

Harold and Roberta Kreider

JOHN MARQUETTE: My name is John Marquette, and I'm here with Roberta Showalter Kreider and Harold Kreider to talk about their life and experiences in LGBT organizations in the Lehigh Valley as a part of the Lehigh Valley LGBT Community Oral History Project. Our project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are in Sellersville, Pennsylvania and it's January the 11th, 2020. Our videographers are Danielle DelPriore and Mary Foltz. 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? And we'll start with you, Roberta.

ROBERTA KREIDER: Okay. It's Roberta Hope Showalter Kreider.

JM: And can you spell that?

RK: R-O-B-E-R-T-A, H-O-P-E, S-H-O-W-A-L-T-E-R, K-R-E-I-D-E-R.

JM: And now you Harold.

HAROLD KREIDER: Okay, it's H-A-R-O-L-D. And my middle name is Glen -- G-L-E-N. And last name is Kreider -- K-R-E-I-D-E-R.

JM: Roberta, will you please share your birth date with us?

RK: Yes, it's April the 3rd of 1926.

HK: And mine is May 3, 1924.

JM: Thank you both. Will you both confirm that you've signed a consent form for this interview?

RK: I did.

HK: And I do.

JM: Thank you. Let's start with the very beginning. Roberta, would you tell me about the early years of your life?

Describe your childhood.

RK: [Sentence redacted by interviewee] But I was born into a family of four brothers and me. I had three older brothers and then I had a baby brother. And I wanted a sister so bad. But it never seemed to work out that I could have a sister. And my father used to read the story of Baby Ray, how the tree gave him an apple, and the cow gave milk and all that sort of stuff. That was my favorite story. And the reason they were reading it that way was because we were all R's. My oldest brother Robert, and then Richard, and Russell, and me, and then Ray. And when Ray was ready to be born they read -- my dad used to read to me a lot that book about Baby Ray. And so they were preparing me to be disappointed because all we seemed to have was boys. And so I remember so well sitting on the end of my mother's hospital bed. And they put this little baby in my arms, and they said, "This is your baby brother and you can name him." And I said, "I want to name him Baby Ray." And so they said, "Okay." And, so, on the birth certificate it says Baby Ray Edward Showalter. Edward was after my

mother's youngest brother. And they were quite sure that I would pick the name that they wanted for this [video?].

And I remember once, I wanted a sister so bad that I dressed him up in my clothes and I went around the neighborhood and I kept introducing him as my baby sister. And, of course, people could just smile at that because they could see what was evident. So, we grew up together and my father had been a bridge-builder and a farmer. I don't know what all he had done. But when I was born they lived on a farm that was just about a mile south of West Liberty Mennonite Church, which was near Inman, Kansas.

And -- I'm drawing a blank here for a minute. Anyhow, when we were in -- whenever I was interviewed, I'd always say that my father had been a farmer and all of this. But then he was president of a small-town bank at Yoder, Kansas.

And we used to laugh and say that Yoder, Kansas was like a wide space in the road because it didn't have many people in it. And a lot of them were related to us. But there was a depot and a railroad track that went through the town. And I remember being -- going over there to see a friend of mine and playing with her. And I remember the church that we went to would not accept my father's -- in those days we had to have church letters to take from one church to another to recommend that we become members. And

they did not want to accept my father's church letter because he wrote insurance -- he wrote out the papers for insurance. He didn't do life insurance, which would have been a complete no-no, but he did other kinds of insurance. But I remember that one of my mother's first cousins -- that they would invite us into their home, and we would eat with them and things like that. But the other church members wanted to shun because he wrote insurance. And this church was a church made up of Amish Mennonites. They came from the Amish and they had become Mennonite. And they were a very judgmental group. And it's hard to know how to describe them other than I grew up in this church of judging other people by the things they did and said that didn't correspond with what I thought the Bible said. And so, I regret that kind of a childhood that I grew up in. But I'm thankful that in the years that have followed that God has shown me that God is no respecter -- or what do I want to say? -- no -- he treats us all alike. We are all part of God's creation and we're all sacred to him as his children. And that's what I believe now and I have believed through most of my life. And I think I said that we traveled on a bus down to Philadelphia to be part of Witness Our Welcome, which was a welcome for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in the neighborhood. And

this professor -- I wish I could think of his name right now -- we ate in their home and were good friends of theirs. And he came to the bus door and he said, "Roberta, Fred Phelps' crew is over here protesting and saying their terrible, hateful things about fags." He said, "But you don't pay one bit of attention to them." He said, "Do you see this line of gay and lesbian people?" And they were just lined shoulder-to-shoulder all the way from the bus into the building. He said, "We're here to make sure that he cannot get to you and you just walk down that path and we'll keep you safe." And that's what they did.

JM: Can you describe a little bit more about the Fred Phelps Church and how they felt in regard to the work that you intended to do?

RK: Okay. I also have a book in my Kindle that's written by Megan Phelps-Roper. And she is a daughter of Fred Phelps -- no a granddaughter. And her story is told in that book. And I was so glad that I could read her story. It's very descriptive of the way that church acted and hated people so bad. But I thought it was really significant that our gay and lesbian friends were willing to take the brunt and to see that we were safe all the way into there.

JM: Where was this church located?

RK: Do you know where it was located? I don't know.

HK: You mean in Philadelphia?

RK: Yeah.

HK: It was on the Western edge of Philadelphia. Wayne, I believe, was the name of the suburb. Wayne, Pennsylvania.

RK: Yeah. And it was a Baptist church there.

HK: Central Baptist.

