

Interviewee: Bell, Deborah

Interview Date: July 29, 2010

University of Houston
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GLBT History

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Abstract:

This interview with Deborah Bell, a longtime feminist and GLBT activist, highlights these two movements in Texas as part of a broader Civil Rights movement. She recounts the context in which she gradually became more and more involved with the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the 1970s, eventually becoming the President of the state chapter. Bell then recalls her “coming out” in the 1980s. Her prior experiences of activism within NOW would reflect her position in the gay community of Houston, where she quickly embraced political advocacy, participating in Pride, conferences, even marching in the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Rights and Liberation.

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JG: Today is July the 29th.

DB: 2010.

JG: 2010. I'm interviewing Deborah Bell and we are going to start with biographical information, and let us learn about her childhood and where she was originally born and that kind of information.

DB: Well I was born a poor white child in Birmingham, Alabama in 1950, January 16th. I was the fourth of five children. We lived in a rural area outside of Birmingham called Chalkville. It was the foothills of the Appalachians and that is where my earliest memories are from that time. When I was about four and there were lots of woods and hills and it was really lovely. I come from a working class family. My father was a bricklayer and my mother was a homemaker. We left the Birmingham area and moved to Florida. I'm not sure what order all the states are in but I've lived in Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, New Mexico, and a whole bunch of places in Texas.

I consider Lubbock, Texas my hometown. I was there from the age of seven to the age of fourteen. That's where I had my first sexual experiences with other girls. I had a pretty good childhood all things considered. I talked with lots of other people and I thought that mine was bad, but it wasn't compared to a lot of other people. I developed a love of reading at an early age. I was pretty well rounded as a kid. I played with dolls, loved my babies, always have been a big animal person. I had the best dog in the world, Lucky, who was kind of a Border collie mix. He was like having Lassie. Having that dog was like having Lassie. He would wait for me after school and be there and walk me home. That was pretty special. I had a tree house and I rode my bicycle and roller skated

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which are two things that are really easy to do in Lubbock because it is very flat. I went to the roller rink. I used to be Hell on Wheels, much to my regret that I can't skate now. Mack Davis played the guitar at the roller rink sometimes, which I had no really memory of but you know there's lots of famous people from Lubbock, Buddy Holly, all those... well I call them the Lubbock boys that became the singers like Joe Eli and Butch Hancock and Jimmy Dell Gilmore. We moved to... let's see I've lived in Denton, Bryan College Station, Austin, and Houston. We got to Houston when I was sixteen. I was entering my junior year of high school.

JG: Okay so you said Lubbock until 14 and then you moved around a little bit and Houston at 16.

DB: Actually there were some moves during the time that we were in Lubbock but they were short term and we ended up going back to Lubbock. I... like I said I ended up in... let's see I was in Austin and then that was my sophomore year. Then in Houston I spent my last two years of high school in Houston. I graduated from Madison High in 1968.

JG: Alright!

DB: I was very into drama and little known to me at the time I never even really thought about it. My drama teacher was gay and several of the boys that I hung out with, which I should have been able to figure out but I didn't until later. Throughout my childhood I had a number of male friends that later it turned out were gay. One, that I know from Austin, you know we stay in touch to this day. So, I really didn't date in high school. I had maybe three dates all of high school. Because I read a lot, I was fairly knowledgeable about sex. I would speak matter-of-factly about it because to me, for

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some reason, even though my mother told me after I was married and had children that if you were a woman and liked sex, something was wrong with you (which I thought was very bizarre) but she came from that thing that it was something that women just put up with and frowned upon it apparently.

JG: Because it was strictly for reproduction?

DB: No, not quite that but she just... I guess she didn't care for it or something but she also had come from home, her parents, I don't remember ever sharing a room. They had separate rooms. So the people assumed that since I wasn't dating boys in our high school that I must be dating college boys, and because I spoke knowledgeably about sex that I must be putting out, because if you are dating college boys you're putting out, which wasn't true at all. I, in my early teen years was when I had experiences with other girls, sexually. Although we "played like," we "pretended" that one of us would be the boy and one would be the girl because, you know, it was "practicing." I didn't really think of it as something that was real.

JG: What age would you say?

DB: Probably twelve, thirteen, fourteen. I'm not sure at what point I became aware of homosexuality. I do remember before I was in... well we were in Houston so I must have been sixteen, I read a book about Christine Jorgenson and was very impressed by her story. There had been a few incidences in my childhood where I guess I became aware that there were women who had sex with women and there were men who had sex with men. I just always felt like, "Okay." You know I didn't know why people had issues with it. After high school I had been accepted to college but I ended up not going and a big part of that was a lack of communication in my family because my parents

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never told me they would pay for my college and I was assuming I would have to work and go to school and I did not think I was up to it at the time. I was kind of burned out at school. So I did a number of office jobs and working as a PBX operator.

JG: In Houston?

DB: Yes and at the Holiday Inn at the Astrodome and the Marriott Hotel on Braeswood, which Marriott no longer exists there at that location. Eventually I started working in clubs as a waitress and a dancer. I hung out and started hanging out in Montrose.

JG: So what year would this be? We've moved on...

DB: This would be in '69, '70, '71.

JG: Okay so when you were sixteen and grew up in Houston would be 19...

DB: '66.

JG: '66. Great.

DB: Since I was born in 1950 it's always really easy to figure out.

JG: So now we go to maybe as far as '71 and you were working as a waitress and a dancer in clubs.

DB: Yes. There was a club called The Golden Fleece that was on Old Market Square it was right next to La Carafe. That was fun and I made pretty good money. So I was living in Montrose and I knew several gay people and I got stoned once with Janis Joplin, oh boy big claim to fame there. Later someone said, "You know she was hitting on you." I said, "She was?" I mean I hadn't a clue. Anyway and I had a boyfriend at the time.

JG: When you referred to Montrose as Montrose, did people refer to it as Montrose by then, at that point?

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DB: Yes. It was always considered the Bohemian area and this was well the time of, you know the hippies

JG: Right.

