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SPEAKERS

Vince Lee, Brian Riedel



Vince Lee 00:04

All right. My name is Vince Lee, and I'm the archivist for the University of Houston Libraries, Special Collections, LGBT History Research Collections. Today is Monday, June 21 2021. And I'm pleased to be joined by Dr. Brian Riedel of Rice University. And, Brian, I just wanted to take this opportunity. And thank you for joining me in this interview, that I know it's going to be part of our collaborative exhibit in partnership with Houston arch and also at the Cushing Memorial Library at Texas A&M University. Thank you for joining me today, Brian.



Brian Riedel 00:48

Thank you. It's a real honor and pleasure to be part of this collaboration.



Vince Lee 00:53

As as it is with us, and also our fellow members of orange. For our audience, and our viewers out there. Could you please reintroduce yourself and tell us about your role at Rice University, and also with the Houston ARCH Oral Histories Project?



01:16

Great. So again, my name is Brian Riedel. I am an associate director at the Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality at Rice. And one of the projects that our center does to contribute to Houston ARCH is the Houston ARCH Summer Oral History internship and a academic year Oral History Program that takes place through the Introduction to LGBT Studies. In both of these cases, undergraduates work with Houston community members to collect their oral histories about their contributions to Houston's LGBT communities writ large, not limited to the city limits of Houston, but expansively to Harris County, the contiguous counties, Texas and beyond.

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Vince Lee 02:13

So it sounds to me like it's the project is very much, I guess, student run in terms of identifying potential candidates within the community, to interview and also do research upon and in working with you is part of a course curriculum or practicum.

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Brian Riedel 02:41

It's a very collaborative thing. Yes, that's the the long list of potential interviewees is something that I have taken time to cultivate of people who I've reached out to and gotten their consent to be on that list. And then the students exercise choice within that list about whom they would like to interview, whether it is as collective teams during the school year, more as individual paid interns over the summer. So it is a collaborative process at that point. But the students have a huge role in figuring out what is publicly available about any given person. What kinds of questions might be interesting to ask pieces of that person's history that are not as visible in the public record, perhaps, or things about that person where the public record is thin. But it sounds like that would be an important story to be preserved for the greater LGBTQ community.

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Vince Lee 03:53

Great, and I'm happy to hear that a lot of the students have a choice, because then realize that there may be certain topics or individuals or areas that you're very passionate about in terms of pursuing that and for the project.

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Brian Riedel 04:06

Absolutely. And when students have a person that they would like to recommend, who is not already on the list, we also encourage that and there's a process of making sure that that individual is given all the information that they need to consent to an oral history collection before the students engage

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Vince Lee 04:27

them. And besides yourself, and the students, is there anyone else that's involved with the Houston Natural Histories project?

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Brian Riedel 04:38

Very much so. It isn't just that the students and I collaborate to pick people and they collect the information. We do this with the collaboration of the Woodson Research Center, the archival arm of Mondrian library at Rice, so that given the consent of both the interviewee and the students, those oral histories can go on permanent record for the greater good of Houston's LGBT communities, future researchers and other projects

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Vince Lee 05:11

and delving into the history of the Houston Archibald oral histories project. Can you tell us a little bit about when you may have been started and right, the purpose of why it was started?

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05:22

Yeah. So the oral history collection process actually began before Houston ARCH came to be. We started that process in 2007. And about two years later, the Houston ARCH collective came together. And I know that you and Sandy Thompson had been crucial in documenting that history and making it available than the scholarship. So part of what the oral histories have done is from the beginning been one way that the center has contributed to that larger project to preserving Houston's LGBTQ history that was the mission of Houston ARCH. But even before Houston ARCH, the idea for the oral history project was to give the students connective tissue into how social justice movements and activism actually work on the ground is one thing to read about how social change happens in an essay, or a newspaper article or a textbook, it's another to be able to be in conversation with someone who has helped make that change happen. So you could read about the creation of Hatch, or you could meet the person who helps to run it, you could read about the creation of the lesbian health initiative and larger lesbian health issues. Or you could talk to the people who volunteer on the board or serve as the CEO, and really get a sense of what it's like and the the questions and problems that face every day social justice work from an upfront perspective. And it's also a project of intergenerational understanding, because in that way, all of the ongoing projects in Houston benefit from a new generation of people who get excited about them and can get involved.

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Vince Lee 07:24

Sounds like a very transformative experience for the students involved. As you mentioned, it's not just reading about it or being taking a passive role but a very active role in documenting the history. What sorts of oral histories can folks expect to find in the collection, I would imagine you all delve into various topics and areas within the LGBTQ community.