RK: And I had -- after I did stories and books, I had stories from people there too. But it was just so touching how they wanted to be sure that if any hatred coming from this Phelps group or any violence of any kind that they were going to be sure that we were safe. And that was very touching to me to know that these friends cared so much about whether or not we were safe. And this book -- *Unfollow* -- was written by Phelps' granddaughter who came to know that their attitude was completely wrong.

JM: The name of this church is on the tip of my tongue and I can't quite pinpoint what it is.

RK: You mean where we had the wo--

JM: No, the Phelps church.

RK: In Topeka, Kansas.

JM: What is the name of that church?

RK: Oh, what's the name of it, Harold?

HK: [Not sure?].

JM: West--

RK: Westside.

JM: Westboro?

RK: Westboro Baptist Church. And it was mainly their purpose to just spew out hate of every kind toward lesbian and gay, bisexual, transgender people. And they called the people fags. And the people who were of that orientation, they called them fags. And if you go to -- I mean you can find this book -- *Unfollow* by Megan Phelps-Roper. And she is the granddaughter telling the story about this church.

JM: How did you and Harold develop a response to that kind of hatred that you experienced?

HK: (laughs) Boy. I guess it was because we began to learn to know gay and lesbian people.

RK: Well, my brother died with AIDS. Have I said that before? I'm not sure. And that's a long story of how I learned that he was a gay man. Like I said, I knew that people called him a sissy but at that age I didn't understand what that was all about. And I remember -- like a vision coming to me when I was debating what to do, I felt these stories needed to be told because we had been going to Laurelville, where our church had a campground. And we were in groups of people where the stories of these people were told. It was called Connecting Families. And I remember so well that as I was thinking about all this and I stood in here

in the bedroom and I had hold of that treadmill and he was in the bathroom -- I was in there alone. And I said, "Oh God, if I try to tell these stories -- I've never written a book and I don't have a computer -- but if I try to tell these stories," I said, "my friends are going to hate me." And it was just like I had a vision, at that time, and I heard God's voice say to me, "Roberta, you are just as important to me as the greatest preacher that ever lived." And I thought, "Oh. I've thought about it a little bit." And then he said, "And now look out there. You see that man lying out there in the gutter?" He said, "That drunk man lying in the gutter is just as important to me as you are." And I thought, "Oh, that's something to think about." And I remember thinking, "I don't even have a computer, how on the Earth am I going to do this?" And I was part of a -- well -- no, that -- I couldn't have had that then, the computer. But we had attended these Connecting Families weekends. And we heard them telling their stories there. And the very first one I attended was the one that Peggy Campolo went to. And she is a very adamant supporter of gay and lesbians. And, of course, that was many years ago. We moved back here in '83 and we still lived in Indiana then. And so anyhow I tried to think what to do about all this. And finally, I remember

saying, "Well, God, if you will lead me, I will go." And yet that still wasn't enough. I know we continued to go to these Connecting Families weekends. We went every spring when they were held for, oh, I don't know how many years. And then, that very first one, I told my story about how I found out that I had a gay brother. And I need to stop for a little bit. Okay?

JM: Sure, that's fine. I would've--

(break in audio)

HK: [Before?] she's out. That's never been a problem for me. And I can't explain why, except I'm convinced that God's love reaches out to everyone and with God there's no respecter of persons. And so that's been part of my life. And the community that I was born in was Northeast Missouri -- near Hannibal, Missouri. And my grandfather was a bishop and a minister and my dad was a deacon in a very small family congregation in Northeast Missouri. And I also grew up with a great fear of God and was never sure that I would ever make it to heaven. And then I --

JM: Do I --

HK: -- went through Goshen College and also seminary. And I was ordained minister by that time.

JM: I think I hear Roberta coming back and if--

(break in audio)

JM: -- our interview with Harold Kreider and Roberta Kreider on January the 11th, 2020 at their home in Sellersville. And my name is John Marquette and the videographers are Danielle DelPriore and Mary Foltz. Roberta, I'd like to ask if we can hold your portion of the story for a moment and then talk with Harold about his childhood and how he became involved with you. And then I'd like to see how we can bring both of these stories together and bring us to the current moment. So Harold, tell us about your childhood.

HK: What was the question?

JM: Tell us about your early years and your childhood?

HK: I'm the oldest of ten children in our family. And my father tried to teach me this bedtime prayer -- now lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to take -- or when I die I pray the Lord my soul to take. And he would spank me and I was only four or five years old then -- spank me because I had a hard time learning that prayer to be able to repeat it back to him. And from that day on I had a fear of my dad and I never got over that all our lives. And so I never did experience a really happy home. In fact, my father gave my mother a silent treatment for several days -- wouldn't speak to her. And she finally suffered a nervous breakdown because of that kind of

conduct. So I made up my mind that my home would never be that way. And I met Roberta at our church college in Hesston, Kansas, near Wichita. And there I fell in love with her (laughs) and I've been in love with her ever since. But anyway, that's part of my experience. And I'm also a graduate of Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. And also Goshen College Biblical Seminary, I'm also a graduate of that and have a been a ordained minister since 1950. So my experience has been varied. I've been a pastor of three congregations and interim pastor of our home congregation here in Perkasio. Of course I'm completely retired now. That's been my experience for most of my life.

JM: Tell us about your denomination.

HK: Pardon?

JM: Your denomination.

HK: Oh, it's Mennonite.

JM: And because we're recording this conversation for the future, what are the basic tenets of the Mennonite faith?

HK: The basic--?

JM: Tenets.

RK: What do they believe?

