

**Oral History Interview of
Randall Gentry**

Interviewed by: Elissa Stroman and Jordan Butler

May 18, 2018

Lubbock, Texas

Part of the:

LGBTQIA Oral History Project

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Interview Series Background:

In Spring 2018, the Office of LGBTQIA, in partnership with the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, began collecting archival resources and oral histories from members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA), and ally communities. The oral history interview series seeks to record the rich history of social progress relative to LGBTQIA people at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock, and throughout West Texas. Interviews highlight the lived insights and knowledge of LGBTQIA people and allies.

Transcript Overview:

In this interview, Randall Gentry provides a life history, growing up as a cisgender gay man in conservative Texarkana Texas. He addresses his schooling, coming out to his parents, education at Texas Tech University, life in Lubbock as a gay student, and his work since graduating. He reflects on societal changes for LGBTQIA individuals over the past twenty years.

Length of Interview: 01:17:15

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Keywords

LGBTQIA community and identity, Texas Tech University, faith, sociology

Elissa Stroman (ES):

Okay. We are recording now. I'm going to turn it up just a little bit. And so today's date is May 18, 2018, and my name is Elissa Stroman. We are in the SUB [Student Union Building] at Texas Tech University, and today we're interviewing Randall Gentry for the newly founded LGBTQIA Oral History Project. So I am here and also, Jordan, you are here. Jordan, can you say your name?

Jordan Butler (JB):

Yes. My name is Jordan Butler. I'm a sophomore at Texas Tech University, and I am the student assistant who will be doing a lot of work on this project.

ES:

Okay. So, okay. So now, you know Jordan's voice on the recorder, and he's going to be asking questions as well, and so we're just going to dive in. So Randall, if you can state your name, how you identify, your pronouns for us.

Randall Gentry (RG):

Yes. My name is Randall Gentry. I identify as a cisgender gay male and my pronouns are he, his, and him.

ES:

Okay. Can you tell me your birthdate, where you were born, parent's names? Just general information on that.

RG:

Yes. I was born on May 21, 1983, so my birthday is coming up in a couple of days, in Texarkana, Texas. Both of my parents were born and raised in Texarkana and it was a big deal to be sure we were born on the Texas side and not the Arkansas side.

ES:

Okay. Did you have siblings? What did your parents do?

RG:

Yes. I have one older sibling. He's three years older than me and my parents both had their jobs from the time I was born until they retired. My mother is a retired elementary school teacher and my father worked for a pharmaceutical sales company for about twenty-eight years.

ES:

So tell me about your childhood.

RG:

Well, I grew up just right outside the city limits of Texarkana, so that area is extremely rural. It's very conservative, both politically, socially, religiously. Looking back, I didn't know it at the time, but I felt very suffocated and I could tell that there were constraints to my life there. I just, at the time, couldn't identify exactly what those were. As a child, you just don't know what your opportunities and what the world looks like outside of your hometown. But I had a very great childhood. It was—I came from a very loving home. My parents were very strict, but at the same time, were very reasonable about anything that I ever wanted to do. They tried to get me involved in as many things as possible that I wanted to do so I played tee-ball for about two years, but I hated it. They tried to get me to do piano lessons, but I didn't stick with it. The only thing they forced me to do that started in childhood and went all the way through the beginning of my teen years was the Boy Scouts. So I am an Eagle Scout, which I earned at the earliest possible moment you can do that. There's age requirements for the Boy Scouts and I achieved all of the requirements at age thirteen—no, excuse me—fourteen. But they don't let you have your Eagle until you're at least age fifteen. So I had to wait almost an entire year before I could even have my ceremony. But yeah, and I'm actually very proud to have been an Eagle Scout. It's paid off for me. But, see, what else? So I think that one of the key things that influenced my life early on was because my mother was an elementary school teacher and both my brother and I went to the same school that she worked at, I knew all of my teachers personally and what I mean by that is I was either friends with their children, who were my age, or because of my mother's relationship with them, we hung out at their house. I knew their spouses. If their kids were a different age, I still knew their kids. So I saw a lot of my elementary teachers in contexts and circumstances that most students don't, as in, I saw them in their swimsuits or in their nightgowns or no makeup coming down the stairs at, you know, seven o'clock in the morning to eat donuts and coffee. And so I saw a very different side of things and had a very different relationship with my elementary school experience. But then that sort of shifted, but not really, because growing up in a small town, everybody knew who my mother was, being a teacher within the district, and she was a very sought out teacher. So she actually had a waiting list every year for kids to get in her class. She's very, very good. And that reputation spilt over into the rest of my academic career there in my hometown all the way through high school. So I was already labeled as Mrs. So-and-So's son all the way through school and then as my older brother began to build a reputation on his intellectual capacities, I, then, also lived in his shadow. He is an extremely bright and gifted person so school came very easily to him. It didn't matter what subject you put him in. He was always going to make an A. An easy A. Never really struggled. He ended up salutatorian of his high school class and that influenced my entire high school career because I had to live in his shadow. Teachers automatically had assumptions about me. So it was a very challenging time and I hated high school because I didn't really get to build my own identity. I really—looking back, I put a lot of myself on hold through high school, which is not common for a lot of people. That's where you start to figure things out a little bit for yourself because that's really the first time you get a taste of academic freedom and you get to choose

your schedule. Even though there's still limited options, you still have a little bit more say in what classes you take. But that still didn't really change anything for me because everybody already had these preconceived notions about what kind of student I was going to be and the sort of performance I should live up to, so it was very challenging. I also had a—I come from a very small family, so I only have one first cousin. She also is extremely bright, but also very pretty and popular. So she was Miss THS. She was homecoming queen. She was an executive in student council. She wasn't president or anything. And she ended up—there was something else. Oh, she was co-captain of the cheerleading squad. So I also had to follow in her footsteps. She was a year ahead of me. So everybody knew our family really well. And then the kicker for high school was her senior year, my junior year, her mother took her own life so that really, dramatically influenced the remaining time in my high school because again, being in a small town and going to a small town high school—and if you know anything about cheerleader life, the cheerleader moms are heavily involved in everything that goes on with them so they were always up at the school. Everybody knew who my aunt was. This wasn't like it was, "Oh, I heard so-and-so's aunt/mother died." Instead, it was the whole school was affected. The cheerleaders, everybody who had anything to do with the cheerleaders, everybody knew who my aunt was. So it was a very, very difficult time for us, but good things came out—believe it or not—came out of that for my cousin because there were opportunities that happened she wouldn't have had had my aunt not passed away. But you'd rather have your aunt over those opportunities, I'm sure. I'm sure my cousin would feel the same way, but, you know, she ended up going on to do what she always wanted to do as a kid and that was become a veterinarian. That's what she is today.

ES:

So that—one of the questions I always have is what were you interested in in high school? So you were saying you didn't really have a good identity, but were you able to find any niche or anything you were really interested in at that point in time?

