know? Something we all learned later was not really going to be the case. But there didn't seem to be a lot of resources at that time. But if you weren't looking for them, you weren't going to find them. Until about nineteen eighty-six, when FACT was formed, that's when things really developed as far as information getting out there, activism being there. And so, that's when it became more -- I became more aware of it, myself. That's pretty much -- like I said, I think, still, like I said in that period of time, there wasn't a lot going on that you could see, going up to eighty-seven. Then, I did go --

eighty-seven to nineteen ninety, I lived in Florida. There were some activities going on there, too, some fundraising events and stuff like that. But to be honest, being around Orlando, which was a vacation spot, promiscuity, et cetera was in full swing, you know? There was more focus on having fun and the shows and things like that then there was, actually, on activism about this disease.

LB: Yeah. When you were talking about FACT being formed, that was before you went away in eighty-seven?

MH: That was actually before I went away. FACT was formed in nineteen eighty-six. It came out of a friendly competition between the Stonewall bar and Candida's bar. The staff on both, at both bars, were always doing things with friendly competition and it kind of built up to what we decided was going to be a bar competition. At the time, we called it the Bar Olympics.

LB: Right.

MH: And a few forward thinking people, not necessarily that were part of the actual activities, thought to use this event to actually do something more with it, raise awareness about AIDS and things like this, and started FACT. So, that was in eighty-six, eighty-seven I moved to Florida, and then didn't return until nineteen ninety. So, when I came back in nineteen ninety, things were -- we're seeing results of the disease within my community and my circle of friends and things like

this.

LB: Well, I want you to talk about that but I just want to get an idea, like, when FACT was forming in nineteen eighty-six, do you think that that was happening because people were hearing about the disease or because people had it?

MH: In eighty-six, when it was actually formed, it was -- FACT was formed in our area because we were seeing people we knew who were being affected by it, that had it, and were already passing away, you know?

LB: Right.

MH: And within our community, we knew that the government wasn't really doing much of anything for it. The health departments really weren't doing anything. And to raise awareness and do something about it, we kind of had to do it on our own. And that was one of the reasons, you know, with founding FACT, although it was supporting the entire community, not just gay and lesbian, you know, people and LGBTQ, but it opened itself up, knowing it had to do everything for the entire community and have those services for everyone. That was a big step forward, you know, and drove a lot of things, I think with, like, the Allentown Health Bureau and different -- made more things available and brought more information out there as a result of it.

LB: Yeah. In nineteen eighty-six, when these things were

happening, do you think that people were -- they were changing their behavior? I mean, you were raising money with FACT. What was the money for? Because in eighty-six, I don't know whether there was medication. I was just moving to Lehigh Valley then, so I wasn't as aware of that. But, like, when they were trying to raise money, what was the money for? Was it for education?

MH: The money at that point, as I understood it, with my involvement with them, in the beginning, was a lot of it, it had to do with helping people that were HIV-positive. It had to do with educating the public. It had to do with getting materials like condoms out in bars and literature out in bars and making people more aware of it within the community. And, like I said, obviously, they, you know, were open to the entire population of our area. However, that was where the focus needed to be because our community was being affected in a higher ratio than the community at large. So, that's really where their focus was, to educate, to -- there was money, as they went down the line, that was made available, like, through grants for different other organizations. So, they're almost, like, a parent organization to other organizations. But the main thing was to get the word out, to get the materials out so that people understood better what was going on and how to help prevent it from spreading.

LB: I think there was, perhaps, a time, and maybe you could comment on this, where people didn't know where it was coming

from. They just thought it was a gay disease that gay people were getting but they didn't really know how it was communicated. Were you sort of aware of --

MH: Definitely was the case, especially in the earlier days. And I think a lot of us -- and like I say, I was young and a bit selfish, you know, with my own life at that time. Had it been happening when I was in my forties, perhaps I would have been different. But a lot of people really just thought this was something that affected a small group of people in other places, you know? Like I say, it's only the people that are going to the bathhouses or, you know, that have way too many partners or, you know, people that were IV drug users, we heard about it, and were also being affected by it. But I don't think it was something that we thought of as a community so much was going to affect us individually. It's not going to get me. Kind of like the young people right now with this pandemic. I'm strong, I'm young, and if I do get it, I'll beat it, you know? And I think that attitude, it wasn't -- I think I had that attitude and I believe a lot of other people did, as well. And, you know, coming from the freedom of the seventies and the sexual freedom and everything we experienced as a community that you were able to do without having to worry about somebody getting pregnant, you know, that's one of the reasons that it was spreading so rampantly through the community. But we really didn't think that

it was going to affect me personally. And I think a lot of my circle of friends and a lot of people that I waited on as customers and knew from the bar, I think they felt the same way until, like I said, around eighty-six -- was when we were starting to see people we actually knew getting sick with it. And back then, with what little you did hear about it -- was that if you did get it, it was a death sentence, you know, because people were getting very sick and people were dying rather quickly in the beginning.