HK: Well, the Bible has been our main textbook. And tried to -- at least for myself -- I made that my standard of life. And I tried to live what I believed. And also made it a

point to accept people for who they were and what they were and not be a judge. But I think there's a scripture in Matthew where Jesus says "Judge not that you be not judged." And so I've made that a guide for my life too.

JM: What were your feelings when you were a young man about the Bible's teaching on homosexuality?

HK: I don't know. As a young man I -- well, homosexuality was unacceptable from any angle you wanted to think about it. And people that I knew, if they knew of anybody, that was completely negative. And I never -- well I don't know when -- I guess homosexuality didn't become a real part of my life until we were a part of PFLAG in Allentown.

(inaudible) And her brother dying of AIDS. And he was a homosexual. And it took -- and that happened in 1948 -- or 1984, when he died. And it took ten years after that before we became advocates of persons of that nature.

JM: In the process of selecting people for this project we have been looking for people who have been allies of and advocates for the LGBT community in the Lehigh Valley. And you mentioned PFLAG in the Lehigh Valley. Tell us what PFLAG is.

HK: You could probably tell better.

RK: Well PFLAG is an organization of parents -- let's see -- of lesbians, bisexual. Let me start again. PFLAG stands for

parents of gay, bisexual, transgender, and what's the other one -- and families who love them. That's the way I titled the first book I wrote on that. But the reason we wanted to go to PFLAG goes back to how we became interested in the needs of gay and lesbian people. And that goes way back to when we found out that my brother was gay. And that was really a blow to find out that he was gay. We knew that he was sick with something. We didn't know what. And my family thought, "Oh my, Roberta won't be able to take it," because of all the [rest?]. Anyhow, I would say, "What's wrong with Ray. Please tell me." And they wouldn't tell me anything. And finally somebody said, "You'll know when you get there." And I thought, "What am I going to know when I get there?" And I really wasn't acquainted with any gay and bisexual, transgender people. And so, when we got to the hospital, my brother just older than I and his wife came from Kansas, where they lived near Hutchinson.

HK: We went to there.

RK: Where I grew up. No, they came. We met together at Ray and Ann's house.

HK: Yeah. What I meant to say that we were living here, and we went to Chicago.

RK: Yes. But we hadn't gone. I mean, we went to Chicago because we knew that Ray was dying and we wanted to see him

before he died. And I wanted to know what he was dying from. And people would just say, "Well you'll know when you get there." And I thought, "Well what am I going to know when I get there and what's all this about?" And so when we met at the hospital, they gave us gowns to put on and masks. And I thought, "Well what does he have that I'm going to get, or they're afraid I'm going to get?" And I was so dumb for all this. And then when we went up to his bedside to say hello to him, he said, "I have a sad story to tell you." And I thought, "Oh, okay." I guess I did know about lesbian and gay people because I know when he said that, I thought, "Oh, okay, he's a nurse, so somehow he's contracted AIDS." And I said -- I went up and took his hand to listen to him, and he said, "And I have no one to blame but myself." And when he said that, my hopes went way down. I thought, "What's he talking about?" And then he said, "And I don't want you to tell anyone." And I said, "Well, Ray, our daughters are intelligent people." And I said, "If we go back and tell them we don't know they're going to figure out something." I said, "We'll have to tell them the truth because I can't do less than tell them the truth." And he said, "Well, okay." And you could tell he was very ashamed of all this. And so -- to make a long story short -- he was in a hospital way up

north of Chicago. And the church they had been part of was Community Mennonite and that was down in kind of the center of Chicago. And we had been there for church with them and things like that before too. And his -- on the way up there, that was when I said to his wife, who was driving the car. She turned her head, and we were sitting in the back seat, I guess. And she said, "Roberta, what did you want to know about Ray?" And I said, "Well, Ann. Nobody will tell me anything." I said, "Is he dying?" And she said, "Yes, Roberta, he's dying." And I said, "Well, why? What's he dying from?" And that was when she said, "Well you'll know when you get there." And so, we bounced along and drove up to the hospital and met my brother and his wife. And he didn't tell me what he thought he was suspecting either. And so they gave us these gowns and everything to put on and went into the room. And when Ray said, "I have a sad story to tell you." And I thought, "Oh, yeah, he's a nurse, so something's happened here." And he said, "I have AIDS. And I have no one to blame but myself." And then my hopes went way down because I thought, "Well, there's some story here that I've not been told. I don't know what this is." And so, I went up to his bedside and took hold of his hand. And I said, "Ray, God is a God of forgiveness." I said, "This whole week I've

been working on a talk that I was supposed to give at church. And we went to Perkasie Mennonite at that time. And I said, "I've been working on a talk that I was supposed to give to church in the park on forgiveness." And I said, "I had to ask a friend to read it today because I couldn't be there." But I said, "You know, God is a God of forgiveness." And, yes, he agreed with that. But anyhow, can I digress just a little bit back to when Ray -- we were talking about his birth certificate and I said that when they let me name him, I said I wanted to name him Baby Ray Edward Showalter. And he spoke up and he said, "Yeah. I have you to blame for that. It's on my birth certificate." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes. It's written that way on my birth certificate -- Baby Ray Edward Showalter." And had to deal with that always. Well, anyhow, I wanted to talk to him alone because I wanted to ask him some questions and things. And finally I said to his wife Ann, "Do you mind if we can have some time -- if Harold and I can be alone with Ray for a little while?" And she looked at me sort of strange and then she said, "Okay." So she walked out of the room and that was when I tried to talk to him about God forgiving and he said -- see, how was that -- oh, I told you that he said he didn't want us to tell anyone. And that was when I said, "Well I