DB: And it was the... because of the clubs in the area and the atmosphere of the area, it was popular among the younger crowd.

JG: But it wasn't strictly gay at that point people weren't thinking of it as gay?

DB: Well Montrose never has been and still isn't. The highest populations of gays and lesbians in Houston if you go by the demographics that have been collected by some of the groups over the years is not Montrose. But it has that view as it being the "gay" area of Houston. Of course that has become more so because a lot of the gay clubs and the community services are located in Montrose. I think it is in part just because we are smart, and its convenient and it's centrally located it is one of the most centrally located areas of Houston short of being right downtown. You know it was one of the early suburbs. You know it's quite lovely. It's got beautiful trees and it's the arts community. I think that's the other reason it started thriving and why the gay and lesbian population kind of flocked to it. The... and at one time when the houses were in disrepair a lot of gays moved in and redecorated and remodeled...

JG: It was affordable early on.

DB: Yeah, it was affordable. Eventually, I met my husband and ironically, kind of, at this coffee shop that is now an Italian restaurant right next door to where we are sitting now at Michael's Outpost on Richmond Avenue. It was a coffee shop named Lancers and since I worked in clubs I would go after work and usually have a breakfast. That is where I met my husband who would go there and drink coffee. That man could drink a

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lot of coffee. I can't drink coffee like that. So you know, I'd be up to 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and then sleep until past noon.

JG: Do you still work close to downtown or Market Square?

DB: Yeah I either work downtown or at clubs in Montrose.

JG: In the Montrose area?

DB: Yes.

JG: And you lived in Montrose?

DB: Yes.

JG: Okay.

DB: Anyway, my husband had grown up in Montrose and just one block from Cherryhurst park. So our first home was in Montrose. It was the time of the... when they first had a Westheimer Street festival and back then it was like crafts people and artists. It didn't become what it later became which was a bunch of people getting drunk and walking around with iguanas...

JG: But it wasn't called The Arts Festival it was called a street festival.

DB: It was called the Westheimer Street Festival but I could be wrong. Really I married at 21 and when I was 22 I had my first child, Jason Robert Bell, and in 1976 I had John Michael Bell. I was married for about 12 years and I was...I had always been, starting in Austin, I had been an anti war activist and a civil rights activist. I always say that if my parents ever knew that I snuck out of the house to go see Dr. Martin Luther King they would have been appalled because they were very prejudiced people but that is something that I did and I actually helped boys go to Canada.

JG: From Houston or from where?

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DB: From Austin and Houston. The first boyfriend that I had in junior high actually was killed in Vietnam so it was... you know it wasn't an organized thing but it was you knew somebody and people would have house parties to raise funds to help people get to Canada and things like that. So, like I said I was married and I had children and I think that I had always been aware that for myself that I had an attraction to both men and women, but I never really thought seriously about living as a lesbian. I kind of had my eyes opened as a homemaker with two small children by watching Phil Donahue. I am hearing all this talk about the equal rights amendment and all this other stuff and that is when I started getting involved in both the feminist movement and the Democratic party and worked to get the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. That was very important to me. I became very active in the National Organization for Women which had a number of thriving chapters in Houston in the early '80's and well what happened was in 1977 I went to the International Women's Year Conference that was held here in Houston. It was a heavy time in Houston because we had Kathy Whitmire for mayor and we had a number of women on city council. That conference just was amazing, really kind of overwhelming in a way. I was not as deeply involved in it as I wish I had been. If I had even known what the structure was. But I remember going there and being excited that there were going to be lesbians there.

JG: Oh you knew so in the 1977 conference is that what you are speaking of?

DB: Yes.

JG: And you knew or felt that they were going to be there? Because wasn't... they weren't openly included that that point were they?

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DB: Yes. Lesbians had been very active in the creation of the conference and working on it because there were a number of lesbians that were feminists. There was a plank on the platform for lesbian rights and that is when I first met Pokey Anderson. It was... now in NOW at one time there had been at one what they called The Lavender Menace, which was the presence of lesbians active in the organization. There had been an active purge of the lesbian membership in the sense of those that were active that people knew were lesbians because people were afraid, because of the prejudices of the time, that if there was this connection to NOW and lesbians that it someone invalidated the efforts of the feminists. Now the reality was that there were lesbians who did not want to be known as lesbians who were closeted and then there were also straight women that were so afraid of being called lesbian. So it was kind of a Catch-22, but at that conference there, and part of it is Betty Friedan, who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* and who was one of the founders of the National Organization for Women, she was the one who brought to and spoke to the lesbian platform at the time and the resolution passed overwhelmingly. So that was really good.

Anyway, from that point on I was very active as a feminist and held a number of offices within NOW. I started a chapter in the Spring Branch Memorial area and then later I've been President of the Houston Chapter and State President. At some point NOW got over the lesbian issue and to me there's... one of the core things about being a feminist is that you are not homophobic and you are pro-choice. I mean those are just two tenants of a women's personal autonomy over her own body and ways she expresses herself sexually and reproductively is... "ain't nobody's business but her own" as far as I'm concerned. And I found that mainly to be true. One of the great things about NOW

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was that it was intergenerational. There were women younger than me; there were women older than me. There were women of all colors, shapes, sizes, and sexual orientations. I mean that was not what was important about a person, that they were willing to speak up for feminism and that they would go out and do the work, that is what was important. I always say that while feminism itself is a theory of [laughter in the background] okay I don't know why they are laughing so much but it must be very funny. You can't be a feminist just on the theory, just because you agree with theory. You have to put the "ist" into it, which means you have to be active, that's what I believe. So you know being an advocate for the rights of all people and doing things... the analogy I always make is that we are like the bumblebee. The bumblebee has wings that are too short, a body that is too heavy and it's not supposed to be able to fly, if you looked at it aerodynamically. The bumblebee doesn't know this so it flies anyway.

JG: Uh huh!