LB: Yeah.

MH: You know? So, that was eighty-six, when FACT was formed. And then, by the time I came back from Florida in nineteen ninety, it had -- a lot more people were affected and a lot more people that I knew were affected. And I went to a lot of funerals and I got to the point, in the early nineties, where I just felt I can't go to one more funeral because I had been to so many where I had seen friends and people that I had known, you know, pass away from this thing. But even then, to be honest with you, the mentality of myself, even -- I'm guilty of this. I'm one of those lucky fools because I wasn't even tested myself. I didn't get tested until about nineteen ninety-one . In 1990, I moved back to be with my current partner of, where -- my husband and we've been together for thirty years. But before -- and to be honest with you, I'm not proud to say this but I tried

to have monogamous relationships throughout my life but in between those relationships, I lived a free life and I did a lot of things that were not safe and I was a bit of a hypocrite because even after the formation of FACT, I would encourage people to use safe sex, and -- if it's abstinence and everything that was involved with trying not to get this disease. But myself, I was not following the rules. And when I took that test in -- around nineteen ninety-one, I was actually of the opinion and thought I'm definitely going to show up positive because I did too many things that were too risky. I drank too much in those days and I made some very poor decisions. And I knew of some people that I had been involved with that actually had contracted the disease and then later passed away from it. So, I thought it's a given and my only protection was not to do things with my current husband that could put him at risk. So, when I actually got the test back negative, I was actually kind of surprised, you know?

LB: Wow. Is that why it took you a while to get tested, because you were afraid --

MH: I think so. I think I was kind of, in my head, it's going to be positive, you know? But ignorance is no excuse, you know? And I can't really relate that to something that's going on in this situation other than the -- my behavior, I was a hypocrite. It's like telling somebody you should be wearing a

mask but then I go out and don't wear one myself, you know? So, yeah, it was a hard time within my own mind, too, and I don't know if a lot of other people struggled this way. I contemplated -- like, this interview, I'm not the best example of it because I wasn't the best hero, definitely, through that period. I was doing the things that I was telling other people not to do and I was the lucky fool in this case.

LB: Weren't there other people that were doing that too, though?

MH: Oh, I know there were, yes. There were multitudes of people doing that. But, you know, when you look at it and you think of the things you have done to try to help with the epidemic and stuff like that -- but while not following your own words, you know? And I was guilty of that, you know? It was something that I think a lot of people within my age group, you know, that are now coming on sixty and, you know, a little younger and older, we were all pretty much doing the same thing and we were very quick to be a part of the organizations, go to the fundraisers, do these kinds of things, and go to the fun things, you know? The Summer Games were fun, you know, to be a part of them, to be there. Going to the Snowball, the FACT Snow Ball, that was fun. You got to dress up. It was kind of like just another event. And you all often lost sight of why you were actually doing it while there were people in the background

always working. You know, some of the people, you know, that I've known through time, like Carl Mancino and David Moyer and people like this that were doing all the hard work through all of that, you know? But it's a time I look back on and say I didn't deserve to make it through it, in some ways, you know? And I'm sure there's a lot of people that feel the same way, you know?

LB: What was the hard work? I mean, what were some of the things that you saw --

MH: The hard work is actually living what you're saying, you know? Doing -- not only just doing the fundraising and actually doing the work of an organization but also walking the walk and talking the talk. Not just saying this is what you should do, you should be safe, you should be using condoms, you should be doing this and then going out on your own and doing otherwise, you know? And like I say, I know a lot of people, they -- we've talked about this, you know, looking back, and it's, like, how did we survive this when our friends who were less active, even, didn't, you know? We knew people that actually had had one sexual encounter and that was it, you know? But this was all before they had the medications that they have now to make it that it is not a death sentence.

LB: Yeah.

MH: You know?

LB: Did you know people that were taking care of other people, who were -- you know, people who were caring for people that were dying or sick?