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Sure, it is as broad as the community itself. In Age, the interviews range from people in their 20s at the time of the interview to people in their 70s. In terms of demographics, we intentionally make sure that the shortlist from which students get to select, there is an intersectional representation of all of who Houston is, so that not only can students find people who might look like them, and thus see a role model within the community. But to make sure that we do not replicate any of the problematic archival practices of the past, where only certain kinds of people's history is available in an archive because they are collecting people who look like themselves. We don't want a white LGBT archive in Houston. We want a completely representative archive and Houston.

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Vince Lee 09:00

And that sounds I guess, kind of the thought process I guess we were talking about before is the kind of document the world around us it's very complex, and it has many voices and perspectives and colors, as we would say, as as well represented.

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09:20

And then up representing all sorts of different organizations as well, from things that people know very well, like the Montreux center, to organizations that people might not have heard of, but have a deep impact in Houston. Like the Truth project, an organization that through arts and performance helps Black LGBTQ community not only see itself and in their own mission statement heal themselves, but presents the full complexity of Black queer experience to audiences who do not themselves identify as Black or queer

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Vince Lee 10:01

Great. Are there particular oral histories that you could tell us about or that were memorable, either for yourself or for your students when they were conducting those particular oral histories?

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Sure. One of them is with Dalton Hart, who, if you have not met or heard of Dalton to heart and Houston's community, you will eventually if you talk to more than one person, because he touches so many people's lives, he photographs, almost every single event socially that happens. And I don't know exactly how he's still able to do that. It's like there's five of him, and they just materialize across Houston, wherever there's a community event. The students who chose to interview him, followed him, they went to some of the events and photographed him photographing other people, which is kind of a rare event, actually. And so Dalton was himself really touched by that. And in the interview with him, it was really just heartwarming to see the kind of connection that developed between the students and him because they got to see him doing what he does. And they built that into the video oral history that they did with him. That was a particularly impressive one.

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Vince Lee 11:25

And yes, Dalton is has been a very long time, photographer, chronicler of the community, and its people and events. And yeah, that's a fresh perspective in terms of documenting photographer in action within, I guess, the field as he's doing his craft or work as we speak.

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11:48

Yeah, yeah. And it almost feels a bit of a sin to pick one out of all of the different oral histories that the students have done. There are more than 140 oral histories that have been collected since 2007. So by all means, the full list is far more than just Dalton. Some of the other ones

that I'm particularly fond of personally include one with Harrison Guy, where he's able to reflect on what it means and and this was just in the preface to the murder of George Floyd to be thinking about the role of race and sexuality in art, and how to be in that space. And it only gains more meaning over time. So I find that the the true beauty of the oral history project is that the stories that the students collect have an enduring value, that only becomes deeper as we move forward.

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Vince Lee 12:58

That's powerful. And especially during these times in which the country is wrestling with its own personal identity and where we are and how we treat others. And I know you touched on this a little bit before, but what's the process for identifying potential candidates and interviewees? Is this a discussion or process between yourself and the students? And perhaps the interviewees? Or how does that work?

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13:30

So when it's a pedagogic project in the classroom, I prefer to have the short list work with people who have already consented to the process, and for whom there is some level of discoverable public record. Part of what the students are learning how to do is to be critical consumers of media, critical consumers of publicly available information, to know how to sift through, here's a credible source that has taken time to vet its work or has a system that backs it up, right, versus something that might be a less vetted presentation. And also to think about what it means to look to work that has been put out by the person themselves, a Facebook feed a LinkedIn profile, for example, versus material presented about them by others. So what I want in a classroom setting and in the internship setting is to be able to have a conversation about what those different kinds of representation mean, for queer community in the present day to imagine 100 years ago, putting a version of oneself in a public space that anybody could see that contained information about sexual being is a very different social world. than the one in which we live today, where someone can see on a Facebook feed images from same sex weddings or images of someone announcing that they are about to go for a transition surgery of some kind. These kinds of socially available facts are new in a really powerful way, culturally, at least within the last 2030 years. And so to consider that, as a student in the act of then we presenting that person's life to say these are images that someone curated of themselves. And here is a representation that somebody else curated, how do we think the two together, and then talk with that person about that? That's a really powerful experience for the students to think about in terms of how do identity politics work? What do we mean by respectability politics? How do we think about visibility as a political term in and of itself? Who can be visible? And in what ways, right? So the process of how the students move into picking people is modified in that way, I want them to have that rich experience, because it also helps them understand how the same processes are at work in their own lives.