DB: Right? And my name is Deborah so that means the bee in Hebrew so I've always kind of related to that because we had receptions and conferences and events and marches and walk-a-thons and did all these things and we didn't know how to do them we just did them. You know, we learned it on the job. That really empowered me in so many ways that later morphed into the work that I did for pay in the future. And my children were around feminists, and my younger son particularly, we would go to, I would take them with me to meetings and marches and things. I always asked them would they want to go and I would explain to them what it was about. They say they don't have to do any of that now because they did it all when they were younger. But...

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JG: Were they old enough to understand, to get some inkling about what was going on?

DB: I think so. I think they were both pretty aware, the older one in particular although he wasn't around me as much but he did, yeah he's always been pretty intuitive about what... and that's the way I am. Feminism came to me in an intuitive way, not a scholarly way. I read books later. Now I always find it kind of interesting the academic feminism compared to the street activist feminism. Things just would make sense to me, you know that it was like a gut instinct about it. So I, at some point in my marriage, because of issues that had nothing to do with my sexual orientation, because I used to tell people I was a non-practicing bisexual, which meant I was living a heterosexual life. But I... the tenants of my marriage was "no drug and alcohol abuse and no other people" well because of my husband's alcoholism he had broken that tenant and our marriage was beginning to fail. I did leave him at one time and then came back but my oldest son was around 11 (I think, he may have been a little bit older) and my younger son was 5 or 6 and I had started being around lesbians through being involved in NOW and some of my good friends were lesbians and I started going to some of the clubs and different events and I was very aware of my attraction to women, but I didn't feel like I should act on it because I was married. But, and maybe it was just a justification in my own mind but at some point I did have an affair with another women, who was also married, and then I knew from then on that I probably would be with women.

So, eventually I left the marriage throughout the time following my ex-husband and I both had our children, we never had a big custody fight or anything and he was actually... he dealt better than some men over me coming out. My oldest son who is an

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artist was kind of close to the woman I came out with because she was an art teacher. So I told him early on and he was just, he was funny he said, "Well okay, but don't tell me dad's home and dad comes in wearing a skirt" which I never did quite figure out what he meant by that. But after that he and I never really talked about it very much. Then the younger one, I remember one time we were going to a NOW meeting and he saw some friends of ours and I said, "Oh there's Gail and Michelle." He says, "Oh, they're gay!" I said, "What?" He said, "They're gay!" I said, "What does gay mean?" He said, "Well, that's when two men love each other or two women love each other." I said, "Well, that's right." So later I found out that he got that from his older brother but at the time I just thought, "My God, how could this little 5 year old saying something like this." But because my kids were around diverse people and later when I worked at Bering and worked with the support group with the people with AIDS, my younger son would come, like on days he was off from school, he would come to work with me and he would go over to the care center and play games with the guys that were there and he... so he knew people living with AIDS and who died from AIDS. So both of my sons probably knew more about sex then they wanted to know but to this day I think that's a really good thing because, for one thing, when Jason, the older one was in high school and I tried to have "a talk" with him. He said, "Mom, I'm not ready for that." So he was aware that he was not ready to be sexual and I thought that was really, really good. I think they are probably very responsible as men. I don't have any grandchildren that I know of. So that's good. They certainly know the dangers of not practicing safe sex.

So, I had several short-term relationships with women and eventually entered into a long-term relationship. That relationship was on and off for like seven years and at one

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point I went away to well... I almost in the time I came out I was an activist in the GLBT community. One of the first things I started doing was the Wild and Stein radio program on KPFT, which later became Lesbian and Gay Voices and then later became Queer Voices, which is the name it has to this date with Jack Belinsky.

JG: Wild and Stein was also the book store?

DB: Right Wild for Oscar Wild and Stein for Gertrude Stein. The side of that bookstore is where the HPD storefront is on Westheimer now. I became involved in several GLBT organizations most prominently the political caucus and what was then called Gay Pride and I worked actively to get the word lesbian included in both the political caucus and in Pride and the reasoning behind that, because a lot of people will say, "Well it's divisive" and I go, "No it's inclusive because of when people say 'gay' most often they think of male and if you say lesbian there is no doubt you are talking about women." Now there are lesbians that don't like the word lesbian. I should say women who partner with women who don't like that word and I always thought that was absurd because of the history of the poet Sappho who had relations with women and lived on the Greek island of Lesbos and that's where the name came from. So we... but I've learned to say gay and lesbian people and that way it is more inclusive in those terms. Now I was involved in the Pride week for two years I was the co-chair of the committee. At that time we did it on an ad hoc basis. It was a new committee every year. Now some people stayed around like Jack Belinsky was one of the people that was an annual member and so there were two parades that I helped organize. One year with Bruce Reeves as my co chair and one year with Ray Hill as my co chair.

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JG: What year, let's see can we go to... so when you became involved in lesbian and gay organizations, can you kind of put a year on it?

DB: I think in 1983 was when I came out.

JG: Okay.

DB: So at the age of 33 and the... so it was I want to say it was about '85 though, when I started doing the radio show and being involved in Pride.

JG: Because all the other years you had been involved in NOW and the feminist movement?

DB: Right and I stayed involved with NOW I guess '84 really was probably the year.

JG: Was Bering going at that point? They are probably more '85.

DB: Yeah, I can't remember the exact time that I was working there, but it was in the late '80's. Yeah, that would be right.

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DB: In '85 is when I met my long-term partner. Like I said we were on and off for like seven years. More on during that time then off but we would break up and get back together to the point of ridiculousness. I accepted a job, well one of the things that I had started doing and through my... I was the lesbian rights task force chair for Texas NOW and I started going to the Creating Change Conferences that the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conduct which are just the most amazing conferences. I just hate that I've had to miss a lot of them but they are just... you meet every kind of person and it's

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the full diversity of our community and so many leaders and experts that, you know, it's very impressive to be in a room with like 3,000 other queers.

JG: Goodness that sounds amazing!

DB: Yeah and they just do excellent workshops and so, even though I'm not college educated in the sense of having attended a college I certainly have a wide range of education based on the very many conferences and workshops and things that I've been involved in. I also got to meet so many of the leaders from Harry Hay and Del Martin, **Delva Slide (01:54, Bell 2).** You name somebody and I've probably met them.