MH: Just indirectly, for the most part, you know? And, yes, and that was -- in the nineties, there were numerous people I -- that took such a toll on the people that were the caregivers. I can only relate to it having taken care of my father until he passed [at the?] first of the year. But there is quite a struggle for a lot of people that not only had to, you know, deal with this -- and from the entire community as a whole, you know, that were taking care of people like that and having to watch them waste away, especially in the early days, you know? There wasn't -- the drugs that were out there really weren't extending life and it wasn't making life better, you know? So, the early days were really rough and a lot of us, people like me, sometimes it was easier to look the other way. But then, when a friend of yours died, it brought it right back to the forefront and it was, like, you know, why are we forgetting about this, you know?

LB: Yeah.

MH: Was a lot of that.

LB: So, when you were doing the -- talk a little bit about the magazine because [I think it?] --

MH: Well, when I did come back -- like I said, I helped with

the formation of FACT and I was doing that. That was my involvement and I was a little bit, you know, involved with some of the work on the fundraisers and things like that in the early years, then I moved to Florida. When I came back, like I mentioned, in the early nineties, that's when people were being more affected. But I started *Above Ground* magazine and launched that in November of nineteen ninety-four. And the reason for launching the magazine was because the LGBTQ (sic) -- the community in Lehigh Valley no longer had a periodical, you know, that -- and it was something that was needed, it was missing for a period of time, since other things had fallen apart. So, it was an entertainment and information monthly magazine that I put out. And one of the things that I made available through it was access to the HIV/AIDS groups so they could advertise their events, put in articles, you know, different things like that. And I would actually always go to the big events and give them some publicity and things like that so people kept aware of it. And the magazine I had ran for -- I had it for three years, until I sold it in nineteen ninety-seven. And then, shortly after, it stopped being published. But it was filling a need at that time, which was filled by other things in the meantime. Some, notably -- (laughs) but at the time, there was really nothing out there, so you didn't know about these events other than that. And that was one way that it actually spread

throughout the community and into the surrounding areas and people were made more aware of these different events, as well. So, I hope to think that it did something to help in that way.

LB: Yeah.

MH: [You know?]?

LB: Oh, yeah, no question. So, what do you think, in terms of activism, I mean, you did some significant things with activism and we saw the continuation of FACT over all of that time. And things began to change in terms of medications and stuff. In about nineteen ninety-three, I think that really began to change. How did that seem different to you? Did you see any kind of difference or did you see people still being actually more aware of things?

MH: I actually believe people were -- after I came back from Florida, I did go back to work at the Stonewall again and I worked there for another eight years or so. And so, you know, just having to see the view of how people are reacting in the bar scene, do you know what I mean? There was a difference made. You know, the work of FACT and other organizations like that actually was working and people were being less promiscuous, in my opinion. I think people were starting to show, you know, safe sex practices more. They were involved. Over time, after the medications became better and treatment became better, I think there was less urgency with a lot of

people. Like, we have to do something and we have to do something about this now, you know? However, I think that it did make a change. Now, whether that change is still relevant today is a little different. For a short period of time, sometime after two-thousand, for a very short period of time, I worked part-time in the Stonewall's coat check, for their underage night.

LB: Ah.

MH: And all of the materials are there. I think that they have a different sense -- the younger generation definitely has a younger sense and they're more aware of how easy they can contract the disease from another person, although they don't have the same fear that a lot of people did, especially in the nineties, you know, because of the advances that have been made, you know, through medicines and treatments.

LB: Yeah.

MH: So, I wouldn't say that they're ignoring it. I think they're still behaving better than we did in the early '80s, I really do. I think in a lot of ways, they're more responsible. But, like I say, good medicine also makes you little more comfortable with thinking that if I do get it, they can take care of it, you know? Which does nothing to stop the spread.

LB: Right, right, right.

MH: Yeah.

LB: So, how did you think -- with the competition between the bars that really began FACT and began those kinds of things, that part atmosphere that made things more fun in some ways, do you think that that was something that really encouraged people to become involved?

