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University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Interviewer:	Hannah DeRousselle
Transcriber:	Michelle Kokes
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Abstract:

Jack Valinski, one of the three founders of Pride Houston along with Carol Clark and Brian Keever, did not live in Houston while the Houston Pride Parade was getting starting in the late 1970s. Mr. Valinski moved to Houston in 1981, and beginning in 1982, he became increasing involved in Houston's LGBT community, which eventually led to his co-founding Pride Houston. Mr. Valinski spent twenty-five years working in the Pride Parade, only retiring in 2008. Over those years, the Pride Parade evolved into a night parade, a process in which Jack Valinski played a large role.

Pride Houston's open policy helped keep the obstacles facing the Pride Parade low in number. Great efforts continue to make the Pride Parade largely a community project. In fact, the community controls a great deal of what Pride Houston does. The parade, open to everyone and anyone, showcases just how diverse the Houston LGBT community is. Further, the Pride Parade helps educate people about the LGBT community and proves that the LGBT community is a part of Houston and the diversity of the city.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Jack Valinski

Interviewed by: **Hannah DeRousselle**
Date: **March 10th 2014**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **KPFT Radio Studios**

HD: This is Hannah DeRousselle interviewing Jack Valinski at, on March 10th 2014 at eight o'clock pm. I thought we'd maybe start with some biblio, oh I keep saying that, biographical questions. Where were you born at?

JV: I grew, was born in northeastern Pennsylvania near Scranton, Pennsylvania.

HD: And where did you go to school at?

JV: Well, I went to a small high school and then I went to a small junior college, and I'm a graduate of Syracuse University.

HD: Ah. Can I ask like who was, who were your parents? Or who are your parents?

JV: Well my father's deceased. His name was John Valinski, and my mother's name is Ann Valinski. She's still living.

HD: So when did you move to Houston?

JV: I moved here in 1981, and it just happened to be the election day of Kathy Whitmire, by coincidence.

HD: And may I ask? Are you married by any chance?

JV: No, I'm not married.

HD: No. Okay. So how did you get in, I got that you were, you are a member of the LG, the Houston Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Political Caucus. How did you get involved with that?

JV: Well, the strange thing is that I came to Houston to work at a commercial radio station. I was an engineer. It was owned by ABC, at that time the biggest company in radio. I was sort of in the process of coming out and as I was working professionally at that station I started to tune into KPFT, and I heard this show at that time called "Walden's Time" and I thought it was a pretty good show except that technically it wasn't very good. People were off microphone, you couldn't hear them half the time, the quality was pretty bad. So in the spring of 1982, I called Ray Hill who was in charge of the show at the time, and I said, "I'm interested in volunteering." So I showed up here, at the studios, and for about three or four weeks I pretty much just sat and did nothing because I don't think he knew who I was or what was going to go on and this was a generation ago so things were different back then.

HD: Yeah.

JV: So slowly, I started getting more involved and my only purpose was to run the control board, the mixing board, but as time went on I got more and more involved and I got involved in actually being on the air, something I had never expected or wanted, and the frequent guests at that time were people who were doing the Pride Parade and who were part of the caucus. So I started going to the caucus meetings and I got involved in the caucus, I got on the board of the caucus. The Pride Committee at that time, the Pride Parade was sort of a sub-set of the caucus. You know the joke back then was there's five activists in the community, and we kept trading hats?

HD: Yeah.

JV: Well, that's sort of what happened. The parade was something that sort of sprung up like in March or April, and then they raised the money, put on the parade, and then the committee would sort of just disappear after June. So I got more and more involved in both the caucus and the parade. and the parade was on a Sunday afternoon, and here in June it's really hot. The reason why the parade was in June on a Sunday was because that commemorated Stonewall. Stonewall happened at the end of June in New York. Other cities had done things like move it around so we kept doing the parade, and I helped bring it into a nonprofit. I'm actually the one that took the parade from that committee to what's called the Pride Committee or Pride Houston, which is a nonprofit organization, in the early 90s. And so the parade kept going on. We just realized that we had to do something, you know, because we went through the AIDS period, the really tough AIDS period where people were dying so quickly, and it was really hot out there on a Sunday afternoon, that we in 1995, we did this community survey, tried to talk to as many people as possible, and we sort of gave people four choices: let's move it to the spring, let's move it to the fall, let's keep it where it is, or let's do something completely crazy and do a night parade. And as we went around and talked to people and stuff like that, it pretty much came down to like one vote, and I made the deciding vote to say, "Okay, let's do this night parade." The problem with doing something in the spring and fall in Houston is that there's so many other things going on because that's when our best weather is. We wanted to keep it in that traditional weekend and for most parts people were pretty happy about it except for maybe a couple bar owners were not that crazy about it because they thought they'd lose business. They thought they had this great Saturday evening, the parade was on Sunday afternoon, you know they thought having it on a Saturday night would really cut into their business. What had happened though is by having it on a Saturday night we brought them business for the whole weekend, and