RG:

You know, I was a bit of a band nerd. I was in percussions so that was really sort of my outlet. Although, my high school swim team was also really good. They were state champions for many, many years in their division, and I had done that in middle school and the coach had wanted me to stay and swim because he said I had the body for it because I was tall. I was lean, you know, so it was real easy for me to just jump in and be at the other end of the pool in like three seconds, but I ended up going with band and so that ended up really serving as my, sort of, sole identity because my brother didn't do that so that was the small part of high school world that nobody really knew my brother and I really got to kind of create my own identity.

ES:

What was the—the kind of—the hierarchy of band in your area? Was—were they the outcasts? Were they the—

RG:

Within the high school?

ES:

Yeah. Some bands, you know, some high school bands are very popular in their towns. In small towns, sometimes, it's the misfits and outcasts that all end up in the band.

RG:

No. I would say we were—we weren't the most popular, but we had a lot of popular people in band because we just didn't have a ton of choices. It was a fairly small high school, though it was the largest one around, so we had more than what other high schools had. But no, because of the huge mix of people we had in band, we were not, by any means, the outcasts. On top of that, we won a lot of awards so we were, you know, we were respected among our peers in the high school and they loved all of the things that we did, especially in percussion because we just jammed out and it made the football games a lot more fun since our high school team wasn't really all that good most of the time.

ES:

Okay. So senior year, getting ready to graduate, what were you thinking about college? What brought you to Tech? What brought you? You know, like what were you thinking of studying? And those steps, those transitions.

RG:

I really didn't have any idea what I wanted to study when I was coming out of high school. It was really more driven by what my parents thought I should do and that really kind of summed up all of my undergraduate education, but I'll get to that in a minute. No, when I was coming out of high school, I had never even—couldn't even tell you where Lubbock was, but I had, for some reason, this really sort of weird—I don't know what you call it. It was sort of this sense. I was being drawn here to this university for some reason, and so I had it down between here and UT Austin. And UT Austin accepted me, but on a conditional basis, so I was like fuck them. You know, Tech was all like, "Come on," you know? But the problem was my mother did not want to take me five hundred miles from home because I was the youngest and she was going through some severe empty nest syndrome. I mean, it was bad. It was really, really bad. So I had to make a compromise and I actually went for one year, my freshman year, to the school I actually work at now, which is UT Arlington because that was only about two and a half hours from my hometown and so I get there, but UT Arlington is very much a commuter school. There was no traditional college life there at all and so even though I lived on campus, there was only like three dorms at that time so there was nobody there. And on Friday, when school was over, people left and so you were stuck on campus, you know? And I didn't have a lot of money to run around and do anything because there was nothing in Arlington to do. It's not a college town and

so you had to go to Fort Worth or you had to go Dallas and so it was just expensive to do that all the time, and you just couldn't afford it as a student. So after—or really, towards the end of that year, which is also the year that I came out to my parents as gay, officially. [Laughter] They knew early on in my life and chose to ignore it, and I also—that happened right before my birthday, which again, is at the end of the school year, typically, or right after it ends. But I also had applied to transfer to Tech without even telling my parents, but they saw how miserable I was at UTA and knew at that point it was okay. They'd had a year to sort of get over me being gone and them having the house to themselves because my parents would just pop in on me because it was so close to home, and they liked to come to DFW to go shopping and stuff like that because there was nothing in my hometown to do that. And so I would be going on a date and all of a sudden, I get this phone call and this was before cellphones, or at least everybody had a cellphone, I should say. And all of a sudden, I get this call on my dorm phone and it was my parents and they were like twenty minutes away and I was like, "Are you fucking kidding me?" You know, and I wasn't out officially at that time so I was like, "What do I tell my boyfriend?" Like, "Sorry, mom and dad are here. You're going to take a backseat because they don't know you exist." So it was—it just pissed me off even more and so that helped to motivate me to apply to transfer. So Tech, ultimately, accepted me, of course. And at that point, my parents were very accepting of it and they helped me move out here to start my sophomore year. But what was really interesting and I think this was a bit of a sort of a twist of fate from a friendship perspective, but the guy that I dated during my freshman year at UTA, he was two years older and he had gone to Tech his first two years and then transferred back home to Dallas-Fort Worth area and he had some really good friends here that were still out here. So he was like, "Here, you need to meet these people if you're going out there." And that, ultimately, ended our relationship, which I was okay with because I was about to turn nineteen and I wasn't about to get married. [Laughter] You know, which you couldn't at that time, but you know, you couldn't commit in any serious way. I had so much in front of me that I wanted to do and I wasn't going to let him tie me down. But so he set that up. He set with the friends of his that were out here and all of those people are still my friends to this day. I've been in their weddings. One of them is about to have a kid at the ripe old age of thirty-eight. Kind of an uh-oh baby. And so it's just—it was sort of meant to be, in that regard. But when I got out here, from an academic standpoint, I still didn't really know what I wanted to do. I had only had one sociology class when I was at UTA and it was by a lady who still as a profound impact on my life to this day. She was an out and proud lesbian. She was from a family of hippies, so her name was Harvest, and she still works as an adjunct at UTA and has the most incredible memory of anybody I've ever seen. Now, keep in mind, I had not seen her since I was eighteen years old. I walked over when I started working at UTA two and a half years ago. I walked over to her office. I turned the corner. She looks at me deadpan in the eyes. Says my name. Starts telling me all of the things that I had done in her class. She remembered me to a tee, including the research project that I had to do, which I chose to do on suicide at the end of that course. She remembered it almost verbatim. I mean, she has a memory like a steel trap and I was going, "This is scary. I'm going to be very

careful about what I tell you from now on.”

ES:

What was her last name?

RG:

Moon. So her name is Harvest Moon. So if that is not the hippest name, I don't know what is.

ES:

Harvest Moon. Amazing. That's amazing, anyway.

RG:

But she embraces it, so it's—she's an amazing person. But anyway, she had a major influence on my life and actually, I got here and I should have majored in sociology as an undergrad because I took enough courses for it to be a major. I just didn't do some of the requirements, like taking a theory course or the research class, but I took pretty much every elective that was being offered and I could've slept through those classes and still made an A. It came so naturally to me, but I was pressured to do something that was a little bit more practical by my parents and so that's how I ended up getting my undergraduate degree in marketing, which I was not very good at. Like there were some classes in business I excelled at and then others, I just struggled through. But I really didn't know what else to do and I wasn't at a point, developmentally, to actually listen to my own intuition that says, “You need to be over here.” Because I knew that my business degree would automatically translate to a job, which it did. So that part is kind of history at this point.

ES:

Let's back up for a minute before we keep going with Texas Tech. This was—when you were at UTSA, this is 2001?

RG:

UTA.

ES:

UTA. Sorry, yeah. UTA. That was 2001?

RG:

2001 and 2002. Yeah.

ES:

Okay. Because I was just thinking of the cellphone migration, and I went through the same thing

of having a dorm phone.

RG:

Right. I started—yeah, my first semester, I didn't have a phone, like a cellphone, at all. At Christmas of that year, my parents forced me to get one of those big ass Nokia phones and you couldn't text. Calling was very expensive per minute so there wasn't really anything you could do with it and I didn't really want one and they made me get it knowing that we were no longer physically connected in the same space.