MH: Oh, absolutely. To be honest with you, if it was less fun, you wouldn't have had people coming to it. You know, sometimes you have to kind of make things fun to make it worth people to do things, you know? It's difficult. Right now, (inaudible) we're looking at the pandemic, with the COVID-19, how do you really encourage people by doing something fun to do the right thing or to -- you know, it's a totally different situation in that it really can affect anyone and everyone. It's an even more invisible thing and it's, you know, so much easier spread that people just don't -- they don't realize how severe it is, you know? What we had to deal with the AIDS epidemic was kind of compartmentalized, you know what I mean? It was only affecting people that were having sex with each other or transferring blood, you know, through the use of different needles and stuff like that. But it was something that -- at least you weren't going to get it just by walking up to somebody and talking to them, you know? One of the things that was a parallel that I see was to the way I felt when I was younger and AIDS came out, we were young. And, you know what? We're strong and we will

get through this and it will not affect us and if I get it, I will beat it. I saw that, especially if they close down things and I'd see big groups of people on the basketball courts: younger people, still playing, you know? And that feeling that you're invincible when you're younger, it's difficult with younger people, you know? So, it's such a different situation now than the AIDS crisis was. But, at the same time, there are a lot of parallels that we see and one of the things, if we as the gay community hadn't kind of taken hold of it ourselves, it would have been left to just run rampant, you know what I mean? We weren't getting support from the, you know, Reagan/Bush government. We weren't getting support by a lot of people in general because they thought this was a gay disease. It was only affecting gay people and it was only affecting drug users, so better to it. I mean, even leading to some conspiracy theories, you know, that it was actually put out there on purpose to wipe us out, you know? But one of the parallels I see to this and our situation now is actually the way that a lot of people in the government are trying to make it seem as if it's a non-issue, it doesn't exist, you know? We can look the other way, it'll just go away, you know? And that, we saw when we had the AIDS epidemic. It was, like, this is a small, isolated thing. It's only affecting, you know, this type of people. It's nothing for us to worry about, you know, until it started going

into the population as a whole and heterosexual couples had to worry about it, too, and it was, like, this is something that could be spread that way. So, it was a difficult time going through that. But, unfortunately, I'm one of the examples of the, like, I say the lucky fools that, even though I was doing everything I could to help promote information about it and promote people to do the right thing, I wasn't necessarily doing the right thing, you know? And so, I'm fortunate that I can look at that in hindsight and know that I didn't contract it myself. And, more importantly, I didn't pass it on to someone else, you know? This epidemic here, you can get it, you may not even get very sick. But you can pass it on to so many other people, so --

LB: Yeah, in terms of contagion, really, HIV is very hard to pass on just to another --

MH: Correct.

LB: -- [you know, to?] --

MH: You can't pass it through the skin, it's not breathed in. It's something that has to be done through a bodily fluid.

LB: But do you remember a time when people had no idea how it was passed and so there was [no?] --

MH: Oh, yes, I do. You know, at first, when you'd first heard about it -- and like I say, I was mostly -- really became aware of it around eighty-four, eighty-five, when I started working at

the bar because that's when you'd actually hear some inklings about it and people that were a little bit more aware and actually took the time to look into this when they were hearing about it and reading about it in the news. Before that, like I say, I believe I'd heard of it, you know? And then, in the beginning, we really didn't know what was happening. In the early days, I think, from when it came out around eighty and eighty-one that they saw the first cases of this, they were just telling us they didn't really know what was happening but it was affecting heterosexual males I mean, homosexual males more than other people and so it was kind of focused on the group. So, no, we didn't know and, to be honest, we didn't know that it wasn't the government or some group trying to actually wipe us out. We didn't know that. That's why these theories come up. Until science took a hold of it and funding came in, we didn't really find out all the details of what caused it, where it came from, and how it was transmitted. One of the things -- I wasn't very politically motivated until leading up to the elections in nineteen ninety-two. And one of the main focuses of that was because of the way the government was responding to the AIDS epidemic and it was important that, then, Bill Clinton got into office and got the Reagan/Bush era over so that we could see something done. And we did, you know? That's when you really saw a lot more information come out from the scientists.

LB: And maybe there's a tie-in, do you think, between that and when people were really understanding about it? I guess people who had been infected, people who were scientists, people who were doctors had enough information then and they could begin to make scientifically informed --

MH: Oh, definitely. And, well, there was more motivation -- there wasn't a lot of motivation to push for it, to give money for the funding into the research into it in the beginning because of who it was affecting. Had AIDS been only affecting rich, white businessmen, they would have had funding a lot quicker. But like I say, there wasn't -- a lot of funding has to come through the government. And so, if it's not being funded for the research and to find out what this is, to actually look at it and say this is going to be a problem and we got to take care of it, in the early days, that wasn't there, you know? And so, as a result, none of us knew, really, what was going on. And if there was science coming out, it wasn't coming out to us.