we brought people in from all around the outside metropolitan area came to Houston. And very few people come to Houston as tourists in the middle of June, but we sort of proved that we could do that. And it was a struggle for many years to raise money and put it, you know, put this thing together, but by making this night parade it had really sort of put Houston on the map compared to New York or West Hollywood or San Francisco or Chicago that had these humungous parades. So I was lucky enough to find a lot of good hardworking people that helped organize this, and one of the things I really felt that we did very well is we kept the whole process open. We had public meetings the same time every month. It was at a city building. It was accessible so that anybody in the community who wanted to address us, or had any concerns or problems, they were able to do that. And we sort of grew the parade over the years by doing a number of things. The first two years of the night parade which was 1997, because 1995 we decided that we're going do it, we sold it in 1996, and we did it in 1997, the night parade. And for the first two years it actually had to be, the length had to be smaller because of a city ordinance. And back then Annise Parker was on council, she helped work behind the scenes to change the ordinance so that we could have it at the original route. And it was sort of a magical day, the first night parade, because the sun was setting and the floats were lighting up, and it was just incredible. One of our real concerns was safety, you know. What if there's an attack at night? Luckily that never happened and slowly the parade started moving, but the interesting part is I'm really proud of how this organically grew to the night parade. First of all, there was four of us in the community (including me) that sat around at my kitchen table and we talked about what were some of the problems if we were going to do this and we talked about insurance and security and all this type of stuff. So a person named Lee Harrington, who sort of was known to, like back then before we had email and stuff like that, would call you up around 10

o'clock at night and leave you a five minute message and say, "You ought to do this. You ought to do this. You ought to do this. You ought to do this," and say, "Can you help, and I'll do this?" But Lee wanted this night parade so badly that he worked so hard to find out what our problems were. So after we got the parade started, Lee was not, still was not happy. He says, and we got a lot of the ideas from Sydney, Australia, because their parade was at night, and there was no other parade that we know of, Pride Parade, that was at night and it was really sort of like a Mardi Gras parade where we threw beads and, you know, people just had wonderful fun. So Lee says, "We're really missing sort of a centerpiece." So, he sort of worked unofficially outside the committee, and he kept calling all these advertising agencies, and finally he sort of got somebody who was interested in helping finance this eight-and-a-half foot disco ball, and this disco ball was erected at the corner of Montrose and Westheimer, and we had these lights shining on it. It was like, you know, like for two blocks around you could see these lights shining that we're all like in a disco party. And the person who seemed to be interested in helping us finance this was Mattress Mack. And for two years he gave us a very generous donation, and it was so interesting and I, you know, what I really loved about all these years that I was involved is we had these, and you know Lee is just one example of sort of somebody working on the side, didn't like to go to meetings, wasn't with the structure type of thing, but I had a lot of these people who would show up and say, "This is what I want to do, can I do it?" There's a gentleman that used to show up the week of the parade and had maybe twenty-four bottles of water and all he wanted was to volunteer, and he wanted to give out those bottles to volunteers. You know, it didn't really make that much of a difference to the parade, but for him it was very, very important. And you know, there was a lot of concern about the parade for many years about the leather community or drag queens or this or that or that could be in the

parade, and I always tried to make it as open as possible because that's our community. Our community's all these different parts that made it up. So we tried, as long as they weren't breaking the law in anything or, you know, going out nude which was against the law, that we were as encompassing of a parade. But then we also, every year we seemed to have a different barrier. We were probably one of the last cities to have, major cities to have our mayor in the parade. One year, this was two mayors before the present mayor, when Lee Brown says, "I'd love to be in the parade," of course we opened up our arms. The first year the fire department was in the parade and what was so great is that they, when the passed the grandstand, which was in front of near where Half Price Books is, the Tower Theater, people would just get up and scream because we did this, and one year you know we had a call from a straight gay alliance and we also had this really, sort of, we also did a whole bunch of traditions in the parade with the volunteers and the community and stuff like that. One of the things was a mandatory parade meeting that we used to have like in early, I think it was in early June and that was not only that, "Okay, everybody knows the rules," but it was also a way that we sort of like pumped up what we were going to do. What's new and what's different and that you're all part of this. One of the things that Ray Hill, who, you know you look up Ray Hill's name, he's been a founder of this community in so many ways. Ray Hill used to go around to every entry before the parade started and thank them for being in the parade, warn them about maybe there was going be some protestors but let's just ignore them because we're not going change their mind, and I sort of took over the role for doing that, and I as worked for a city council person and went to other parades in the city, that never happens. Nobody every thanked you for being in the parade and especially young people that were, maybe this was their first parade. So I sort of inherited, and unofficially I still do that even though I'm not part of the committee anymore. But there were so