ES:

I found my Nokia the other day. [Laughter] Anyway, so I don't know. Talk more about coming out. Talk more about that.

RG:

So I told my parents because it was the third or fourth time that they had shown up unannounced and I had to cancel yet another date and this was a guy that I actually fell in love with. He's the only time that I've really been in love and he—he was so sweet and so nice about it that after my parents left that evening to go back home, he had gone to the mall and bought a shirt that I had pointed out like weeks earlier that I really liked and then showed up with some of my favorite foods knowing that I was going to be miserable. But what happened is I came out to my parents during that time because I told them. I was like, "I just can't. I can't do this anymore. You're disrupting my life and I'm trying to, you know, have a love life here and you're like ruining it." So I told them, and it was a very big deal really for my mom, more so than my dad. My dad is—he's a very laid back guy and just doesn't care really about much, to be honest with you. So he has never said a negative word to me in my entire life. But my mother, on the other hand, she's—I got her personality so we butt heads a lot and so she, of course, is all dramatic and it's all about her and what this is going to mean in my hometown and I'm like, "I don't give a shit what anybody else thinks. This is my life." I can remember in our very first discussion, I told my mother, I said, in a moment of frustration, "You better get over this. I'm not dealing with this shit when I'm thirty." And here I am, I'm going to be thirty-five on Monday and I still deal with her shit about this. So anyways, but it sort of rapidly—our relationship sort of deteriorated and then it got better because the further I got away from them after I transferred out here, the harder for her it became. And there was one time they came out to Lubbock and my mom whipped out the Bible. I grabbed it out of her hand, I threw it at her, called her a bitch and stormed out. Didn't talk to her for almost a year. And so my dad, of course, playing mediator, would call and be like, "You need to call your mother. You need to talk to your mother. You need to makeup." I was like, "Fuck her, you know, if she's going to be like this. Blah, blah, blah." But obviously, we made up. Sort of, long story short. And she has gotten better. Sort of fast forwarding past this, just as an anecdote to her, that's been a part of my story. Coming from a very religious family, sometimes I look through that lens and there has been times God has used her to actually help

other people, and or God has presented her with an opportunity to sort of learn about sexuality and she still—it's funny because to this day, I've brought those things up and she's like, "That wasn't God." And I'm like, "Yes, it was." One day, after class, when she was still teaching, a teacher who was on the other side of campus, who she never interacts with because they were too far apart in grades so their schedules were completely opposite of another, made a beeline for her class and she sees her coming down the hall and my mom's classroom was at the very end. She sees her coming down the hall and she's making a beeline for her and she has this book in her hand and the woman says, "I don't know why I feel like I'm supposed to give this to you, but God is telling me to give you this book." And my mom was just like overwhelmed by that. She starts crying and all that sort of stuff and she doesn't even know what the book is. She takes it home and she reads it and it's a book written by a woman who had three adult sons in the 1960's. The oldest went off and died in one of the wars. I can't remember if it was Vietnam or Korean War. I think it was Korean War. Died. And then the middle son was an academic and he had gone to Alaska and they lived on the west coast of California and he had gone to Alaska and decided he was going to drive home for the holidays and as he was making it down the west coast, he was killed in a car accident. Then, their youngest son was gay, came out, and the father kicked him out. So now, she was down to one son and they hadn't seen or heard from him in years and she writes this book about sitting by the phone year, after year, after year, after year waiting for her one remaining child to reconnect with them. It wasn't really until right before her husband died that the son called and they got to rekindle their relationship. But really, for him and his father, it was too late. But for her, she still had that opportunity, but they were all much older at this point. So that was sort of an influential moment for my mother in seeing that you have a choice. Either be a part of your child's life or risk never seeing them again until it's possibly too late. And then, years later, my mother and father moved into a new house. They sold my childhood home. Went out even further into the country. Built this huge house on this big property that they had always wanted, and a neighbor down the street had moved in and they got to know them. Well they learned that the woman, because the—her husband was not her child's father—had an adult son that she hadn't heard from for years either. They had—he had come out and he just vanished because they had a big blowup and he didn't want to deal with it, and so when she found out that I was gay and saw that we still got along and we could still laugh and talk, she wanted to know more about how that worked out for us. And so my mother told her, you know, that very same thing from earlier was you just have a choice to make. Do you want to be a part of their life or not? They're adult children. They have to make their own decisions for their life. You just have to decide what you want. And you fast forward about three years because it took them about three years, they are now rekindling their relationship. And so I told my mother, I said, "God has used you, one of the most homophobic, resistant people I know, to counsel someone else on how to build a relationship with your gay son." And so it's just very strange how things work out in that regard, but that's kind of actually where we are now. She's starting to accept things, but I haven't crossed any major bridges with her in a really long time. Like, she hasn't—there's nothing for me to invite her to, like a wedding of mine or, you know. I

haven't built a family or anything for her to decide whether or not she wants to be involved, in that regard, so we'll see what happens when that bridge comes upon us.

JB:

So earlier, you had talked a lot about how you came from a really conservative area and then now, also through what you said, it's become evident that faith is a big part of your life as well. So I was just wondering if you could talk about your family's politics and the role that faith played in your childhood and family life.

RG:

So the church home that I grew up in was a very conservative southern Baptist—what I would call almost a very country church. It was all white, pretty much the entire time that I was growing up there. You know, and they did things like the True Love Waits and all those things that actually, research shows, are not effective at all at preventing anybody from premarital sex of any kind. So in fact, we had several teenage girls who ended up being pregnant over the years that I was in that youth group. So you can see—I guess small town. You know, what else is there to do? My church was never—they never felt like they had to be direct in being anti-gay because they just probably thought there was no issue for that. You know, since then, as an adult, I have attended services for various reasons at other very conservative churches where they have preached those very controversial, social topics of the day. But my church was never really direct about it. It was just understood that you just weren't going to be gay. And for me, it was more just about biding my time. I just—there was almost sort of this weird sense of safety in a very conservative church because nobody was looking for those things because they didn't expect anybody to be gay, so it was really easy to hide things that other more socially aware people who might have a gay-dar, so to speak, would pick up on. But in a very conservative church, they're not looking for those things so you could easily hide yourself as you were sort of entering your teen years and starting to maybe express yourself in ways that weren't typically masculine or expected for a very rural area. Yeah.

ES:

What about faith today?

RG:

So I actually—I attend what a lot of conservative straight people would call the “Gay Church” in Dallas. It's called Cathedral of Hope. I joined it about a year and a half ago. Or I should say, I started attending about a year and a half ago and I joined about a year ago. And it's been—so yeah, I've been trying to actually reinvigorate that aspect of my life a little bit because there are so many people, who, in the gay community, who sort of resist faith. But that's oftentimes because there aren't any spaces for us to exist there, and Cathedral Hope really sort of gives you that opportunity and they're very—and they're not just a church that says, “Oh, here's our

ceremonies. Come one day a week and be a part of it.” They have so many things that they do and they’re so out and loud and proud that it’s even sometimes, I’m resistant to being a part of everything because they’re so on the front lines and so part of me still rever—excuse me—rever—I can’t say the word I want to say. But goes back to my childhood when I’m like, “Oh. I don’t know if I want to cross that line because that’s really putting myself out there for possible criticisms or potentially, even violence or something like that.” But it’s really—it’s been a really good experience for me to be a part of that church for the last like year and a half and it’s also given me a way to communicate with other people of the queer community about—you know, that there are church homes that exist if you’re willing to seek them out so.