LB: In the Lehigh Valley, do you remember any kind of political response or any kind of elected officials who talked about it or didn't talk about it or supported the rights and stuff that had an effect on that?

MH: I really don't have a big memory of that. And perhaps during the time from eighty-seven to ninety, when I was actually out of the Lehigh Valley, there may have been more of that. I

knew that there were people within the health department that were very focused on it. But that was actually coming a little bit later, once there was more knowledge of what it was. But I didn't really notice a feeling of support or denial or anything like that coming from, you know, government. It almost felt, to be honest with you, back then, it felt like this was our problem, we had to take care of it. Nobody else cares, nobody else is even looking at it, and so if anything's going to be done, we have to do it as our own community. And I honestly believe that communities across the country, that's how a lot of this got done. Philadelphia having a bigger city and a lot more different groups and stuff like that and activism, that kind of filtered to us, some of that. They were more active before we were in this area, I think, in a lot of ways.

LB: In nineteen ninety-three, people in the Lehigh Valley who -- and this really came out of the bars -- organized a bunch of buses to go to the March on Washington in nineteen ninety-three.

MH: Yes, yes. I actually didn't go on that march. But, yeah, that was a big thing. It really was. Wish I had gone. It was one of those things that I didn't go, probably because something was going on with one of my relationships at that time. No, actually, no, that was ninety-three, so, you know, I think I was just too focused on work and things like that. But after hearing about it and seeing people bring back pictures and stuff and

[come back with?] camaraderie -- it was a wonderful experience for a lot of people that I wish I'd been a part of, you know?

LB: I think that the Pride festival in the Lehigh Valley grew out of that. So, were you involved with Pride during the beginning times of that?

MH: I was. And when Pride first started, one of the ways I was actually involved with Pride was doing graphic work for them. Now, let's see, Pride started --

LB: Nineteen ninety -

MH: around nineteen ninety-four, three, ninety-four? Yeah, at that time, ninety-four, I had started the magazine. And before that, I was actually doing a newsletter for the Stonewall. And so, I was doing some kinds of graphic things. And some of the board members from Pride actually came to me and I did their, like, their booklet for the day of Pride and things for the first two years. And then, obviously, with working within the bar situation, we were able to promote things to a lot of people. And the bar itself making -- was very supportive of all kinds of things, always showing -- actually, all of the bars were as far as getting literature out there for people to read, making announcements, doing fundraisers within their own bars. And so, yeah, that, I think the Pride event grew out of that and some other things and our community already coming together because of the AIDS crisis. So, I think that helped strengthen

that, as well.

LB: Yeah, I think that's a big deal.

MH: Yeah, it is.

LB: So, as things went on and the various different stuff kind of wound down for the AIDS community, I mean, I think if we look back at that, there were some pretty key people that were making things happen in those days. And can you mention some of those folks and what they --

MH: Oh, yeah, in the early days, I mean, we lost some people that actually were -- Ken [Tall?] was an example. But Dave Moyer, Carl Mancino. There were people that were just part of -- they weren't part of the LGBTQ community but they were actually close friends and stuff and they became very instrumental, as well. Off the top of my head, coming up with names, those are two people that did a significant amount in those days, especially with FACT and things like that. But there were so many people involved and, to be honest with you, I wasn't as involved with the organizations other than, for instance, with the startup of it, promoting their events, perhaps, and like I said, helping with organizing some of the events. And I did concession stand -- I was in charge of concessions and stuff in the second Summer Games and things like that but --

LB: [Tell me a?] little bit about the summer games because people in the future should hear about that because they were

pretty wonderful.

MH: They were fun. First of all, like I say, they came out of a fun competition between competing bars. And they built into a much larger thing. At first, it only included Candida's and the Stonewall, which, you know, because of our friendship with each other and our competition with each other -- but then, after the first year, then it was decided that we were going to make an event and it was going to be a FACT event now that FACT had been formed. And so, other bars were invited, as well, from outside of the Lehigh Valley. There was bars from Reading, there was bars from Wilkes-Barre, Scranton. So, you had bars from other areas coming in and bringing more people in and learning about these things. One other thing about the summer games was it was a lot of fun. It was fun to watch, it was fun events. There was swimming, there was, you know, things like a drag competition where people would have to do a relay race getting into different outfits and stuff. A lot of fun. But one of the things that I remember the most we would get to the end of the competition and there would be a ceremony at the end and that is when everybody had time to actually remember what we were doing there with candlelight vigils, sometimes the naming of names and remember what we were doing there and take time to reflect on that. And that was a very heartwarming part of those events. So, like I said, the different events were always a lot of fun. You