many other traditions we used to do. Before we started doing the festival, we used to have this lunch at noon before the day of the parade because we're out there all day long. I mean, we start at like at 6:30 in the morning, the parade would start like at 9 o'clock at night and we're out there, you know, setting things up, getting everything ready and stuff like that. We used to have this lunch for all the volunteers at noon, and we used to call it the last supper, and part of that thing was, okay we gathered everybody here together, people are tired, they're sweating, they are all this, but then we'd bring in like a speaker who talked about it what it was like in the old days. So all of this stuff added to how we could make this better, and this night parade really put Houston on the map as having a major Pride celebration. We did a couple informal surveys and asked people where they're from, and we found out that up to about thirty percent of the people came from outside the metropolitan area, which we never even knew or thought about because we, you know, this was a Houston parade. So we did all that type of stuff, we opened up the Grand Marshall voting so that it was done by the public not a committee. We really try to work with other people in the community like I said, the police force or the fire department that were all part of it, the mayor being in the parade. One year we were actually broadcast live on a cable television channel, and it was this thing that everybody is, you know, everybody who's in the parade, who volunteered, were all part of the success of the parade. It wasn't just a closed committee. It was an open thing that we did our best to keep it open, and you know it cost a lot of money to do this, you know, to do it, to get the permits, get the insurance, to be able to do it right having the parade always started on time, we made sure of that, and we were very happy with the politicians that were in the parade. So we really did our best to make this like this really community event that everybody is interested in.

HD: Um, when founding Pride Houston and making the parade official I guess you could say, did, were there any kinds of obstacles you had to . . . ?

JV: No, there wasn't, and this was sort of really interesting. You know like I said, sometimes we had a protestor show up for the parade. You know it was like five people that would show up and there's a hundred and fifty thousand people, you know, cheering on the parade, and there's five people that are objecting to it. We really worked, and one of our concerns always was that, you know, this is a parade in a neighborhood. It's not downtown where there's things on a night or morning where things aren't going on. Westheimer's a vibrant street on a Saturday night, and once a year we closed it down for this parade, and a lot of businesses, you know, they suffered from that. Well, we did our best to make sure that these businesses knew when the parade was, tried to work with them any way possible if they can bring people in from the back way for their parking lots. And the one thing that we really did, and in the early days we used to do it ourselves, when the parade was over and we got up at like five o'clock in the morning to clean that street out. Luckily, later on we were able to afford a professional company that did it, but basically we wanted to make sure that the street was cleaner than when I started for it. The other interesting thing is that when the parade lines up near the school there, that's a residential area and it was difficult for some of those people that lived there to be able to get in and get out. We did everything we can to make sure that we only use one side of the street, we weren't blocking their driveways and we wanted to make sure that this was, that they have a good time. There's sort of a tradition out there that, you know a lot of these people have families, young kids and they would be out there watching the floats being built all day long and then when it came time for the parade to start, they're in their yards watching this parade, you know, assemble and be put together and they had a good time. We had, you know because we kept this open policy of

listening to people's concerns and trying to do our best with them, we had very little obstacles. We used to deal with the cops every year, and I know in the early years there was concern because basically Pride is a protest against the cops, but here in Houston as we got more professional we worked with them, we had a really good relationship with the police department, with the traffic and transportation departments and so we tried to do as best we can to make it work and make it as easy for them as possible.

HD: Just to clarify, the neighborhood it started, was, that's Montrose, right?

JV: Yes, and the parade goes along lower Westheimer, and it's all of Montrose.

HD: So basically there, there was some protesting during the parade but not all that significant.

JV: No, it was very insignificant.

HD: Okay, because I remember reading about how there was a time when there, like the police would raid bars . . . .

JV: Yes, and that was before, it was pretty much, it happened a few years when I started getting involved, and the police used to raid the bars either around election time or around Pride, and for a couple of years in the early years we use to have the annual Raid on Mary's event. Mary's is one of bars that was in the community for a long, long time, and so we just made an event and they do that. The strange thing is when the police would raid the bars, it got us more publicity. Same thing with elections. More people came out and voted when the bars were raided because they, you know, they felt they had a concern there. So yeah, that was part of it, but that was also vice that did it. It wasn't the regular, you know, the regular police. And not to say that we didn't have discrimination by police over the many years, but for the parade for the most part as time went on it was, you know, they had fun. They'd be out there on their horse,

they'd be out there on the bicycles and they, you know because we, we had a very well-controlled crowd. I mean, people were screaming and yelling for the beads but overall were having a good time.