have to tell them, because they are intelligent people, and they know we came up here because you're dying. And they have to have a reason for why you're dying." So anyhow. Then, the more I talked to him, he said, "Oh" -- when we were alone with him -- he said, "Oh, Roberta. I'm so glad you came." He said, "You know, as a nurse I used to think that people -- visitors got in the way. And I didn't have time for them when I was taking care of patients." He said, "But it means so much to me that you drove all the way up here to be with me when I'm dying. And you didn't even know what was wrong." And so we just had a really good heart-to-heart chat with each other there that day. And then we came back home and waited for the call to come that he had died and that we were to go for a memorial service. And that was hard too, because after he died and we went back to our home church for the memorial service -- this very judgmental place -- no, that was the one we were at at -- well, anyhow, there we had to sit and hear the message about Ray among these people. And yet I knew that God was a God of forgiveness and I wanted to be that kind of a person. And right now, I'm kind of drawing a blank. Oh, I told you about how I told God, "You know, I can't do this." And then what God said to me about the people. So, I've often wondered if I wouldn't have had a gay brother,

would I have been able to open my mind and to accept them into the church? At that time the church at Perkasio where we were members then -- we go to Salford now with our grandson and his family. But I've wondered if I would have been able to accept him. But the people at Perkasio Mennonite they didn't want to hear anything about gays and lesbians. There was no place for them to tell their story, no place for them to share in any meaningful way or give their testimony. And finally I said to Harold after we had been to some meeting that we went to, like Witness Our Welcome or something. And I said, "Harold, you and I don't have any children at home anymore that can be affected by hatred." So I said, "I know that we're not welcome any longer at Perkasio Mennonite Church. They don't want us there. And they -- by all means -- have let us know that we're not to share in sharing time." And I said, "But you know what, I really feel that every time we walk in that door, we're making a statement. And I really feel that God wants you and I to just walk in there each Sunday and we don't have to say anything. We'll just be there." And so that's what we agreed that we were going to do. And I remember that we came back from a Witness Our Welcome thing and we just wanted to share so bad the things that we had heard there about being a welcoming church and how we need

to welcome all people and let God be the judge. And, yeah, we weren't supposed to say anything. And we agreed together that we were going to continue to go even if we weren't welcome there. And so that's what we did. And then our grandson, Luke, who -- he and his partner have many apartments in Indiana University up at Indiana, Pennsylvania and in Bloomsburg. And they have rented these apartments to students. Now it's getting -- they will be giving those up pretty soon, but that's not part of the story. So anyhow I often wondered if I wouldn't have had a gay brother, would I have been able to accept people? And after he told his story I waited for quite a while. And we kept going to Connecting Families every -- every once a year and listened to the stories. And I remember so well the morning that I was sitting in the front row on the right-hand side and after people would tell their stories and they would be affirmed. And I heard God speaking to me and finally I said, "Okay, God. I'll go if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart." And then how was I going to do this because I didn't have a computer -- didn't even know how to use one. I had a good typewriter. And so his boss -- he worked part time after he moved back here and he was retired for a contractor from our church at that time. And he and his wife had taken us to some gay and

lesbian meeting. And we knew that they were on that side. And he said, "Roberta, you go down to this address in Souderton Shopping Center and he --

HK: Souderton?

RK: Huh?

HK: Was it?

RK: Yeah, it was. And he said, "You go to this man -- this young man and you tell him I sent you and I want him to find a good computer for you to use." And so I said, "Okay." So I went down -- we both did. And I went into there and I told him that John had sent me and he said that you would help me find a good computer and show me how to use it because I have never used a computer. I've only used a typewriter. And he said, "Sure. I'd be glad to." And so he showed me. And when I told him what it was for -- because I wanted to be able to write stories that these people would send me so we could put them together in a book of stories so people could hear from their own lips what it was like to be born that way -- and he looked at me and he said, "I'll be glad to help you in any way I can." And I came to believe then that he was a gay man and that he was very happy to help me to get a computer and to get going in this work that I felt was so important -- that their stories needed to be told. But like I said before, I

wondered, could I, would I have been accepting if I didn't have a brother who died with AIDS? But I hope that I would have been, and that by now with all the stories around that I would have been able to accept them. And I think maybe I would have. I don't know.

JM: Can you tell me a little bit more about the meeting that you went to? Where was that meeting?

RK: The Witness Our Welcome?

JM: The one where you first had contact with LGBT people.

RK: Yeah. Well, would that have been when we went to Connecting Families, the first time?

HK: Probably.

RK: Well Harold and I wanted to learn to know more about these people after my brother died with AIDS. And so, we decided we would go to one of these weekends. And so we drove and I remember that when we came up to the place where you register somebody parked our car for us. Anyhow, they were very warm and welcoming to us. And that was when we actually heard the stories of these people and what it was like to be born a gay person. And, like I said, I've wondered. It took me ten years before I was ready to write their stories.

JM: What state was this in?

RK: Pennsylvania.

JM: This was in Pennsylvania.

RK: It was in Laurelville. Because we had moved back here.

Our daughter upstairs had worked in a retirement home. And she had said to us when we were still living in Indiana -- she said, "Mom and Dad, I don't want you to go to a retirement home." She said, "They don't get good care there always." She said, "When you're ready to retire I want you to come and we'll buy a house together and you help us raise our kids and then we'll take care of you when you get older." And so that was the agreement that we had then. [Sentence redacted by interviewee]

JM: If this is something that you would prefer not be a part of the work that we're doing today it may be better that we leave that portion to one side and maybe talk about it later. And think more about the contributions that you made in the Lehigh Valley. And how --

RK: Well --

HK: (inaudible)

JM: This is about the time -- because we have to change the camera -- this is a good time to take a break. Would you mind we take a break now?