want people to do things, you want people to participate, you got to make them fun. The Snowball, a lot of people didn't do the Snowball as they thought it was a little bit elitist because everybody was renting tuxes and going like this. So, they said, well, I can't afford to rent a tux and if I don't wear one -- you know, and over the years, that changed somewhat. There was a lot less people worrying so much about what they looked like and just enjoying the event. But the summer games was one thing where everybody could just show up, was a big ol' picnic, kind of atmosphere. And Rainbow Mountain resort in the Poconos hosted it for most of that period of time until it moved past that. But, yeah, for people that didn't experience that, at a time in our community, it was just something where you could bring all kinds of bars from all different areas and people from those areas together, just have a great day. But at the same time, you're doing something for a wonderful cause. And that makes people feel good, that you can actually still have fun and you're doing something good.

LB: Yeah, great.

MH: Yeah, it brought our community together, too. I mean, beyond the AIDS epidemic and, you know, it strengthened our community as we moved forward looking into our own rights. So, some of the things that came out of that epidemic were then -- we as a community became stronger. We became used to getting

together and doing things together, which made us stronger going into the nineties with the elections and as we go down the line. And then, the different organizations that -- you know, has the voter's guide that came out and the -- now with the Bradbury-Sullivan Center, you know what I mean, there's so many things that would have been unthought of actually years ago. There was little fringe things here and there but they never got a full acceptance and support of community. And so, like I say, our community is actually better off -- not that we had the disease come through us but how we came together for it.

LB: Were you involved with Le-Hi-Ho?

MH: Le-Hi-Ho, that goes back pretty far and I don't have a lot of memory of that. I believe Le-Hi-Ho is back in the late seventies, perhaps?

LB: The eighties, I think.

MH: Was it eighties?

LB: Yeah.

MH: Yeah, there was some -- I have to be honest, I'm not the best one for an interview because a lot of my time was spent inebriated. (laughs) Let's just get right to it. When I was young, I drank a lot. I had a lot of fun. But those were the days. I graduated from high school at seventeen, moved out of the house at seventeen into my first apartment. Had just realized that I was gay, finding out what gay was, and was

living to -- exploring myself, you might say. It was a different time coming off of the craziness of the seventies, so --

LB: Where did you go to high school?

MH: I went to school in a high school in Emmaus, just outside of Allentown. So, I grew up in a pretty small, somewhat privileged area. And then, like I said, I was in a big hurry to move out to the big city of Allentown as soon as I could and I hadn't even turned eighteen yet, yeah.

LB: Yeah.

MH: [You know?]?

LB: I didn't ask a whole bunch of demographic questions on this. I don't think this really -- oh, well, it does ask you what your zip code is. We're supposed to say what your zip code --

MH: Oh, well, right now, I'm in one-eight-oh-five-two, which is the Whitehall area, but --

LB: Yeah. So, is the reason that you came back to the Lehigh Valley because you just missed it so much? Or was there some reason why --

MH: Because everybody comes back (laughs) that's from here. I moved to Florida with a boyfriend at the time. Things didn't work out so well and then you come home, you know? Actually, while I was here on vacation, I met my current husband and came back to be with him. And then, like I said, we've been together

for thirty years now. So, it's not a bad area and it's not -- we don't get as much cold weather as up north. (laughs) So, that's why I came back to this area. It's home.

LB: Yeah. And I guess, see, in this list, they didn't -- they ask, in the COVID thing, that you're supposed to identify yourself within the community. So, in other words, how do you identify your LGBT-ness? And so, you would say what -- how would you identify your --

MH: Within the current situation, really?

LB: No, no, just, like, I would identify myself as a lesbian, in other words.

MH: Oh, I identify as gay, I'm -- you know, but --

LB: [That's?] easy, okay.

MH: Yes.

LB: Well, I think -- so, here's one thing I think everybody should ask and -- because we hope that someday in the future, somebody will look at this and get a sense of, you know, various different people's experiences with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. And it is true that we Baby Boomers are the ones that went through this in our twenties and now we're at a different age. We're about to go through the aging epidemic, as well, since that's another thing. But what would you want somebody in the future to know, like, in terms of what that was like? I mean, if you were just going to sort of describe what the AIDS epidemic was

like to somebody who had no sense of what it was like -- and I think there are young people today who really don't have any sense of what it was like.