JG: Well so in '85 you began to go to those kind of conferences?

DB: Yeah, around that time. It was at a Creating Change conference that I was exposed to this idea of there being another national march on Washington. Now I had attended the one in 1987 and that was also the first year that the AIDS memorial quilt, the Names Project was presented and because I had been involved with the Pride committee I attended the international I... I can't remember what the name of it was but it's called InterPride now and anyway, 1987 was the year that we voted for the Rainbow flag to be the "official" emblem of the organization. A whole bunch of AIDS organizations and other groups came out of that march and the events surrounded it and so I had been really impressed by the march and I had understood the need for our visibility, that it was so important. It was the anniversary... the '87 march was when they began National Coming Out day, which is October 11th. That message is, if we keep acting like we have a dirty little secret then no wonder people are going to treat us as if we have a dirty little secret. In coming out that everybody pretty much has to get over it. That our numbers do matter and it's a weird thing that really shouldn't matter has to matter so much because

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when you are an oppressed people, “Yes I chose to be a lesbian because I wanted to be oppressed.” You know, if it was a choice I would still chose it but... and I guess as a bisexual you would say that I did and I say, “Well so what?” That doesn’t invalidate it. It’s still what I as a human being can, should have a right to do because it’s not... there’s nothing dirty or wrong about it. If people examine how they came to be heterosexual it’s just because that’s what they are. Of course they never have to question it because that’s the majority and as far as I view it, it’s just something that “is” and that our sexuality is sacred to us and, you know, that being a friend of mine expressed it very well. She said, “Well you know we’re not just gay or lesbian in the bedroom.”

A lot of people probably live a large part of their lives not really “in the community.” They may be gay or lesbians but they may not be really active in the community. I always say the GLBT community is comprised of the people who chose to be part of that. Some of them are straight. Some of them are allies such as the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, PFLAG, our greatest ally, and some of... and the transgender community is certainly included in that because of their gender issues. They were viewed as being gay because of that when ... and I still have to explain to gay and lesbian people, as well as straight people, that transgendered, that sex and gender are not the same thing necessarily and that sexual orientation is fluid, and there are people that transition and then identify as gay or lesbian because of who they partnered with and that it can be anywhere on the spectrum. A friend of mine, Martine Rothblatt, wrote a book called the *Apartheid of Gender* and you know just like there is a rainbow of races there is a rainbow of sexuality and people could fall, you know they could be yellow or they could be purple or they could be green they could be anywhere in that spectrum at

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different times in their lives. Not for some people, some people are whatever they are and that's what they are and that's what they are always going to be. But there are certainly variations.

So, at the Creating Change conference where people were talking about doing this march and it was a group of people that were talking about it were very committed to an idea of consensus and that it be a grass roots effort. Because of the work that I had done in Houston I was hired as the national organizer. That meant that I and one of the co-chairs, Billy Hileman, set in an empty office in Washington D.C., which the human rights campaign actually helped us set up the office and Billy and I started the work of putting together the infrastructure for what would be the march. We had a committee of 12 people on the executive committee and I was the 13th. I say, "Oh perfect just like a covenant." I did not have a vote but I certainly had a voice and the committee worked by consensus. So part of my job was to take the notes and document who said they would do what so that it could be followed up on. I also used a NOW structure, which was that each member of the executive committee was in charge of a particular aspect of the organization and that way that person could be the conduit between the executive committee and the local organizing committees in what was called the steering committee which was roughly about 200 people, and we came together I think four times during the organizing period. Conducted by consensus and these were not always the same 200 people but it was... but usually it was. That, I learned a lot by knowing that I could do consensus decision making and us using that model, most of the people on the executive committee had a real commitment to that consensus decision making. I still think that is the best model, although I also love *Robert's Rules of Order* and I've learned *Robert's*

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Rules of Order because I think there are at times that you have to implement that. That's what Congress uses and you may or may not know this but... I want to say Henry Roberts was an engineer and he designed the Houston Ship Channel, small world!

JG: I did not know that.

DB: But it certainly is an excellent way to conduct meetings and for there to be the ability to have the majority rule but still to hear the voice of the minority.

JG: Right.

DB: One of the things that I suggested with the steering committee was that we allow for minority reports because I think that's important because sometimes people just want to be heard. Of course, coming up with the name of the march became a very tricky thing. If you want something real messed up, design it by committee because we had a hard time agreeing on the name and it eventually became The 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Rights and Liberation.

JG: Hmmm.

DB: Isn't that a mouthful?

JG: That is a mouthful.

DB: I would have rather it be called The Big Queer March and if I ever have enough money I'm going to have a march and that's what I'm going to call it. The last march they had they just called it The March for Equality. But the previous march to that one that took place in 2000 was called The Millennium March and that one got started by a bunch of organizations and a lot of us felt that that was not the way to go, that anything like that needs to come from a grass roots effort.

JG: Yes.

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DB: Being a radical is being grass roots. Radical means to the root so I don't shy away from that, I'm a "radical queer yeah me!" and I like the word queer because I think it is inclusive and...

JG: But don't you think that's changed over time? I mean I can see that in the '90's maybe there was perhaps more an assimilationist idea in things and "queer" seemed to be moved away from that.

DB: Well we did have Queer Nation. I think that queer certainly was a word that was one of those words that was thrown at us that was a put down. Just like dyke which people, they need to get educated. The word dyke means: an autonomous woman separate from role and I think that's a great thing to be, so I call myself a dyke. We can get into the whole dichotomy thing about butch and femme and whatever people, whatever labels and I really don't have a trouble with words. I don't think necessarily that labels are bad I just don't think that you can generalize. In my world I would love it if everyone would just use the word queer. Because we are outside the norm and that's okay you know that's perfectly fine! So...

JG: The parade of course was a great success?

DB: The march? Yeah...

JG: The '93 march.