RK: Okay.

JM: Okay, we're going to conclude for a moment, and we'll be back sh--

(break in audio)

JM: the interview with Roberta Kreider and Harold Kreider in Sellersville, Pennsylvania on January the 11th, 2020. And where we let off was, you're talking about your relocation to Sellersville in the home of your daughter and your agreement with your daughter that you would live together and you would help them raise their children and they would help you when you needed to live, in the latter part of your life, not in a nursing home or in a retirement facility. Does that help you? Does that give you a position?

RK: Yeah. And they didn't have money to buy a house and we had a house to sell in Pennsylv-- in Indiana. And so we sold our house in Pennsylvania and used it to help buy this house. But this house was a real dump. (Laughs) The person who had lived here had been a roofer and he just dumped all his trash out there in the backyard. And so it was full of trash. And -- let's see -- was it? -- the stone wasn't pointed, was it?

HK: No.

RK: No, it was just kind of crumbling stone and --

HK: Well plaster. It was covered with plaster but a lot of it had fallen off. It was all (inaudible).

RK: So, anyhow, we needed to do something to make this house respectable. We have a book -- it must be upstairs -- of the before and after pictures of what it looked like before and what it looks like today. And we had a fairly nice house out in Pennsylvania -- I mean, in Indiana. And I remember when I was jumping on the bouncer -- what do you call it? What do you call those round--

HK: Trampoline.

RK: -- yeah. On a small trampoline that we had. And I used to use that for exercise in Indiana before we came back here. And I would think about how I had seen this house -- or, no, they sent us drawings of what the rooms were like. And so I had figured out where furniture was going to go and all that. And it was so much different when I actually saw it I could hardly believe it. But anyhow, when we first moved -- well, I came back to help them with their first baby. And we lived in the room above our bedroom -- or I did -- for that month that I was here to help them. And so when I was here when the baby came first -- or, anyhow -- I had figured out how we were going to arrange that room. No, that was when the second child came. And Luke, the little guy, he had come into the room where I had my stuff and he said, "Oh, Grandma, it's just getting cozier and cozier in here." (Laughs) And he was so tickled that we

were going to move back here to live with them. And they had a big sign made and he was dancing up and down when the truck came in and when we drove in behind it. And it had a big sign, "Welcome home Ma and Pa." And so, they really made us feel very welcome. But that's another whole story that I don't want told on the video here. But anyhow, growing up, all of the children are gone now and married and in homes of their own. And I tell Luke -- who has our power of attorney, our oldest grandson. And I tell him that he's the in-between family now like we used to be in between the grandparents and the grandchildren. And back to church acceptance. At Perkasio they did not want to accept them. But then as time went on, they finally became more open and welcoming. But we still weren't able to really share our stories too much. But then we were a part of this group that was trying to be a welcoming group and starting to investigate letting them be a part of the church. And then the pastor -- we had two women pastors -- and she called us, asked if we'd come into the library during the week she wanted to visit with us. And what she wanted to tell us was that there were people in the church that were very unhappy that we were advocating letting these people be a part of the church just like everybody else. And that they didn't like that. And I -- oh I know

-- we just came back from one of those big meetings of Witness Our Welcome and had been really urged there to share. And I can't remember the statement of what they would say. But anyhow -- oh, if one isn't welcome, none are welcome and that we need to welcome everybody. And so that's what I wanted to do. And then when a friend of ours who was gay, and we knew she was a lesbian, and she had a partner, and she had been asked to bring the morning message. And they didn't know that she was a lesbian. And so I had prayed and said, "God, if I am to share in sharing time then please help me to know for sure that you want me to do it. Because I don't want to make dissension here in the church." And sure enough, when got -- after she had brought her message and we got to sharing time and the leader said, "We have extra time this morning, so there's plenty of time to share." And I thought, "Oh, okay, I guess that's what that means." And so I finally stood and asked for the mic and I shared what we had heard in this Witness Our Welcome meeting. And that week then she called us into the library because she wanted to talk with us. And she said people were very unhappy with the things you shared on Sunday in sharing time. And I said, "Yes. How many?" And she said six -- no, what was it -- four people had been unhappy and had complained to her that we were

able to share this in sharing time at church. And I said, "Well, that's interesting." I said, "I had prayed about whether or not I was to share and when the leader got up and said we have extra time this morning I took it to mean that God was saying to me, 'Go ahead and share what you learned this week.' And so that's why I shared." And I said, "And tell me," I said, "Those people that complained. Why didn't they come to us? Why did they come to you and complain? Why didn't they tell us?" I said, "Would you please when anybody complains to you about what we're doing will you please ask them to come and tell us directly so we can tell them why we're doing what we're doing?" And so we kind of left it that way. But it's interesting that when they finally -- this committee decided okay, we're ready to welcome gay and lesbian people. Now we'll make it known. We'll put it on our website that we're welcoming them to come. So we had a meeting later on of this group that was taking the initiative to start welcoming them. And she said, "Well, nobody's come. We've said they're welcome. We've put it on our website. And nobody comes." And I said, "Oh, can't you see?" I said, "These people were here while we dickered and dockered about whether or not they could be members, what we were going to do with them, whether they could sit together in church, and all that