MH: I think more so than anything, I would like them to know that hopefully sometime in the future when there's no real recollection of that, I hope that we as a community are accepted just as -- the same as anyone else in the community, that our -- as the gay community is no longer the gay community, you know? I'm hoping that would be that but the case would be that we were at a time then where we still considered less than, being part of our community. And we had something that struck us really hard but we showed a strength that probably would not have been imagined. And we pulled ourselves up by our boot straps and we took care of it on our own when the government wasn't there to do so, you know? It was a time of a lot of pain but there was a lot of camaraderie and a lot of good things actually did come out of the situation, so -- although it was a difficult time for a lot of people, we lost a lot of friends, we lost family members, a lot of good actually did come out of the situation for us because we became stronger.

LB: Yeah. I want to ask you one more thing because you brought it up because you were talking about how you became aware of this sort of -- of HIV/AIDS because of Rock Hudson. And I think people don't have an understanding of how significant Rock

Hudson's circumstance was. And there were some other famous people that --

MH: Yeah.

LB: -- spoke out about -- but you want to say a little bit more about that? Because I don't know if people would always really get what happened.

MH: That was actually something, by somebody of his stature coming out. And for somebody of my age, we thought of him as McMillan from *McMillan and Wife*, you know, even more so than the movies, in the black and white movies and stuff. But he was a leading man. He was everything. So, from a gay person's point of view, I almost wonder if -- he brought attention to it but we were also looking as, like, well, look, he was gay, you know? And we were almost more focused on that when the whole thing arrived than we were on the fact that this guy has HIV. And at that point, we thought, well, he came out -- that he had HIV. It's, like, oh, he must be gay because this is a -- you know, we were still being told this was a gay disease. But for somebody like that, somebody in the public eye like that, that meant so much to older people, too, older than us at that time. That meant a lot. It's, like, oh, wow.

LB: Yeah.

MH: He's, like, Rock Hudson and he got this disease. And I think it made people think, you know what? I can get this,

too. It was really big. Other people did talk about it frequently. You know, we had Magic Johnson come out, that was very big, to have somebody that wasn't homosexual get the disease, come out publicly about it. I think that was really a big turning point because this wasn't somebody that was gay, to our knowledge, at least. And so, when celebrities or famous people like this actually can show that "this can happen to us, too" and then they relate their story and they actually speak out in support of a cause like that, it means the world, it really does, just like right now, with this epidemic, you're seeing so many famous people, celebrities, whatever you would call them actually speaking up: "Wear a mask, you know? It's not that hard. This is very important. This is a serious issue." Without that, a lot of people would actually ignore it completely. So, that was an important turning point and it really was and -- as were some of the people that got -- contracted it and came into public view after that, even more so -- there's other people that may have been more known to the gay community but not to the entire population of our country that -- that's why, to me, that was extremely important and that's why it made you notice it right then and there and this is a real thing.

LB: Yeah, it's pretty -- it was remarkable. And even Elizabeth Taylor's response and --

MH: Yeah.

LB: -- you know, that kind of stuff, too.

MH: Yeah. And when, like, for instance, when Liberace died, he didn't do a lot for -- the fact that he denied that he was gay throughout his lifetime. He didn't talk about having AIDS throughout his lifetime. It was done -- all that came out posthumously. So, that did nothing, really, to help in eradicating the disease. It takes a lot for a celebrity, even knowing that he's going to pass away soon to know that everything he's done and the way he wants to be remembered, this is what you may be remembered for but this is important. So, that actually was something that really meant a lot at that time and especially, like I said, to be a leading man like that, a heartthrob to so many heterosexual Americans, you know what I mean? It was a very important -- yes.

LB: Great. Well, is there anything else you want to add that you're thinking --

MH: No, no. I wish I -- like I said, I thought to myself I didn't know that I would be a good candidate for this because I wasn't one of those heroes that walked the straight and narrow. But I think I'm more an example of how a lot of people were back then, you know? Like I say that the knowledge wasn't there in the beginning and then it was a bit sketchy as we did get it. And a lot of us still carried on, thinking this won't affect me.