DB: If you look back historically from that time, a great deal started changing. We were dealing with "don't ask, don't tell." It was, the march happened 100 days after Bill Clinton's inauguration, which had the first gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender inaugural ball at that time. He had instituted "don't ask, don't tell" in the military. Well he meant it as a means to soften the outright ban on gays and lesbians serving in the military but it

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didn't quite work that way. So it was still a matter of gays and lesbians and lesbians disproportionately were... what's the word they used? Anyway... kicked out of the military. So here we were these many years later and we are still, we are on the verge of overturn of "don't ask, don't tell." We also were dealing with the issue of same sex marriage. I've chaired the platform committee for what became "the notorious platform" of the 1993 march.

The people thought we were asking for too much and that we were too divergent in issues that were not seeing as purely GLBT issues. The executive committee took the platform and kind of ramped it into categories. The reality was that most of the people on that committee were of the street activist nature and we very much wanted to have to, it was very feminist. Like we wouldn't accept advertising from certain sources. We think... we thought that we didn't need money from beer and alcohol. We... the sexist advertising that is used in liquor industry; that is just not acceptable. We certainly thought there needed to be a bigger voice for people of color, for people with disabilities, just, you know, all of us. So that day, of course just stands out in my mind so powerfully. One of the things that we did though we were probably the best documented of any of the marches, before or since. We had a very powerful effort in our media. I was the only paid staff until the last month or so of the organizing. A lot of volunteers, I worked directly with the D.C. host committee. I always joked that I came to know more about the bisexual, S&M, and transgendered community then I ever wanted to know. But I made some friends in all of those communities and people that I value very much and certainly gained more of an education in the process. So anyway that was like... being on that stage and looking over what we estimated to be about 750,000 people was a real

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rush because knowing that I had done the work that I had done to make it possible. Now the last three days before the march most of the principal players that made it happen were never in the same room at the same time.

JG: Because on the ground up there it was just so enormous.

DB: Yeah and we... some of the things happened in spite of us rather than because of us. It's like I say about the Pride Parade every year. Even if we did nothing on the last Sunday in June... well last Saturday now that it's a nighttime parade, all these people would line up on Westheimer waiting for the parade. The... I think it was 1987 was the year that I was co-chair of the march, I mean of the parade, where we... we were recognizing the devastation of AIDS in our community and we didn't want it to be all gaudy and with floats and all of that.

JG: Too celebratory?

DB: Yeah. I mean it was like, "Yeah we're taking pride in who we are and we're speaking up for those members of the community that are suffering from HIV and AIDS." Oh gosh, thank goodness things have changed so much in that people are now able to live with HIV and AIDS and that there's medicines, because there are some friends that I just really don't think I could afford or bear to lose. In 1992 when they laid out the quilt display in D.C., I was one of the people that read names and they said to me, "There's somebody that we've been waiting for and she just got here and would you mind if she went in front of you?" It was Ryan White's mother.

JG: Oh...

DB: It was like, "Of course I don't mind." But then that's who I had to follow.

JG: Wow!

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DB: Talking about a hard act to follow and the list that I had happened to contain a panel from **Bering** (20:50) and it was my guys.

JG: Oh and that all just happened coincidentally?

DB: Yes, but I thought it was you know kind of a magical thing and special because it was my guys and so that was quite a day and that was in October of '92. I left Houston in August of '92 to go to D.C. and it was right before the Republican National Convention that took place in Houston where there were all the protests and stuff so I missed that. I maintained my relationship during the time that I was organizing the march although I thought that I was doing a geographic when I went to the march. I thought that that was the way that I was going to sever the relationship. I just needed to get over it. It wasn't ever going to work out and I needed to move on. Well that is not quite what happened. I ended up coming back to Houston to be with my partner and we made a commitment to be together and that lasted ten years, which it was probably undoing in the last two years very rapidly. It was not my choice to end the relationship, but I'm not sorry that it... I mean I can't say I'm sorry it ended, but I wouldn't want to be in it now. Of course hindsight, as they say, is always 20/20.

It was very difficult for me and it took several more years before I really recovered from it, the loss of that relationship because I had thought, which I always tell people some relationships are just meant to be a day and some of them are meant to be, that the length of a relationship and I give my parents as a perfect example of this because my mother married at 17 and was married until the day my father died. I can't even remember how many years, 57 years. I would say they probably shouldn't have been together that long. I think we need to be more respectful of each other in the ways

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we end relationships. Certainly if someone... if you have an agreement to be monogamous and that you should honor that and if you want to be with someone else, the people... you need to break off the one relationship or negotiate what, if it's an open relationship or whatever before moving on. Particularly lesbians seem to have this serial monogamy thing and I, unfortunately, have not been able to establish another relationship. Now here I am at the age of 60 and a half and looking at what it means to be an un-partnered lesbian and you know it is real different when I was still in my 40's and the idea of dating or whatever made sense but now it's like a whole different world.

JG: That's what I was going to ask you, don't you think it's different then it would have been then because of the way things have changed?

DB: Yeah and of course there are... and I'm a member of Lesbians Over Age Fifty, LOAF and there are certainly women much older than I that are actively involved in relationships and the idea in our society that people get older, that they become non sexual is a joke. But there's quite a few partners of people that they have a partner who is maybe 15 to 20 years older and I say, "No wonder I can't find anyone my age group because they are all with these older people or younger people." I have... I am currently working as the editor of the Montrose Gem, G-E-M which is the... it's supposed to stand for Gay Entertainment Media which is a biweekly publication for the Montrose area, GLBT focused and beyond, because I do think that Montrose is a state of mind as well as, the 77006 is a state of mind as well as a zip code. There is a sensibility about the area of Montrose that is carried over to queers wherever they are. Like I said earlier most gays and lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders do not live in the Montrose. They are all over the city of Houston and the suburbs and Katy and The Woodlands and Kingwood and

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Alvin and Beaumont and Galveston. From what I hear Galveston has a pretty thriving GLBT population. So I am able to take my perspective on the community and produce a publication that addresses interests and concerns as well as what people in the community are doing. I'm enjoying that very much.