stuff we went through. And then they got discouraged and they went away and up to the Lehigh Valley and they found churches that were welcoming. And they've become members of those churches. And do you think that now when we say the doors are open that they're going to come flocking back here to be members?" I said, "No, it'll have to be people that have never been members before if they're going to welcome them back." And then she said, "But Roberta, we thought you were going to bring them." (laughs) And I guess that's when I said, "Do you think they would come flocking back like that?" So that was a long story but they finally became an open and welcoming church. And about that time our grandson who had gone with us to a meeting over at one of the other Mennonite churches -- another branch of our Mennonite churches. And he had been there for this meeting and -- let's see -- anyhow, we were sitting about three rows back from the front and I had to sit at the end because there wasn't any place for my walker and I had to have a walker at that time. And I looked up in the row in front and there was a lesbian couple. And they turned around and the woman said to me, "Roberta, do you remember us?" And I looked at her and I said, "I remember your faces, but I can't say your names." And then they said their names and what church they were going to

and said that they were there to welcome the man who was speaking to invite him to their church to share their story so that they could become a welcoming congregation where they were. And I remember that night as this man shared the story of being gay and what all. And it was just so real of what we had gone through and I just burst out crying. And I just couldn't hold the tears back. And I just sobbed and sobbed. And my grandson sitting there didn't know what to make of me sobbing like that. And so when we went out and we sat in the car a little bit before we went home and he had the car idling. And he looked at me and he said, "Grandma," he said, "I don't know what to do." And I said, "Well Luke, God will show you if there's something that you're supposed to do." I said, "You just keep an open mind and heart and God will show you." And so then we had been having a group that met in our home for gay and lesbian people. Because when one set of books came out one of the gay men came and helped unload it and he and I talked about what can we do to get Mennonites to welcome these people. And to get Mennonite gay and lesbian people to not be afraid to come and tell their stories. And so that's when we decided to send out a list -- I mean a welcome to have people meet in our home. And for -- oh I don't know how many years -- we had gay and lesbian groups

meeting in our homes. And they would tell their stories and we would share together. And we couldn't -- well, different people would bring refreshments and it was just a good time together. And then after, oh I don't know how many years, I said to Harold one time, "You know, I think that maybe it's time that this group has served its purpose." I said, "I think that these people -- a lot of them -- are just coming out of welcome to us because we've always welcomed them. And they're afraid to move on. But I think that they need to move on in their lives." And I said, "We need to free them to do that. Don't you think?" And so we agreed. And so at the next meeting I said something to them about we don't want you to feel that you're tied to this group in any way. And if God is calling you in some other way we want you to know that we will release you gladly. And so they talked about it and they said, "Yes, it's time that we move on, but we would like to meet twice a year to keep in touch with one another and what's going on. And so that's how that went about. But I remember that Luke had said, "What shall I do?" And so the time came that they decided they were going to come to Perkasio Mennonite Church and be a part of our group because we were welcoming. And so they came on a Sunday and shared during sharing time that they would like to be a

part of our group because they wanted to welcome gay and lesbian people. And then that week I got an email from Luke and he said, "Grandma, what do you know about Salford Mennonite Church?" And so I wrote back and said, "Luke, if you want to know if I think it would be a better fit for you and your family than Perkasio, even though it pains me greatly to let you go, I feel that I have to say yes because your kids go to school with kids from these different schools and they'll have a lot more friends to meet with them here and make them welcome than they ever would have at Perkasio." And so, I say, "Yes, we release you to go there." And so they started going. And then there was a special meeting and this fella who had a gay son and he had married his son and his partner and had raised a ruckus in the church he was in. But he and I had stories in a booklet together. And I wanted so bad to meet him. But then I realized why they protected us from him that none of us could meet him, he could only tell his story at the front of the church. But on that Sunday we were sitting in the handicapped section. And the minute church was out a gay man came up to me and he said, "Roberta, I want to meet you." He said, "I'm a gay man and I am so thankful for what you've done" or something like that. So that was interesting. And we've had occasion to

meet others. And because of the acoustics in that church, we have discovered that when we sit clear at the back that we can hear without any devices in our ears or anything. And so that's what we started doing is sitting back there. And Luke and his wife Mandy take turns sitting behind us. And if I have to go out I just have to motion and they will see that I get to go out. But I usually manage to stay until the end. But we've been made to feel very welcome there and they want to also hear my story and there are people there praying for us today because I told them that we had friends coming from PFLAG and they would be asking for our story and making a video of it. And I said, "I feel very inadequate for this." And I wanted them to pray. And it's very interesting that this morning the woman who supports us there in trying to get the church periodical to us, she had come to the door. She hadn't been there and heard what I said last Sunday and so she didn't realize that we were going to be doing this this morning. And so she was very pleased to hear that you were going to be here to interview us today. So, that's the way things are happening, and I have to feel that just like that morning when I was debating if it was -- I knew somebody needed to write these stories --

MF: Pause.

RK: And I didn't --

(break in audio)

RK: I remember sitting in that front row and they were singing, "Here I am Lord. Is it I Lord? I've heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart." And from then on it was my responsibility. And it's amazing how people latched on and helped and gave me stories. And just that I knew that it wasn't my project but it was parents and families and friends -- all of us doing this together.

JM: Roberta, we need to take a pause right now and when we come back I'd like to ask a couple more questions about the work that you've done. So we're going to take a break right here.

RK: Okay.

(break in audio)

HK: Married a woman like she is. (laughs)

JM: She's a pistol.

HK: Yeah. (laughs) (inaudible)

JM: She really, really is a pistol.