When we look at this pandemic right now, I have a whole different world of thought. Not only did we hear right away from experts and scientists of what it is, how dangerous this could be, but every person that I know that's in the medical profession says this is serious. And these are Republicans and Democrats and Independents, you know? But when it came to this disease, they weren't hedging on it. And so, to see people not take it seriously is scary. It is scary. Like I say, the AIDS epidemic was a little bit different, you know? It wasn't as easily transmitted by any measure. But when you see some of the ways -- you know, I think about -- I somewhat had a somewhat cavalier attitude back then and I see that to the nth degree right now with something that's far more contagious, you know? So, that's just fuel for thought, you know?

LB: It is, it's --

MH: I believe, to be honest with you, too, as far as our own community, I think we're more -- I see very few people that I know from the LGBTQ community that aren't watching this closely, aren't very cautious about it, and a lot of that may come from the fact that we went through this. We went through an epidemic of our own, on a smaller scale, but we know this is serious business. And, like I say, with that community, I'm not seeing the same kind of divisiveness I'm seeing through people in general and the way they ignore it, you know what I mean, and

don't take it seriously. So, [I don't know?].

LB: Hashtag not our first virus.

MH: What's that?

LB: Hashtag not our first virus.

MH: Not our first virus, absolutely, absolutely.

LB: [Thanks that we're?] --

MH: And although we may not have individually dealt with it so well then, now that I'm older, more mature, now more so than ever, my biggest fear is that I get it and give it to someone else, you know? That was something that was part of our epidemic at the time. With maturity comes the understanding of that.

LB: I just want to say, Mitch, that when you were doing *Above Ground* and I was writing an article for it, I remember one time me sitting in your office and you were showing me how to use that program that -- Corel.

MH: Corel Draw that I used to use, yeah.

LB: (inaudible) [and hook it, yeah?], and when I was watching you set up the graphics on it and then, soon after, the magazine, your magazine was over and I started the *Valley Gay Press* and I used Corel for eight years.

MH: Did you? (laughs)

LB: So, well, I could probably do this. And Mitch is doing it and he's -- and I really -- I wrote the paper in Corel --

MH: Yeah.

LB: -- and typed it in in Corel and [part of it was?] just because you were doing it that way. And I ran that paper for eighteen years.

MH: Yes.

LB: So, it grew out of [the stuff you learned?] and I thought *Above Ground* was a huge inspiration to a lot of people. People really paid attention to it and read things in it. And, you know, Steve Black wrote political articles in it and we really covered information to a lot of people and we began --

MH: Steve Black, there's another one who was so involved with so many different things, especially in the political field with us --

LB: Yeah, yeah.

MH: -- [another one?].

LB: Yeah, [just?] Steve in my office and at the center. He was amazing.

MH: Yeah, yeah. There was actually so many people that we've lost over the years that -- and, like I say, you almost become numb to it. And then, when you think about somebody, it was -- it took a lot of people that it shouldn't have.

LB Yeah.

MH: There's a lot of people that passed away that never allowed it to even be said that that's what they passed away from, you

know?

LB: And Steve died of AIDS.

MH: I know he did, yeah, yeah, because -- yeah. And he had said something to me about it. But he did not want that to be out as public knowledge, either, and a lot of people didn't, you know, that were suffering through that. It was [a pitiful?] --

LB: [Yeah?], that he had it.

MH: Yeah.

LB: It was too late by the time --

MH: Yeah.

LB: It was [clear?] that he had it.

MH: So, it was too late and also too early as far as the medical advances they had made, yeah, yeah.

LB: Yeah. So, well, thank you very, very much for talking to us about this. This is really terrific that you've done this and I -- let me just remind you again, I'm supposed to do that, to say that, let's see, that, you know, you -- we're going to -- this Zoom meeting is private and so it has a password entry so there's no, you know, other people on this or anything like that. And we, I just want to remind you again, that once this is done and I upload this and then they'll send it to be transcribed and then you'll be able to review it. We'll send it to you in an email so that you can read through the whole thing. And if there's things in it that you want to change or add or

rearrange or [look at?] --

MH: Absolutely. Will they look at it at any point and say we should edit certain parts of this or --

LB: [Not -- not?] --

MH: No? Okay. All right. I just wonder if -- I get a bit long-winded sometimes.

LB: No, and I don't think that's the case at all. I thought that you were really great and fascinating. But I think that, you know, people may listen to this in the future and what they would do -- and I think I'm going to stop it now because we're just chatting.

MH: Okay.

LB: Turn this off --