I had previously been the editor of The Houston Voice, which is a weekly publication, and I mean having a job where you get to read and write that is special. And the fact that I can be totally out which has been important to me. Almost since I came out any job I've had I either was a professional homosexual or I, there's a few times when I felt like I had to not be as open with people because of the situation I was in and I hated it. I mean it is an awful feeling to think that you just can't be truthful about your life because of other people's prejudices and stuff. There are times, when if you are in danger because someone is going to gay bash you then it's best not to be. There are times where I will speak up and take a stand. There were times where my partner and I were holding hands like in a movie theater and somebody would make a comment. But for the most part I have not been harassed. At one of the Creating Change conferences we were picketed by the Phelps Organization, Westboro Baptist Church is that what they call themselves? I don't remember, Fred Phelps and his inbred family. It was very sad because there are these children holding up these signs, "God hates fags" and all of that. So there certainly have been times that I have faced opposition just like I have faced opposition in being a pro choice and taking on... Because I have taken place in marches in Washington for the Equal Rights Amendment and for the right of women to chose a safe and legal abortion. Not a choice I'd make for myself probably. I thank goodness I never had to but it's not my place to decide for any other woman; nor do I think it's

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anybody else's place to decide what she needs to do. I'm certainly a proponent of doing everything possible to prevent unwanted pregnancy to begin with.

JG: Right.

DB: But people are people and it's time for us to look at the reality of life. One of the things that I am very concerned about is the way, well certainly the sexism inherent in the entertainment industry and the messages that are sent to young women and body image issues, which I think there is a real sadness and a real loss for young women. They are being sexualized at an earlier and earlier age. Anyway so that is one of the things that concerns me which as you can see I'm not only concerned about lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgender issues. I received a very good education about the issues faced by transgendered people because of knowing Phyllis Frye and so I am certainly an advocate for the transgendered community. In Houston we have been very lucky because we had Phyllis and because we have had a very accepting, into the larger GLBT, the larger community of the transgendered members of our community. Certainly with Jenifer Rene Pool becoming president of the Gay and Lesbian which is now the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Political Caucus. Yes it is an alphabet soup, get over it, deal with it, that there is a visibility of the transgendered community being part of the...well being part of the community.

And I think the people that get left out most often are the bisexuals, because it's never really acknowledged. I mean if you are a bisexual and you are living with a person of the other gender, I don't like to say the opposite because I don't think there is necessarily... the dichotomy, I don't think it is as easy as that, then you are viewed as being heterosexual. And it is very hard for people to accept or understand that someone

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is bisexual. I had an argument online in one of the email groups about that I was bisexual. The person seemed to think that that meant you were equally attracted to men or women. I kept saying that, "No it doesn't necessarily mean that, but it does mean that you are capable of loving and being sexual with someone of the same or another sex." So you know it's real, most of the women that I know that are bisexual, once again they are serially monogamous and they may be with a man or they may be with a woman and some of them are in long term heterosexual relationships. But you know, it's just... human sexuality is a complex thing.

JG: Very complicated.

DB: It need not be if people would just be accepting about it but it comes from our Puritan roots and just like they are weird about other sexuality while it's, you know, the message when you are young is, "Don't do anything." But then again our media keeps telling us you have to look this way to be considered attractive and you have to buy this product or that product and you have to be sexual. It's the sexualization of it they promote that, you know counters the other messages. And my theory the goal behind it is to have more consumers, ultimately.

JG: That's a good let's...

DB: Go back to...

JG: Just slightly because you have covered almost everything that we were going to cover anyway. Let's just clarify just a couple of things. So you became aware of the lesbian gay world you say from...

DB: Probably as a teen.

JG: Visiting and through print media?

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DB: Mainly through books.

JG: You were exposed to certain books that?

DB: Yes. And I sought out certain books because, you know.... It was something innate in me that lead me to do the reading.

JG: But you said that you became aware of a lesbian and gay world and you weren't different because of some neighbors. Did you tell me something about that?

DB: Oh...

JG: Or had you had your first sexual experience by the time that came around?

DB: Yeah I had been sexual with other girls before we had these neighbors who I had not been aware of really that much until they had a party one night. They lived downstairs and our windows overlooked the entrance into their apartment and this was in Houston and I thought it was only men going into this party. Then my parents said something, I don't remember exactly what, but what I got out of it was, "Oh, those two lesbians are having a party." I later realized that the people going in had not been men at all...

JG: Everybody had been women?

DB: Yeah, just from what I saw. I just thought, I guess I was kind of intrigued by it. But I just for some reason I just never could understand why people had issues with...

JG: With the sexual ideas.

DB: With gays and lesbians.

JG: So that's really and the media told you about society and the first way you met similar people was?

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DB: Well I met gays and lesbians, you know throughout my life really. My 6th grade teacher was a gay man. He was a wonderful teacher, one of the best I ever had, in Lubbock. Of course I did not realize it until many years later but, you know, suddenly it made sense. He also was very egalitarian. He had us play soccer and softball because those are two sports that at that age, being in sixth grade, that boys and girls are pretty much equal at and I was a pretty good soccer player. I never was the jock. I was never one of the... I didn't there was this whole softball lesbian thing for many years and I don't care a hoot about sports of any kind, as far as watching it. I did get into the Comets when they were in Houston, especially during the time that they were being champions. That was the only time I have really been any kind of sports fan in my life. Unfortunately, I lost my physical activity thing. I still swim, but I'm not as physical as I had been in my younger years.

JG: Can we... the lesbian and gay community in Houston that you found when you started coming out, let's start talking about it in terms of were there a lot of different cliques did you think, was there class and race issues?

DB: Yes! Good question. There was, and there still is, a classism and because we are a microcosm of the larger society. Some things, I thought there were real issues among gay men and their attitudes towards women. I think there is a very sad misogyny such as the way that gay men feminize one another by (39:16) "Bitch" or "You girl" and they often do it in a put-down kind of way because women are seen as a negative. I have found the difference between gay men who have been involved with women and gay men who never were involved with women. There are some lesbians who probably do hate men but most of them, it is probably that men are not relevant to their lives. That's what

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really gets the heterosexual men is that lesbians just don't really care about them; they are not our concern. If you want to hear somebody talk bad about men, listen to a gay man or a heterosexual woman. So you know that's a myth right there about being... if you are a lesbian or if you are a feminist that you are a man hater. Being the mother of sons and I have loved men in my life. I loved my husband. So that certainly simply isn't true. I think there's coming more than there was when I first came out, an alliance between gay men and lesbians.