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Vince Lee 16:24

Yes, I, even now, I realized that with the advent of technology, and the various mediums that are available, and the types of content and things that folks put out, that may be very personal in nature, or even intimate nature, that that's a rich source for students to kind of interact and

pull from, in conjunction with doing all history with these individuals or folks from the community.



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And it also acts as a springboard into ethics, who has the right and the power to represent another person? And in what way so that the oral histories they collect, do not become forms of exploitation, appropriation or yellow journalism, right? The idea is that these living people have a role in their own presentation. So the students have a reciprocal relationship with the people whose oral histories they're collecting, to share the interview transcripts with the person to share, here's the version of the video that we made out of the longer interview that we did, what do you think, and that kind of responsibility, that kind of transparency of process so that the people whose histories are being preserved, have control. That's also one of the important lessons of the



Vince Lee 18:02

process. Thank you for touching on those points. And you had mentioned earlier that you thus far, you have about 140 oral histories that have been done for the Houston ARCH Project, either current or future projects that we can expect or things that you're you and your students are contemplating. On in terms of oral histories.



Brian Riedel 18:32

Yeah, it is an ongoing project. And part of the beauty of Houston is that new people are coming to Houston all the time, new organizations are being formed as new needs emerge and old needs get rearranged and reconfigured. So I don't think that the oral history project will be going away anytime soon. It has a kind of pattern to it, where it feeds itself in some ways as the students meet people and bring them in as we hit the center and meet new people in Houston. And it it will shift and change just as our community does. So I just look forward to doing more oral histories with the students help and the generosity of the community and giving of itself.



Vince Lee 19:25

Who would you say uses the oral histories and why?



Brian Riedel 19:29

That's a really great question. The Woodson Research Center has tracking data on requests for the different collections that are held. And I've been part of some of how the collections have been used by other people in some very interesting ways. So I know that not only students here, in my classes and through the internship take advantage of that existing archive not only as exemplars but as data toward the projects that they're doing themselves. Uh, but students in other universities have been taking advantage of that as well. There's colleagues at the

University of Houston downtown who have brought their classes into the Woodson to look at collections like the Houston art collection, for example. And beyond that individual researchers have also taken advantage of those. I do not have a named list of people, I believe that might be a confidentiality breach. But nonetheless, I do hear that there is some traffic to them. Perhaps we could do a little bit more work to see exactly what that traffic looks like.

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Vince Lee 20:35

And for our viewers out there, how can we access no histories? And are they available to the general public?

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So library.rice.edu will take anybody to the search portal for all of the collections that the library has public or special collections. You could also put into your favorite search engine, Houston, ARCH, Woodson Research Center, and that would take you into their database as well. There's also links available on the Center's website CSW gs.rice.edu. And of course, people can also reach out to the Woodson Research Center directly and ask for the collection.

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Vince Lee 21:23

Great, I'm sure our viewers and folks that are just hearing about the Houston ARCH Oral Histories Project will be happy with that information as to how to go about accessing those oral history recordings. Is there anything else Brian that you'd like to talk about or cover that we didn't necessarily have a chance to, during the course of the interview?

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I do have one final parting thought. Just because you yourself might not think that you are significant in the course of history does not mean that that's true. Everyone's story has a place. And I believe that having a full representation of LGBTQ life includes not looking just at people like a nice Parker, just to people like Elton John, it includes looking at people who form the everyday structure of life. So if you would be interested in being interviewed, we are always welcoming suggestions, nominations, self nominations, including

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Vince Lee 22:38

thanks for mentioning that there seems to be a sea change in seashell, even within an archival profession in terms of not only documenting and collecting materials from the rich, the powerful, the prominent, but also the everyday to get that fuller, richer, I would think story that captures society in general. And the things that even though initially we may think of as mundane, they have more stories that capture additional stories that come from those mundane activities that would otherwise be missed or glossed over if we were just to focus on those that are prominent.



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Couldn't have said it better.



Vince Lee 23:27

Well, Brian, I really thank you for your time again, in taking the time in your schedule today to be a part of this interview. And for our viewers out there, I encourage you to reach out to Dr. Brian Riedel at Rice University, in terms of additional oral histories or stories that you may have to contribute in which they are trying to document within Houston's LGBTQ community. And Brian, thanks again for this and I look forward to working with you on future projects and also with this upcoming exhibit at the Cushing Memorial Library. Thank you.



Brian Riedel 24:06

Thank you, Vince.