JB:

Okay. So you said you transferred after your freshman year to Texas Tech. So, and by that time, you were out.

RG:

Yes.

JB:

So when you came to Tech, can you just kind of talk about that? What it was like, your experiences, the community at that time.

RG:

Yeah. It was—Tech did not offer very many avenues to be a part of gay community and to also put this into context, in today’s time, there were no smartphones. There were—so you didn’t have that quick access to other queer people. Really, your only way to meet other gay people. Well there’s two ways. The first on campus way was to do that via the student group, but as always, it’s the people who are most comfortable with themselves. They’re out loud and proud that join those groups and so they’re not fearful of repercussions. They weren’t even then and they were far greater than they are now. So you got a very narrow niche of the queer community on this campus that would attend. Now, when I first got here, the group was huge. I mean, massive. We had to switch rooms that we met in in Holden Hall because we had so many people attend. And so, in a way, there was this sense of community because there was just no other outlet for that. But a lot of that success had to do with the current president at that time. He was very, very attractive. So people wanted to attend because he was just so hot, and he also was very outgoing. For a lot of students at that time, we didn’t live off campus. There weren’t as many options to live off campus as there are today, so you pretty much always lived on campus. It was expensive to move off campus so he was one of the few people who had a home near campus and lived by himself, which was even more unusual at that time. So he was able to hold parties, and he was a pot smoker and so people would just—I mean, we had a great time, let me just tell you. But he, eventually, butted heads so many times with the current administration about trying

to get things off the ground that exist here today, which it's just—part of me goes, “Damn. I wish we could've had this when I was here because it just would have changed so many lives.” But the then president of the university was famous for not holding his feelings back about our group and any sort of progress. Famously said one time that there wasn't a chance in hell that it would ever happen while he was president and eventually, that student group president transferred to Rutgers University because he was just so tired of fighting that mentality here and he wanted to get away from it. He had also grown up somewhere here in West Texas. I don't remember exactly where.

ES:
What was his name? Do you remember?

RG:
I don't.

ES:
Okay.

RG:
I might be able to find it, but I don't know it.

ES:
That's okay. You can probably—you got it. Okay.

JB:
Yeah.

RG:
Yeah so, but yeah. He transferred and got the hell out of here.

ES:
So the group wasn't formally recognized by the university?

RG:
No, it was. It was an official student group. It was definitely an official student group, but it was a contentious time. Anytime, I mean we tried to be visible. And this was—and so when I first got here, the free speech zones or areas, they didn't exist. You could just be anywhere on campus. It wasn't for another couple of years that they passed these rules about where free speech could happen. Where student groups could set up or somebody from off campus could come and proselytize or do whatever they wanted to do for the students. So you could be anywhere and we

faced a lot of hate and discrimination and people making comments and yelling at us when we had tables set up on the sidewalks out here. Of course, the SUB wasn't nearly as big as it is now. It was much smaller.

ES:

I was going to say. You came in about 2003, then?

RG:

Two thousand two. It was the fall of 2002. And this addition to the SUB and the one on the—no, yeah. We're here on the—

ES:

That was about to start.

RG:

It was not for another two years. It was around '04 that they started building and then they opened the building, I think, in '05, or maybe one year earlier. I could have that wrong. Don't hold me to it. But it was around that time. So the addition that's on the south side and then all of this north side did not exist. And then they redid all of this upstairs. It didn't look like this either. It was very, very old school. Very eighties up here when I got here. And it wasn't called the SUB either. I remembered that this morning. I was like, it was university center or something like that. It had a—it was changed while I was here to the Student Union Building. I forgot where I was going with that though.

ES:

So there was no free speech designated zones and so there was—

RG:

Oh, yes. No, no, no, no, no. Yeah, so there was a considerable amount of space between the end of the SUB here and the library and so you had a much larger space to sort of meet people and all that, but you really didn't come to the SUB like you do now for anything other than the cafeteria that was in here and that was it. You know, and it wasn't what it is today. There were not any of these options that you have down there now for all of the fast food and all that so if you didn't like what they were serving in the cafeteria, you didn't eat here. But yeah. We faced—anytime we set up, we faced a lot—people were not afraid to tell us how much they did not like us being out and visible. People who could easily be identified as part of the queer community because they were either stereotypical in their mannerisms or their voice or something, they faced far greater challenges and obstacles than those of us who were more passable in our mannerisms and our voice and so on. So they oftentimes used the group as sort of a therapy counseling because those sort of services didn't even really exist for us and the staff, both in the counseling services

and in the on campus medical student services. Whatever it's called. I can't think of what the name is right now, were extremely homophobic. So you did not go to them if you had an issue that could be potentially related to the fact that you've had gay sex or something. So it was just a very, very challenging time. And then when the guy left who was extremely attractive, the group dwindled considerably. The people tried to keep it going, but your leadership in these sort of student groups follows whoever the leader is in a lot of ways so when it's a gay guy, the gay guys come along. When it's a lesbian, the lesbians come along. When it's a trans person, the trans people, community, really comes out and then everybody else sort of falls away. So it was easy to fracture the community at that time. Now, the second time—or the second way in which you could connect to somebody who was gay. This, again, before smartphones. Before Craigslist. Before Facebook. Facebook did not open for Tech until either '03 or '04. Of course, if you remember, it was a university only sign up at that time. You had to have an active university email address so not anybody could sign up. Facebook is probably wishing that it was still that way to this day, given what they're facing. But no, so the only other way to meet somebody was a little known website nowadays called gay.com and it had chatrooms and believe it or not, they had a Lubbock only chatroom, which was rare, and they had blogs and forms and all kinds of stuff on there. It actually still exists to this day. Nobody just needs it for that anymore. But that was actually how I ended up meeting a lot of people who were in the closet was through that medium because these were the type of people who were involved in more conservative aspects of college life here so they couldn't join the student group and risk having their photo being taken and published or, which at that time, wasn't as big of a threat as it is now with social media, but they still just couldn't risk even somebody knowing who they were on campus and coming up to them and their peers identify them—you know, associate them with somebody who was clearly gay in some way. You know, so yeah. That was about it and that was pretty much my existence and the experience that most other people of our queer community had. There was just not a lot of spaces for us. Off campus, a lot of people, and this is still even true to this day, would meet at J&B because it's always been sort of considered the queer hangout, the liberal hangout, in Lubbock and so I would always have to tell people who were left leaning politically like who were coming here. They'd be like, "Oh, where I should go?" And I was like, "Well even to this day, J&B is going to the place to hang out because there's still not a lot." Luxor did exist then, as it does now. Of course, at that time, the Overton neighborhood was unsafe. It was drug infested. There was a lot of poverty. A lot of crime happened in that neighborhood. There were a lot of empty vacant lots so a lot of shady criminal activity would go down and we were warned not to go in there, which was, looking back, you go, wow. That was right across the street from campus. Nowadays, that would be hard to see that even exist so close to the university, but so Luxor was kind of a weird thing to go to at that time. It was the only outlet if you wanted to go to a club and it wasn't very good, by my standards, but so I rarely ever went and on top of that, it was on 4th Street. It's not like it is nowadays with the freeway and being on an access road. So there was actually a considerable amount of space of dirt between 4th Street and where Luxor was and so it was just sort of this weird—I don't know—it was just very—you look back and

you go, wow. It doesn't really feel like any place you wanted to go. It just looked unsafe and kind of shady and all that sort of stuff. And then towards the end of my undergraduate years, probably around the fall of '05, another club—I don't know if it still exists or if it's just simply changed—was Heaven.