JG: Being that it was that way, did it interfere a lot with once political organizing began to happen do you think that the groups dominated by men and probably... just everywhere else.

DB: That's why we have such things as during Pride we made a rule that there would be two Grand Marshals, one would be male and one would be female. Unfortunately, people still used the terms female Grand Marshal and male Grand Marshal that should not be part of the title in my opinion. It's just... the idea was that if there wasn't that (41.25) that it would always be a gay male that would be Grand Marshal. Probably that's not the case now. Certainly considering that our mayor, who is the former president of the political caucus and who was the one that also worked for the word lesbian to be included and the fact that Anise Parker is a lesbian and Sue Lovell who was also president of the caucus and who is now on city council, there have been both male and female leaders in the community for some time. There still is, I see a lot of classism. I never really... I knew that there was segregation among like the Latin community, the black community and the Caucasian or white community. I deplore using the word... a color to describe people but the diverse races of community members and increasingly so

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in Houston, a growing Asian community. But it has not changed and it is not changing as much as I would like to see. While there are certain individuals that are involved in groups, there's not a proportionate number of mixes of the races within the visible active organization. One of the groups that I have been involved in since the late '70's is the Women's group that meets at the First Unitarian Church. Now it's not a church group, it's a feminist group that happens to meet at a church on Sunday mornings. In that group it is predominantly lesbian but there are women who are not lesbian and there is a diversity of races and people from other countries as well.

JG: Is it that way from the time when you started in the late '70's?

DB: There's always been a diversity, but it's increased.

JG: It's increased?

DB: Yeah, but that group has been a great source for me for...well it's where I met my partner, of finding like minded women.

JG: They have a men's group too. I haven't... someone else told me.

DB: Yeah, I don't know anything about the men's group. What kind of view they take on the world although Unitarians are pretty cool people in my book. You can be anything and be Unitarian. For many people in our community their religion is an important thing, especially if they are a Christian. Whereas for me, you know, I have an eclectic individual personal highest designer spiritual designer belief system. Certainly I take things from my Methodist upbringing. But you know, I am more I'm kind of a Pagan and I'm kind of a Zen Buddhist and I don't know if you have ever read the Book of Pi, but he said he is a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian and it's like equally... There's nothing that says you can't be all those, you know and that makes perfect sense to me.

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You take what is worth keeping out of any teaching or book. So I have never felt like I had to go to a church and be preached to because I was introduced to a feminist spirituality that I call myself a witch, although it's not Wiccan and it's not based on belief in deity. We might use the names of goddesses because there are certain goddesses that invoke certain images. Like, the mother or the maiden or... but we know that it's talking about different aspects of ourselves. So that's something that has sustained me greatly throughout my life. And really, in a way I think saved my life because that was what I turned to when my marriage was dissolving and it was the support and understanding of other women and their experiences. I think we all can learn something through other people's experiences and apply it to ourselves and that that saves you a lot of trouble rather than learning from your own mistakes.

JG: That's inspiration.

DB: Although, but life is life. People... I can't say I'm without prejudice because certainly I have my opinions and my morals and my beliefs. But I really, and it's hard because of coming from this background of parents from the Deep South who were very prejudiced and said horrible things about other people because of their race or because of... my mother said one time if she had a child that was homosexual that she would disown them. Now that is not what happened but... and I was the one that was with my mother when she passed. I was the one that took care of her the last three weeks of her life and my parents had both me and my partner in their home and ironically my younger sister told me that my partner was the only person that my dad had never spoke badly about. If you knew my dad that was saying a lot, he was so negative. You know, my mother in her later years became an avid reader. I think I get my love of reading from her

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and she read a lot of books that I read and that exposed her to a larger world so maybe she came to a certain kind of understanding, I don't know. She still frowned upon it, I knew that. My younger sister, she just doesn't get it. She still has some uncomfortableness for it but she loves me and I love her and like that.

JG: Let's take for instance with all of your involvement in the community in Houston what influence would you say that Houston has had on the community here? Do you think Houston has hindered it?

DB: The GLBT community on Houston or the Houston on ...

JG: Houston on...

DB: Houston nationally?

JG: Well no I'm speaking first of Houston, with a community forming in Houston what influence did the city of Houston being the way that it was or is have on that? Do you think it hindered it more so then in other places? Or was there something unique about Houston?

DB: I think at some points we've had a struggle from the kind of southern aspect of where we are located geographically. But Houston is a metropolitan city and we have such a rich arts community, such as having a symphony, a ballet, an opera, the Alley Theatre.

JG: And major museums.

DB: Major museums, major institutions of higher learning, major international community, that I think that Houston has really been a leader in a lot of ways and certainly we have, say what you want about Ray Hill and I love the man dearly. He came, he was out and doing things long before most people would ever admit to being

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gay and that in and of itself is very powerful. But there have been GLBT leaders in Houston that are also leaders on the national scale and we have a new younger group coming in and, in fact, I can't even just say younger because some of the people that are becoming involved, they are just now really becoming involved in the community, certainly politics... I mean I am part of the political community. People are active in the Democratic Party. Of course we had a log cabin, long head Republican. I can't get my head around it. We've had people organized that way. We've had people that are very strong human rights campaign, a group in Houston and I think Pride also brings out people in a community. In fact it is a great organization for people to get involved in if they want to meet other people. In fact this is my philosophy for if you want to meet somebody that you are maybe going to be a potential partner with is get involved in something that you have an interest in and a commitment to and you are going to meet other people that are like minded and therefore you are more likely going to find someone. Or you can go online. The Internet is another aspect of our community that a lot of people don't. I mean we are taking it for granted but we have a number of groups, Yahoo groups for the community. We certainly have Internet dating. I'm not going to go into the gay male porn but you know it has for a lot of people it has given them access to a community that they may not otherwise have. It certainly has been a boon to organize. So I think that's very exciting. I run an online group called The Feminist Online Network since 1999 and there's the Houston Online Political Organizing HoP-ON and the Lone Star Activist, among others, I mean there's other groups; there's people for certain areas of town (because we are not all in Montrose). There are different blogs and other... The Advocate, The Washington Blade, The Dallas Boys, they all have online

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presence as does the Montrose GEM, www.montrosegem.com . We do hope to change the name of the newspaper at some point because everybody keeps thinks that I'm talking about a place where you go work out.