HK: Yeah.

MF: Did you tell them how -- how did the two of you meet?

HK: Pardon?

MF: How did the two of you meet?

HK: We met at our church college in Kansas. I can remember so vividly. Our dining hall was in the basement of the girls' dormitory and it was morning breakfast and she came down the stairs from the -- where students lived for the breakfast -- men and women both. And she had her head all bandaged up for some reason or other. And I thought to myself, "There's a person I'd like to take care of."

(laughter) And what had happened is she -- they had a class outing and she's up to bat and when she swung the bat her kneecap slid over to the side and she went to the ground. And so she had to be on crutches for a month or more. And I really didn't learn or know her until I was a student myself and the draft was on for World War II. And I'd gotten a notice from the draft board that I had a choice to make. One was my dad had enough units on the farm that I could be deferred. And so I went home and was home three years but finally had to go to camp after that for a year and half. So that's the way that went. And before I was out of camp we -- I had a furlough coming up -- ten-day furlough -- and that's when we got married in '46. Then she went to camp with me. That was Gulfport, Mississippi. And that was quite a change going from Colorado Springs -- I was there a year before we were married and got married on the way to this transfer to Gulfport. And that was a

real change. I'd gained nearly fifty pounds in Colorado.
(Laughs) And down there I lost it all and I've never
gotten it back since. And it was really hot down there.
No air conditioning. Sheets would be wet in the morning
from sweating.

MF: How long were you in Gulfport?

HK: Pardon?

MF: How long were you in Gulfport, Mississippi?

HK: Oh about seven months. Until I was released. The war was
over and I was released then.

(break in audio)

JM: And Harold Kreider. It is Sellersville, Pennsylvania and
it is the 11th of January, 2020. And go ahead.

RK: Okay. As we continued over the years to support gay and
lesbian people and this community of faith, we had many
opportunities to share in mixed audiences. And I was asked
to speak quite a few places. And I remember especially the
time -- I believe it was a Reading, Pennsylvania where we
were speaking at a church. And all of a sudden I realized
that there were going to be atheist people in that
community. And I thought, "Oh God, what am I going to do?"
And I didn't know how to include them. And then God gave
me an answer. And so when I got up to speak I said, "I've
been asked to tell my story today. And because it is my

story I'll have to tell it the way I lived it. But I want you to know, whoever you are, that I would welcome hearing your stories also. And if there just was enough time I would be glad if I could hear your stories too." And do you know that every time after that one I always prefaced my speeches that way. And every time the very first people to come up to me and welcome me were atheists. And they would say, "Roberta, I really appreciated hearing your story. I'm an atheist." But I think they said first, "I'm an atheist, but I really appreciated hearing your story today. May we eat with you?" And so they would come and sit at the table and eat with us so that we could hear their stories too, because they were gay or lesbian. And so that was a really meaningful part of our journey, I felt. And Harold was able to share then too. But I think I said before that I was always his secretary because he didn't use electronic devices of any kind.

HK: Well the reason because I was raised on a farm and my parents were not encouraging my education because it was just too busy. We were dairy farmers and I was up early in the morning and early to bed. And busy in between.

JM: You spoke, Roberta, about atheists wanting to tell their stories to you at the table. What common features did they have in their dinner conversation with you?

RK: Well, I guess they just told me of how they were raised. And it was just their stories. I don't know how else to tell you. And -- but I thought it was something that I felt God answered my prayer in saying this is a way you can handle it and include them too. And what amazed me was that every time the very first people that came up were always people who said, "Roberta, I'm an atheist, but I was glad to hear your story today." And then wanted to eat with us so that they could share part of their story. So it's just been a really exciting journey. And, like I said, I've wondered if I wouldn't have had a gay brother would I have been able to welcome them. And I hope that by now I could have welcomed them with open arms because I know that our Creator has created us all and it's not His will or His purpose that anybody should go to Hell. And I don't think there is a literal Hell. Although I know that there are people who love to hold that over other people's heads. But I don't do that any longer.

HK: Well, I think if there's any hell, people make it for themselves here in this life. And that in the end they're in God's hands and they're not destroyed. God, I don't think, destroys what he creates. So, that's where I'm at.

JM: This is a wonderful opportunity here, your story. And I believe I would like to ask you as you think about what the

two of you spoke about today if there's anything that maybe you missed that you'd like to share with us now.

RK: Do you have anything else that --

HK: What?

RK: -- do you have anything else that you want to add?

HK: Well, I'll give Roberta this praise. I'm just so fortunate that she's my wife and that we've been able to share this journey together. And it's hard for me to believe that I've come from where I was born to where I am now and to feel so different about people different from ourselves. And I think the statement in the scriptures where it says God is love. Well if God is love then I can't do anything else or less. And I can relate to people of any kind without being judgmental about them. It's just not my business to judge people. "Judge not that you be not judged," the scriptures also says, and so I've never been happier in my life than I am right now. And I feel so fortunate to have married a woman that is what she is and she has certainly made a better person of myself.

JM: When we conclude an interview, because this is an ongoing process, we always like to say -- before we thank you -- can you think -- who can you think of that we might want to talk with that has a story like yours about being allies, advocates for people who are LGBT?

RK: Well, do you see those pictures over there? That's our "gay gallery." And our granddaughter over there --

HK: And the only granddaughter we have.