JB:

I don't think it exists anymore.

RG:

Okay. Heaven Nightclub opened and it was supposed to compete with Luxor and it was down there in the Depot District so it was sort of the gay community's first foray into being right in the middle of straight world, in terms of all the bars. And it was actually really fun. It was different than Luxor. And the owner, one of the first things they did, was have RuPaul come for a major show and sold tickets that were extremely expensive for the time and so yeah, I got to see RuPaul live in Lubbock.

ES:

That's amazing.

RG:

Of all places.

JB:

That is.

RG:

Yeah, at Heaven. But I know shortly after I left, Heaven started becoming one of those things where they started having straight night one night a week and then it reversed and it went to having gay night one night a week and then, as you said, it doesn't exist anymore, so that quickly went away. But yeah, no. That was sort of the first sign that things were changing in that regard that we were starting to be big enough. Also, keep in mind, to put in context of that time, Tech only had about 24,000 students so we were considerably smaller than what it is now and so even then, the queer community was not as robust as the number of students that exist today.

ES:

I graduated high school in 2002, so all of this is very similar. I know some of these things. Living on campus was just kind standard. Even, I went to undergrad elsewhere. What dorm were you in?

RG:

I never lived on campus, actually, because it was a freshman requirement to live on campus. I think it always has been, but I did actually have to ask housing to wave me to live off campus since I was a transfer student because they did at that time. I don't know if they still do require transfer students to live on campus, but I was waved to live off and I did. I lived at 4th and oh my god. What is the name of that street? Slide. I had to think about it for a second. I lived at 4th and Slide in these incredibly crappy old apartments.

ES:

That are still there, probably.

RG:

That are still there and mine had more mold than you could possibly imagine. I got very, very sick in the year that I lived there and then during that first year that I was here, they started tearing down North Overton and the very first apartment complex they built, I moved into and it's called—I think it still is called University Trails. It's the one with the green roofs over there. Yeah. It used to stand out in the middle because they tore down all those homes and so there it was sitting in this massive open space and it still was an unsafe neighborhood at the time, even though this was a gated, still is a gated complex because the people who had been forced out of that neighborhood through the gentrification, they still were connected to it so they still would come over even though the homes didn't exist and they were robbing students. I was very lucky that they never did rob me, but they were scouting students coming in with those giant big screen TVs and their—whatever. I can't think of what the like PlayStation version of all that was at that time because I didn't really play video games. But they—yeah. They were breaking in and stealing stuff so it was a big problem for a very long time, but that quickly changed because they started building all the other stuff that was over there in a very short amount of time. But no, I lived in apartment 911. I still remember to this day. And I had a lot of friends that lived in that apartment complex, which was great, and I'll never forget when I moved out because I ended up living there the three remaining years. I ended up spending four total at Tech, so five years total for undergrad and when I moved out, the lease agent walked into my apartment. Of course, you know, keep in mind they're furnished. All right. And she looked around. She was like, "This is the nicest apartment I have ever checked anybody out of." And I was like, "Well A, I've been the only one that's lived here." It was a one bedroom so I had it to myself. And I was like, "I take care of my shit." So I mean, it's like—you know, the carpet was clean. It wasn't stained. I was like, "I don't have wild parties, you know, or anything like that." So I'd love to know what it looks like now. I'm sure it looks like shit.

ES:

Talk about—well what about other—were there other resources for the gay community in Lubbock at all outside of Texas Tech?

RG:

PFLAG was it. Not a lot of people really were involved in PFAG. MCC, the church came along. Metropolitan community Church, came along, but it never really played that big of a role. I'm really surprised by that, to be honest with you, given the emphasis that Christian faith has in this community, that that didn't influence more people to join and be a part of it. But they weren't—I think they would have had they had more of an advocacy arm and then more in your face, but keep in mind, at that time, anybody who was openly gay, but not like connected to—like this was in the community, in Lubbock community, it was not uncommon to hear about someone being vandalized and having things spray painted on the side of a building or—I mean, just, it was constant and there was a lot of hate crime type activities that happened if you were too out and proud at that time.

ES:

So who were your influences on campus or off campus? Or who—what tribe? You know, who were your connections that you made while you were here?

RG:

You know, the first couple of years I was here, I would say it was hard to make friends that were my age so I easily got involved with a lot of the non-Tech gay community, who were—they were much older than me. I ended up getting to know a guy here that was a writer and his husband. I was invited to their pool parties a lot. Other Tech grads, people who were in their fifties and sixties at the time. But they were so much more mature. They had seen so much more. It was much easier for me to connect with them and it was really until the second half of what would've been my junior year. So this would've been the spring of '05 that I really started to make some friends. I'll tell you why, because we tried to create the gay fraternity, which is—oh my gosh. Hang on. Alpha Lambda—

JB:

Tai?

RG:

No. Phi or something. I'll have to look it up. You can Google their—they still exist and a lot of schools still have a gay fraternity. We tried to create it and we even had the national chapter's administration fly out to Lubbock and we hosted them for a weekend and they were supposed to help us get it started. We showed up on their website as a new chapter sort of in initiation phase for about a year and then we could not keep it going. We advertised. We tried to get people to join and it just got harder and harder and harder and then all of us who were trying to get it off the ground, we ended up leaving and it just fell apart and collapsed. But I ended up making a lot of friends from that because it was sort of a way to kind of get away from the setup of the student group on campus and start something that had a different focus. But like I said, it was just too