HD: So what sorts of groups or organizations, people participate in the parade?

JV: Every group we could imagine, and not every group was in it every year because it costs money. You know a float is expensive and not everyone could afford it. We also used to put on workshops for people to come up with some ideas to put up their floats together, but this was a, this was the biggest LGBT community event every year, and we knew that so we really wanted to showcase as many organizations as many as possible and it wasn't just, it wasn't just LGBT groups. I mean, Chase Bank was in our parade many years and you know PFLAG, but some of the major corporations in the city, either their gay employee groups or just them because they saw this as a good opportunity, you know, and they were sponsors and so it really helped bridge the educational gap. You know Houston very much was a redneck city, and if you look in the history you will see that in 1984 we passed a nondiscrimination ordinance by one vote at city council for nondiscrimination of city employees only. That was in June. A few weeks later there was a petition drive to take it, to take it to the ballot so they could repeal it. In January 1985, that thing lost eighty-one percent to nineteen. That's what a good ol' boy city this was, and I'm not saying everything is wonderful now, but it's certainly come a long way that we have, you know, still do not have a nondiscrimination ordinance in the city, but we have seen a lot of major corporations that are here, except for Exxon Mobil, have nondiscrimination. Some of them have domestic partner benefits so it's, you know the education got there. We also during my era was, is that there was one year that it was really tough because so many people were sick with HIV and AIDS that we asked all the major players, "Don't do a float, put your money, you

know, donate to people with AIDS," and we did our best to try to like, this is a celebration for our community that, and you know, sometimes you hear stories about these families, elderly people who will make it through a Christmas holidays. There are stories where there are, there were gay men that would make it through Pride and then in July they'd pass on. And yeah, but it was, that's how important it was to a lot of people that this was our celebration.

HD: So how are participants chosen? Like you said, mentioned, there's money towards it, but there, I've seen everywhere I look it's, they're called entries, like they're judged.

JV: Yeah, well basically the parade was open to everybody, and we used to always have this fight, "I wanna be first. I don't want to be in back of the parade." So what we used to do, and this is something I developed, that at midnight on the first of the year the applications originally would be, we would accept them and then as the internet came along we would then post the forms, the people could be, you know, be in the parade. And I got, I had people calling me on New Year's Eve saying, "When is it gonna be up! When is it gonna be up?" And there were people that would rush to get that first one in there, so we pretty much lined up the parade the way the entries got in, and it was open to everybody. And you know we had certain rules that you had to follow and it is, the Supreme Court ruled that we could reject anybody we didn't want to be in the parade and how that has happened is that some St. Patrick's Day Parades that do not allow the GLBT entries in it and they fought that the Supreme Court and basically the Supreme Court ruled that a private organizer of a parade has the right to refuse anybody. Now we tried not to refuse anybody. Luckily we never had somebody like the Klan wanting to come into the parade, and you know in the '80s the Klan did march down Westheimer when Lee Brown was our police chief, but it had nothing to do with Pride.

HD: How were the themes chosen? There's one, a different one every year, correct?

JV: There's a different one every year. There's an organization called InterPride which is the um, the, I think the official name was the International Association of GLBT Parade Coordinator, and they have a conference once a year, and they vote on what they would hope would be a worldwide theme. Many years we went along with it and some years we didn't go along with it, but basically it was the committee that voted on this. It was the, we set up this system that if you showed up for two meetings at the beginning of the year you became a member, and as long as you didn't miss two meetings from there on, you were a voting member. So pretty much the community controlled what Pride did. The board of directors basically made sure that we were financially sound, we were, you know, we kept all of our, we were legal in all the things we did, all that stuff legally, and unless it was something against our charter, we pretty much allowed the community to choose a lot of things.

HD: Um, so are the participants, are they required to stick to the thing or is that just kind of optional?

JV: No they're, it's optional. They can do anything they want as long as it is, you know, they keep with the legal rules of the parade.

HD: Ah. So I heard, you mentioned Mardi Gras, and I did notice when looking at pictures from the parade that there's, it does have a very Mardi Gras feel. Was that, so is that deliberate?

JV: Well, when the parade became a night parade and the floats lit up, it just seemed natural that we would have the beads and we would have this theme of Mardi Gras with lit floats and, um, and it was much more, I mean now you can have batteries and LEDs on and make lights, but back then it was a lot more difficult but we did. We had these great lit up floats so it just seemed like a natural thing to do.