RK: Well, the -- yeah, the only one by birth. When she was a little girl, twelve years old, she would bring her laptop down to sit at our table to tell grandpa and I how wrong we were in our welcome of gay and lesbian people. And we just let her rile and then we just answered her as good as we could and let it go. And do you know the time came that we were asked -- or I was asked -- to come to the Church of the Open Door in Arkansas -- forget the name of the Arkansas. And the purpose was to receive the Peggy Campolo award for -- oh what does it say on there? -- for anyhow, working with the gay and lesbian people or whatever. And by that time we weren't traveling anymore. But they said that she would take care of all travel. She would go with us. And we just follow her. And so that's the way we went down to that church. And I had the story of the pastor and his partner in one of the books. [Sentence redacted by interviewee] But anyhow, one day as I was sitting at the computer getting ready for stories to come, here came this email from her and I said, "Oh Grandpa, oh Harold, come here." I said, "I can't read this out loud without crying." I said, "You'll just have to come and sit here

and read it -- what Anika has to say." And she said, "Grandma and Grandpa, do you remember when I was a little girl and I brought my laptop down to convince you how wrong you were?" She said, "I'm so ashamed of that." She said, "Can you ever forgive me?" And so after he read it we [went out?] and I wrote back and I said, "Oh, Anika. We remember that time very well and we always hoped that someday you would be able to see it differently. And so we're so thankful that God has answered our prayers." And then she sent pictures of that time in Arkansas, and of that speaking engagement. And she said, "Grandma, now I know you have my family pictures over on the front side of your refrigerator with the rest of the family pictures. And that's where I want them." But she said, "These pictures I want you to put over on the other side in your 'gay gallery' as a testimony to what I feel and believe today." And so there's a whole row over there of pictures of that time in Arkansas and of her speaking and all of us together. And how the people welcomed us and heard our stories and it was just an amazing time together and I thank God that we were able to make that trip. But our daughter in Oregon has always supported us and she knew that I had trouble with my eyes and she's the one who sent me a Kindle and said, "Mom, I'm going to give you this

Kindle because I think it will help you with your eyes and so you can be able to read and do the work that you do.”

And she has worked for years in a school that welcomes high school dropouts. They would be dropouts entirely to the system and everything if she and her team did not welcome them. And she has one more year to go and then she will be retiring. And they’re retiring to a home out in the country. But anyhow, she has always supported us. It’s really been good to know that she has cared that much about me and my eyes because she knows that my grandmother went blind before she died and it’s a trait that runs in my family. So. And also that story about the Indians and massacring a cellar full of settlers. And I discovered from another person who searched out my background that that’s my fifth generation from me. And that I was part of that group that was rescued by some good Indians. And that’s quite a story too. So I just feel that I did what I did because God had his hand on me and I said yes. That’s all I can say. That it’s been a marvelous journey and one that I’m so glad I didn’t have to miss. And I still keep up with, I mean, different ones of those still text me at times. And the guy clear up on the -- is that on the front -- well, anyhow, he followed me almost anyplace I went to hear me talk. And he wanted a partner so bad. And I

hadn't been able to find one for him. But God gave him a partner. And now there's another story brewing right now of a guy that he was supposed to come for Christmas dinner at Luke and Mandy's house where we were invited. And that's another whole long story. And I had said, "I missed you there." And then he wrote back and said, "You missed me because I found a life partner. And he's sick and I'm trying to help him. And I'm not sure what the sickness is yet." But, anyhow, we still have people that we're in contact with as much as I'm able. And I read so many good books on Kindle.

JM: We are so grateful to have this time to talk with you today and to hear your story and to preserve your story for generations to come. The material will be stored professionally at Muhlenberg College. It will be available for academic research. And I believe there will be people in the future who will sit and watch this conversation with you. And I think their hearts will be gladdened. So thank you so much for the time today.

RK: Well, thank you for giving us the opportunity. Because I really am glad to share my story as far and wide as we can. Because I know that was because God showed me that he is no respecter of persons but that he loves everybody. And years ago we were part of a group that was an inter-faith

group. And we met in the home of [Barry and Janet Hartsaw?]. And I think they still have the group meeting in their home. But we had to drop out as we got older because we couldn't drive anymore and all of that. But we met wonderful people in there. We met Muslims who shared their story and discovered how God loves us all. And that I don't want to be a judge of anybody. I just want to welcome everybody. And I wish that you would include the sign on our front door somehow in your video.

JM: We will make sure that we have a photograph of the sign, and -- with your permission -- your award, and a photograph of the two of you sitting together. So, again, I believe our videographer Danielle is aware that we're reaching our 90-minute point. So, again, thank you so much for your time. And this has been a wonderful opportunity for me to learn. Thank you.

RK: Well the people in our Sunday school class at church, we share very deeply. And I had told them about this. And they said they would be praying for us today too. So we had a lot of friends praying for us today that we could be strong and be able to do it. So I'm thankful that you can before God calls us home. And I don't know. We have donated our bodies to science. And so when that time comes we won't have time for much of a goodbye together because

they'll have to come and take them while they're viable.

So, but isn't that -- I mean, why just dig a hole and put us in. (Laughs) So, what he --

JM: Harold, could I ask you to offer a benediction for us.

HK: Sure. Lord, we thank you for the presence of our friends to be with us today. And we thank you for the opportunity to share with them our experience along life's journey. And we pray your blessing upon them. Will you give them much courage and much wisdom as they share this information with them that has been given to them today. Thank you for their presence and their grace. Amen.

JM: Amen.

RK: I'm sorry he couldn't share more of his story. But usually we --

HK: Well, it's been very involved with your story. So.

RK: Well, I know that we've been in it together. But --

HK: I just feel so fortunate that she's my wife.

END OF AUDIO FILE