hard to get it going. But then, if you remember from my speech last night, there were a number of faculty on this campus that were very influential for me. They were able to sort of put me in a position to sort of speak my truth, in a way, and change things. I served not just for Dr. Elizabeth Sharp in her classes, but she ended up then connecting me to a lot of other faculty who were really new at that time, like Dr. Amy Human, over in Mass Comm. She and Elizabeth Sharp both took me in and started having me either give individual speeches if they couldn't put a panel together, but most of the time, it was a panel and it was very good. I mean, to see the response we got—students were actually very respectful when we presented that format. But I will never ever forget and I wish she was here because she could tell this story so much better than I could. In one of Dr. Sharp's classes, we were over in the HDFS building. It had about forty students in this class and it was just me. I was the only one that day. She couldn't get a panel together quick enough for it. But so I'm giving a speech and in the middle of the speech, I notice there's a gentleman in the back very last row and he's rocking back and forth and looking down. I mean, and it wasn't subtle. I mean, like literally rocking his entire body back and forth. I also noticed he was surrounded by female students. I mean, like not a guy within like three rows of him. And so after my speech was over, he never said anything the entire time. Never asked a question. Never looked at me. He looked down the entire time. I asked Elizabeth, I was like, "What was going on with him?" She goes, "Oh, you noticed that, huh?" And I said, "Yeah, what was his deal?" And she goes, "Don't be offended. He does that every single class." I'm like, "What's going on?" And she said, "He is literally rejecting, physically, mentally, everything that we're teaching him because it's so controversial." When she talks about deconstructing gender roles, traditional gender roles, he starts rocking. And I said, "Well why is he doing this?" And she goes, "What you couldn't see is he had a Bible on his lap." And he was reading the Bible while he was rocking back and forth because he wanted to—he didn't want to get up and walk out because that could hurt him from an attendance standpoint and if he was going to miss an assignment that was required or whatever. I mean, he still did the work, but he just could not handle what was going on so there are a lot of little things like that that happened over the years that was just really—I look back and I go, oh. But I'll tell you, one of the best panels I ever sat on that she put together was a guy who was presented as straight. He was a cisgender male, who came out to the entire class as openly bisexual and talked about his dating struggles on this campus as a bisexual guy that when he would come out to any girl that he was interested in, that how they just flat out rejected him and all the things they would say. That had to be one of the more interesting ones and it was one of the few times the attention was not on me because the entire class wanted to know about him, which was a little bit nice of a change, but usually, the other panels included maybe one other Tech student, but oftentimes, people from the community. Somebody from PFLAG would come and talk about their experiences as a parent or something like that. But I did so, so many of those over the last probably two and a half, three years that I was here that it was probably one of the better experiences. But those were the type of faculty that influenced my time and gave me sort of an outlet, in a way, for me to be able to go and talk about things and I think one of the reasons they enjoyed it is because I could so easily relate to

the students at that time and I could really sort of break the tension with humor, but also being able to go through a typical process that we all experienced as Tech students, no matter what year it is, and break it down from my perspective with a little coding of humor. They really appreciated that and would break down and eventually, by the end of the hour or hour and a half, however long that class was, I would get great questions. They were actually sometimes a little too intrusive, but luckily, I'm not easily offended so I would tell them the exact truth. I was like, "You're not going to like this dirty answer, but it's exactly what happens so."

ES:

So we're going to run out of time and not get through everything.

JB:

We are.

ES:

So we're going to have to fast—well we could—we'll figure it out.

RG:

Okay.

ES:

You graduated Tech.

RG:

Yes.

ES:

And then? Talk about post-Tech.

RG:

Okay. So I took a job at Dell and so I moved down to their headquarters in Round Rock. Worst experience of my entire life. It was—we would always say, "Dell is hell." Or we would—instead of telling people, "I hope you have a hell of a day." We would just say, "Dell of a day," and then giggle because we knew what that meant. But I absolutely hated it. Going from conservative Lubbock and struggling to date to going to Austin, where gay life was so different that it was exclusive. Very exclusive. I had some of the worst dating experiences down there and to this day, I just cringe anytime I have to go to Austin. It just makes me creep out every time I go. So like as an example, of course, I lived on the north side of Austin, right—almost in Williamson County. So I wasn't even really in Travis County that much and I tried to get a guy who lived more central to Austin to come up there. He kind of resisted at first, but then he was like, "Well

where are we going to go?” Now, keep in my mind, my east Texas roots would come out and I’m like, “Let’s go get a steak at blah, blah, blah steakhouse. I could really use a twice baked potato and a glass of sweet tea.” And he was like, “Oh, I’m a vegan and blah, blah, blah.” And was like, you know. I was like, “Okay. Fine. Where do you want to go?” He took me to some random ass place on the eastside of Austin that used to be this house, but it wasn’t really converted into a restaurant so you still felt like you were eating in someone’s bedroom because the furniture hadn’t really changed that much and there were still things on the wall and you’re like, “Did they just move out yesterday and then now, today, it’s a restaurant?” And then they had bought the property next door, which was vacant, so they grew the food that they served and that was it. That was your choices. After that date was over, I went to Whataburger and I got like a double cheeseburger because I was like this—yeah, I never talked to him again. It was just those sort of random ass experiences all the time in Austin and if I tried to get other guys to come up to the north side, they’re like, “You live where? I’m not going up there. Blah, blah, blah.” And I’m like, “God.” So it was just one thing after the other, but it lead me back to Tech actually because when I lost my job there at Dell, this was right as the 2008 financial crisis hit and they started laying off a massive number of people, by the thousands actually. And I decided when I was walked out like a common criminal, that’s just the for profit world for you. They have no regard for your time there, loyalty, or anything. They walk you to the front door, they grab your badge, and they say, “Have a nice day.” It’s very cold. I got to my car and I called my mother and I’m like crying that I just lost my job. I was twenty-four years old so it felt like the end of the world and she’s like, “What are you going to do?” And I immediately knew I was going to go to graduate school. It took me some time. So I didn’t come back until January of ’09.

JB:

And you were laid off when?

RG:

In March of 2008. It was right after St. Patrick’s Day, so that’s how I remember it. But so I came back here and you know, when you come back as a graduate student, it’s just not the same. You don’t have the same existence. The students that you knew are no longer here, for the most part. And then of course, I was a TA, so I had a very different relationship with the undergraduate students than I did when I was an undergrad myself and almost so much that they would come to my office hours and use me as like therapy. So and here I was not that far removed from my experience here, but I had a lot of sort of the more feminine gay guys come to my office and tell me all the things that they were still experiencing. Very reminiscent of my peers here. People called them fag and all that sort of stuff. And so I just tried to be a resource for them in a way that I did not have when I was an undergrad because that just didn’t exist, but things were already starting to move, even by the time I came back as a graduate student. You could see just in that short time how things had changed and in fact, one of the key things that changed that we could not get started when I was here was the drag show on campus that’s used as a fundraiser.

We tried to have us and they told us, “No way in hell we would ever let you have that on campus.” And I do think the very first one was actually off campus. I don’t know if it’s in the history of all that because it was not considered anything official. But anyways.

ES:

So you were here for graduate work and you—again, I’m thinking we’re going to have to really speed through this.

RG:

Oh okay. I’ll keep it short.

ES:

No, no, no. You’re good. Tell me about your graduate studies and what you did and who was your tribe at that point in time. Who did you work with at that point? And then what happened after that?