HD: And speaking again of the night parade, you, was the surveys the only way you researched them?

JV: Um, we talk to people all the time. Um, you know, I would, I would have people have comments about things all year around and like I said, we had community meetings, we had the mandatory Pride Parade meeting. So we kept this thing as open as possible to the community and listened to what people wanted.

HD: Okay. Alright, so I read on the Houston ARCH website, I read an article about the very first kind of informal Pride Parade in 1976, and it mentioned there's this quote that stuck out, struck out to me that, "Participants in Houston's first Pride Parade left their footprints on the history, culture, and politics of the city of Houston." And I wanted to ask, what do you think the impact of the Pride Parade is?

JV: Well, from my understanding the first Pride celebration was 1978. The first parade was 1979. That's my understanding. Now there was a, Anita Bryant protest before that. You know, it, it's just this generation where people were out. I mean there, it was very difficult to get people out on the streets, and even though we were a nonprofit organization, the fact that people were marching in the streets was a political act. Ask me that question again?

HD: What do you think the impact of the parade had on history, culture, and politics of Houston?

JV: Well I think it, the Pride Parade's become, I think, pretty much the second largest parade in the city. It's probably the most fun parade. Next to the Rodeo parade, it's the largest. I think we had a great impact in the fact that people learned about who we were. Um, there's a lot of non-gay, GLBT, people that were part of the parade, and they felt comfortable in it. I think that

we helped people be able to feel comfortable about themselves, and I think we helped people understand what type of community we were, we are.

HD: Alright, so and if the Pride Parade had like, was, if you could say the Pride Parade was making a statement, a message, trying to send out a message to Houston and its people, what do you think that message would be?

JV: Well, I think the Pride Parade proves that we have a part of the city, that we're part of the diversity of the city. That we are like any other parade except that we're probably more fun. You know, we see it with the people coming out. We see it now that it is, you know, it is a big, big thing that is on the news at night every year, it's in the paper so that people get to know about it and see about it and understand what kind of community we are.

HD: Alright, so this is kind of a general question. Could you describe what the parade is, like are there marching bands, or how many floats there are?

JV: Well there, when I was part of it, and I haven't been part of Pride for probably about six years, we generally had more than a hundred entries. We generally had everything from, you know, we didn't really have a lot of children's bands from school but we had our own, you know a band from the community. We had everything, and every year it changed a little bit. We've had commercial entries, we had community organizations, we had the PFLAG group, we had the LOAF (Lesbians Over Age Fifty), we had the organizations like the Montrose Counseling Center, the Montrose Clinic, now Legacy it's called, the AIDS foundation, um, we had the Democratic Party, we had politicians, we've had the mayor, um, we had this group from Dallas called the Strangerettes were sort of men dressed up as cheerleaders and they were very entertaining. So it was just this cross-section of the community in, you know, leather community, transgender community, everything that is imaginable in this community was part of

this. The bar community; the early days what paid for the parade was the beer companies donated money and t-shirts. As we grew up and it became more expensive to do the parade and we did better things, we had corporations like Chase and some of the major airlines that served Houston were part of our sponsorships, and it's just been a success I think and I don't know if, I don't know, I can't say it still is but I think certainly during that time it really showed what a diverse community we were, are.

HD: Alright, just a, just a verification. Probably a dumb question but, what it, can you tell me what PFLAG stands for?

JV: Parents of Gays and Lesbians, uh, it's a parent's group.

HD: So it's an acronym.

JV: Yes.

HD: Okay. Alright so, and is there anything else you think I should know that I haven't asked?

JV: No. I'm really proud of the, you know, after I had retired and left it, they nominated me as Grand Marshall which I was just absolutely, I would never run as Grand Marshall while I was, you know, a part of the organization but I, that was a really nice effort that they gave me.

HD: Alright. And I think that's about . . . . Oh yeah. One more question. Could you, can I get the names of the other people that helped found Pride Houston?

JV: There are two other people, Carol Clark who is now retired and lives in Florida, and Brian Keefer, and he works at Legacy. There were, the three of us basically sat down and did the paperwork and found the experts to file. However, I'm the longest one that, I spent about twenty-five years working on, in the Parade.

HD: And your motive in the, like y'all's motivation for founding Pride Houston, that was just to like, so there was a separate entity to like help . . . .

JV: It was a structure, it became a nonprofit group, but we were able to accept donations. We were also very much an educational group of, to let people in the community know about gay lesbian people, transgender people.

HD: Okay. Alright. I think that's about it.

JV: Okay.

End of interview.