RG:

Yeah. So very, very different experience, as I was alluding to earlier, so you know, in graduate school, the set up is so different and you’re so more involved in your academics than you were as an undergrad. Undergrad allows for all those social activities and time and you could sleep late and avoid taking eight a.m. classes, but when you were at least a TA—now, I don’t know if you’re a graduate student and not a TA, then you don’t have those sort of responsibilities, but I did. So I still had to be up early in the morning because I still was a TA for all of those massive Intro to Sociology classes that had like two hundred and plus students and the professor would just come in and teach and he would give me all of the rest of the work, so I had to sit in class and take notes just like one of them and then I had to hold office hours. I had to grade all the papers. I had to do all that sort of stuff, which was great because I ended up turning around and being an adjunct after I finished, but you spend more time with your cohort of graduate students than you do with anybody else so being in the sociology department, of course, they’re all pretty much left leaning. There was very few conservative graduate sociology students, at least in the two cohorts that I got to know, and so those were really the people you spend all your time with, even outside of class, because you might study with them or consult a project, but you also spend more time with your faculty members as a graduate student. So I got to know them a lot more than I ever did as an undergrad. And then, of course, when you start working on your thesis, you spend a lot of time with the chair of your thesis committee so I got to know him and I think he’s still here. Jerome Koch is still here and it was sort of interesting because I didn’t know really anything about his history and he actually sought me out and said, “I want to be your thesis chair,” but I think it’s because I think he got in trouble for not doing it with any graduate students for many years. At least that was the rumor I heard because it was well known that he wouldn’t be on anybody’s thesis committee and then so when he sought me out, I told people, I was like,

“Oh, no. No, Dr. Koch came and asked me if he could be my chair.” And they were all like, “What?” Like, “He did what?” So anyways, but he was great. He was perfect because I ended up doing my thesis on the intersectionality on religious identity and sexual identity. I just had to use a secondary data set. So I used the General Social Survey, the GSS. Long story short, there is very little correlation between those two identities, but I was very fascinated in social psychology towards the end of my graduate career, so I really focused on that a lot, but that ended up really being the majority of my time. It was a lot easier to come back a few years older, a few years wiser, and be out and gay. I mean, so I was even out as a TA. Everybody knew that and I think, actually, that opened the door for a lot of things. Other than, you know, my gay students coming to talk to me about their issues, even the straight students would come and talk to me. I had one girl show up and tell me, “Oh. I’m sorry I missed the test. I had to go and get an abortion.” I was like, “Oh. Okay. You could’ve just told me you had a medical appointment. I didn’t need to know all this. You know, a little TMI.” But it’s sort of funny how that changes when you’re a graduate student, and especially, a TA, they just turnaround and feel like they can tell you anything. And you’re like, “Oh well, you know.” I didn’t know what to say. “Sorry to hear,” or “Congratulations.” You know, I just nodded and said, “Okay. So you can make that up. I think that’s legit.”

ES:

And then post-graduation?

RG:

Yeah. So this is where things really started to change for me. So I struggled finding a job right out of graduate school because I thought I was going—I was a little naïve—and I thought I was going to light the world on fire and of course, I didn’t. I just thought everybody thought I was going to brilliant and I wasn’t. It was just really more that there were a lot of brilliant people out there and I wasn’t the only one. So I struggled to get the job that I really wanted, which was to teach full-time at a community college because it’s just one of my passions is teaching sociology. But the interesting thing was, I had to—like most—it’s not uncommon these days—but I had to move in with my parents. But the thing is, they had moved into a retirement community. Now, don’t get me wrong. It’s actually one of those really nice ones. It has like two golf courses and you know, two resort style pools and I mean, it’s a very active community. It was, by no means, what you think of when you see somebody in like an assisted living facility or something like that. My parents had their own home and it was huge and nice and all that sort of stuff so it was very luxurious. So but I thought, how funny is this? Because here I was, twenty-six going on twenty-seven, just finished my master’s degree and I went from graduate school to living in a retirement community and I thought, this is how it should be done. I was like, somebody’s got to figure out how this works. But since I was struggling to find a job, I just decided I was going to walk in to a nonprofit organization because I wanted to use my master’s degree in sociology in some way and so I did just walk in and I said, “I want to volunteer with your development

department,” which is the fundraising arm of the organization. And I said, “Just sign me up. I want to work with your folks who do grants and all that sort of stuff.” Because after having just written my thesis, I was on fire and I was like, “I’m going to write,” and all that sort of stuff. I was there, really, only three weeks when the woman who was the development associate quit and moved back to her hometown in Kansas, and about a week later they offered me the job because as a volunteer, they had already had my resume and my background. They knew what I was capable of and of course, they’d already had a familiarity with me over the course of the last month. So I had already applied to also be an adjunct with Dallas County Community College and the same day, they offered me the job at AIDS Outreach Center, I’d also gotten a call from the dean to come and adjunct so I went from having no job to one and a half jobs in twenty-four hours. It was kind of a crazy whirlwind time. So for the next two years after that, I worked at AIDS Outreach Center as the development associate raising money, writing grants. I was the volunteer coordinator and then I would go and I would teach college at night. So it was a full, full day, but I got to do two things that were totally my passion and that’s actually how I’ve been able to use my degree and really figure out a whole other aspect about what I was capable of by fundraising. That experience led me to grant writing for a community college in Houston. So I went from doing fundraising to being more exclusively a grant writer, where I wrote state and federal grants most of the time. I was very successful at doing that. I raised millions of dollars for that organization writing seventy page papers almost every single week. And then, that led me to my current job at the University of Texas at Arlington. So it was all those sort of experiences lined up and I look back and I go that’s just crazy that I just happened to pick the right organization at the right time. It got me a job and now, here I am, in charge. At UTA, I’m putting together this massive process for faculty and staff to be able to apply for funding on the foundation side because they don’t—they have never had that system at UTA because they just, historically, have not been a research institution. Since my time in Dallas-Fort Worth, I’ve gotten involved with a myriad of things that all evolve around one or more of my passions. So I’ve been involved with a brand new statewide community’s foundation that specifically targets LGBT people. In fact, the office here applied. I just read their grant application before I came here, even though, I can’t grade it officially because it would be a conflict of interest, but yeah. So we’re actually going—actually, I should be doing that right now. Reviewing all the grant applications because my notes have to be turned in pretty soon, but so I’m involved with that, which has been really great getting that off the ground and then in that capacity, I serve as one of the grant—we call it the Grant Actions Group. But I’ve also been involved with YMCA Fort Worth, serving as a president of one of the branches. I’ve been involved in some young professionals groups with HIV and AIDS resource organizations there. So I’ve done just kind of all kinds of things and it’s been all those things that I did here, building those skills, that have let me to be able to do what I do now. So it’s been really a lot of fun.

ES:

Do you have other questions that you want to ask?

JB:

No. Not at the moment.

ES:

Okay.

JB:

I think we covered.

ES:

We covered a lot.

JB:

Yeah.

ES:

As we slide into home base. I had a question like going way back, but I'm really interested in this. Growing up in this conservative small town, which I totally relate to, what kind of influences and role models? Who did you seek out, especially in trying to find your identity? You know, was it pop culture? We didn't have the internet in our—in the, you know, early nineties. So who were you looking to? And who were you able to find?

RG:

I really didn't have any. I really had to, kind of like I alluded to earlier, I had to put that part of my life on hold because my parents really restricted what we watched on television and we weren't—it wasn't until I was much older that we were allowed to have televisions in our room and when I—about the time I was in middle school is when MTV started doing a lot more programming that involved the queer community in some way. Of course, it was always the very stereotypical mostly cisgender gay men. White gay men, in particular. But that was sort of the first time I had any visibility and I still remember that year of the MTV Real World where Pedro came out as being HIV positive and later died because that was back right around the time the medical revolution for HIV and AIDS was happening, but it was too late for him and he passed away. But I remember watching him and it was just this very like groundbreaking thing. Of course, anytime my parents walked in, I had to change the channel because if they knew I was watching that, I would've been in so much trouble. But no, actually, the sort of weird—I look back on it and think how creepy it was at that time, but the internet was just coming into our house and this was back when you had dial up and it was AOL and you had to wait and wait and wait. There was actually very limited access to the outside world. In fact, AOL outed me one time to my parents because I'd gone on to a forum for gay men and I just simply wrote up this story wondering if anybody else was going through the same thing that I had been going through,

and I was only thirteen or so at that time. This was before high school and AOL flagged it as offensive and a violation in their terms and conditions. And because it was my parent's account, I was just one of the sub accounts and because I was under sort of minor restrictions because you know how AOL, back then, had different levels of accounts. Like, you had all access as like the parent or whatever and then you could put your kids on restrictive access. Well I still had access to that forum, so to me, I didn't think it was any big deal. They copied my entire post and emailed it to my parents. And I look back, and I go, today, they would be in so much trouble for doing that kind of stuff, but back then, nobody even thought about it. So that started—was sort of a series of very uncomfortable conversations with my parents and I sort of had to figure out and wiggle my way out of the conversation because I wasn't mature enough to really have those sort of discussions with my parents at that time. But so little things like that. I also was able to seek out other gay men in my hometown, which most of them were older and so I look back and I go, God. That was such a risk. I could've been killed or whatever because I had these men show up and pick me up when my parents weren't home, and we would go over to their apartment or whatever and hang out, and it was really the first time I had anybody to talk to because even though there were people in my school that I knew were gay, we didn't out each other. We didn't acknowledge each other existed. I mean, like we knew who each other were, but we, in no way, ever socialized or would ever dare to out each other or pick on each other or anything like that. It just was not an option at that time because if anybody saw any sort of weakness or what they perceived to be weakness in you, they could make your life a living hell.

ES:

How do you think that has impacted you later in life?

RG:

It still makes me a little weary about being out and proud and in front of things because you do put yourself out there and risk the consequences. It's just that every time you do it, you grow a little bit more comfortable, a little bit more comfortable, and you can just sort of learn to navigate those and watch for uncomfortable situations, but I've also learned to seek out spaces where I don't have to be as guarded about those things. You know, when you work for an organization that serves the HIV and AIDS community, you don't have to worry about whether or not you're gay because you're definitely not the only one. You know, or seeking out a church that's friendly. All those sorts of things. And of course, living in a much larger city changes all of that dramatically. People there are generally much more open about it and then working now, a full-time and in an academic environment, most people are pretty progressive and open minded anyways and when you work in fundraising, no matter where you work, most people are pretty progressive and open minded because you just deal with so many different types of people.

ES:

Well what haven't we talked about that you thought we would or that you think we should?

RG:

Hm. [Pause] That's a great question. I don't know that I have anything that immediately comes to mind.

ES:

What do you think? So this recording is going to go into the Southwest Collection Archive. It's going to be here. We have oral histories dating back to the fifties and so what do you think fifty years from now, what's a takeaway or something that you hope people looking back should know about your life or about this time in Lubbock or Texas or the world in general?

RG:

You know, knowing Lubbock, I can see in fifty years, it won't be dramatically different, in terms of mentality and perception. I think slowly as more internal migration happens in the United States and you have people who don't have a connection to Texas come here and the bigger the university gets and brings people from other parts of the country who aren't going to bring extremely conservative values with them, things will change slowly. But you know, just in the almost twenty years that I've had an association with this university and Lubbock, yeah, you could, if you look hard enough, be able to measure the change that has happened. I mean, I think a good marker of that is when I got here, this was a dry county. You had to drive out to the strip on what is you know, South I-27, essentially, to get alcohol and that was sort of a unique aspect of my time here. That doesn't really exist anymore and I'm almost a little sad about that that people don't get that experience of driving out there and seeing what looked like Las Vegas Strip, which is where it got its name from, right? Because of all the neon signs and all the liquor stores that's lined up trying to get your attention. And on Friday night, there would be this massive line of cars just backed up down on the interstate because there was only one exit and you had to—you know, everybody was going through the intersection and trying to spread out to whichever liquor store they wanted to go to and it wasn't until I came back as a graduate student that they voted to become a wet county and now, you can buy liquor and alcohol just about anywhere. So those little changes will happen and those are sort of symbolic. So I would expect in fifty years, you'll see more of those sort of symbolic changes begin to happen and I do think that the Tech community over time and much more quickly than the Lubbock community will start to become more and more progressive. You know, if you kind of put Tech as a student body, up against all the other universities in the state, Tech is not the most conservative. People—it still identifies that way. It's probably right leaning, but it's definitely not where, say, A&M is or Baylor is on that spectrum. I would never call UT Austin a liberal school. Maybe libertarian, but they still have their own problems. They still have a lot of discrimination and violence and hatred that happens and they're still very open about it so people plug them as liberal, but they're not always. But we're certainly not as liberal as their perception is and I think that will change. I think this administration is starting to push things to be more open and so I think the student body will start to reflect that diversity over time and you'll see the mentality

and the change. I think, also, what's changed is the generation. You know, I came in the beginning of the millennials and my generation was really the first, the start, of being way more open about gender and sexuality that there was sort of a cultural backlash from the Generation X and then the Baby Boomers. So we still had to fight them and we weren't yet in a numerical majority to do so, say, politically. But now, you have millennials starting to take over because we're reaching the age of which you can qualify to run for office on a federal level and then now, you have this generation behind us that is much more out and proud at a much earlier age than we were. You know, coming out at eighteen was rare for millennials, like I did, officially, but now, you hear kids coming out at like twelve and fourteen and you're just—you know, and there were no gay student groups in high schools when I was going through high school and now, there are, and that seems more common and people don't really question those sort of things anymore. So I think those sorts of very symbolic changes will continue to occur and I think people who live here now will look back on Lubbock and just like I do, from 2002, and go, "Wow. This place has just changed so much in a short amount of time." And yet, to others, who are probably going to be students here in fifty years will go, "Oh, God. I wish we had this and I wish we had that." I think there will always be that aspect of it.

ES:

Well I think it's amazing how you're able to track these changes and see all of this and articulate it so well. So it is eleven o'clock on the dot so we fit in the perfect time frame. So thank you so much for talking to us and I'm going to shut this off now.

End of Recording