JG: Oh, instead of gym!

DB: Yeah.

JG: Do you think the Houston community has had a big influence to the nation some way or another?

DB: I do, especially now that Anise has become mayor. Certainly there is an attention on Houston as being more welcoming, more enlightened.

JG: Open-minded?

DB: Yeah open-minded, progressive and there are people who are disparaging of Anise because she is a lesbian, not our community, although there are a few odd balls here and there, that... but they can't fault her on anything she's done as far as policy or work as mayor. They really can't. There's nothing she has done.

JG: Her experience is incredible.

DB: Oh yeah and I kept telling people, "If you look at her record as city council and community leadership and neighborhood improvement, all of that, I would vote for her for mayor regardless, you know." That should be the criteria always that whatever are someone's qualification and proof of their work should be the basis of your decision, any candidate at any time. Also, because there have been people in the community that have been active in the Democratic Party, which the only one I can really speak to, that has made a difference within policies that have been policies or platforms for our Texas Democratic party and nationally. So yeah, Houston is quite an amazing city. I always

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say, "Well its home" you know? Wherever I was born or wherever I grew up that all influenced me but Houston is home and it's really where I became of age and a lot of people say, "You should go live in Austin" or "You should go to California" because of the way I believe and everything. I'm like, well but you know I've known some radical feminists that were at Texas A&M and bless them because that's where they are needed more.

I think that is what is important for people to make a difference in their own way. Some people just want to live their lives and not have to be concerned. I don't understand people not being political, because it is our very lives that are, you know... One of the powerful things that happened to me when I was working on the march on Washington was that was also the year the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. was opened. There had been a principal researcher, Klaus Mueller, who was a gay man, who is a gay man, who did a lot of work for that museum. Those of us that were on the executive committee had a private opening of the museum. I saw the pink triangles and I read some of the stories of the ways gays and lesbians were treated and I... because we were at the point this was in March, just before April when the march took place April 25, 1993, when I'm like, "Why are we doing all of this?" It's like people want us to come and pick them up and they are important and take them to their hotel and hold their hand through everything. It's just like, "Why are we doing all this?" A light bulb went off, "Ding!" that's why we are doing it because this could happen again and it would be us. We would be, even more than what took place before in the Holocaust, it would be us. That is a very powerful thing to realize that you are that despised, that hated that

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there are people that would eliminate you because of who you are innately. So, you know, that was a powerful moment for me.

JG: Reminder.

DB: Yeah it was a powerful reminder. That's why we use the phrase, "Never again and we will not be silent." Because it's from the silence and that's certainly the way that AIDS affected our community and our need to be vocal and our need to be political and our need to speak out. So, anyway, I always say what I'm about, this is me. I'm all about making the world a better place for women and children, queers, and little puppy dogs.

JG: Puppy dogs... aw!

DB: I'm a big animal person.

JG: Let's go one more question before we close that we've hit on a little bit I think but do you see a lot of generational differences outplayed between the older lesbians and gay men and then the new people that haven't been through the different stages that you have been through?

DB: Well certainly. I think I came of age at a golden time really for being a lesbian. Being in LOAF and being around women that are in their late 70's or early 80's and knowing their stories and what they had to face. You know there is now The SPRY Group at the Montrose Counseling Center and for a lot of them their coming out was in the time of the closet. There are still people that are very afraid of that closet door being opened. You know they have that generational difference just like anyone else. Although I think that, once again, these are people that tend to be more open-minded and who, who are living at a time when that I imagine they feel like they've been given a gift

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in their older years, that our society is as open as it is at this stage. There are certainly, for people coming of age now a big difference then it was for me. I mean one, that I came out as an adult and that I had a certain life experience before I came out. But, you know there are things that I really don't relate to and things you know that it's just not in my world. I was not... I mean I went to bars and for some people, the older generation, that was the only place they had was to go to a gay establishment and unfortunately alcoholism has taken a heavy toll on our community, just as suicide, being that people that either can't accept it in themselves or because of societal pressures, we've all heard the stories about Internet bullying and bullying at school and the gay bashing. We've been informed, like here in Houston by the murder of Paul Broussard and nationally Matthew Shephard. We have the history of Stonewall, the disability and activism that continues to take place that makes it a different world; makes it a different world and a better world then what it was.

JG: Even in the '90's.

DB: Yeah. And of course we still have a long way to go. It ain't done! Our job's not done. We still have to overturn "Don't ask, don't tell." We still have to make same sex marriage a right and fair and equal thing. We still are fighting the battle of AIDS and, you know, we can't hide our head in the sand the fact that gay men are still the ones that are most affected, although you know it's throughout the population, removing the stigma off of it, but certainly the education and the need for testing and all of that is so important. That is what I try to do with the paper is I try to put information in there that informs people about various things so that it will move the community. I have a luxury in that it's not a newspaper where you have to try and be so unbiased. I can be a cheerleader for

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the community. The work I did in radio... that is certainly, I had people that I would meet, they were grown up people but they would say, "When I was a teenager I would listen to you on the radio. Your voice, you were one of the first people that ever said it was okay for me to be what I am." Or "What I learned about something that has enabled me to come out or learned about something that got me active in the community." In a way, even if it was just one person who had said that to me it would have been so totally worth it.

JG: It made it all worth it.

DB: I hope to go back to doing radio and in Houston with Queer Voices and with After Hours but you know that's another real plus. I was doing a series during Pride week about queer things to be proud of in Houston and the fact that we've had all these years...

JG: The radio shows from the very beginning.

DB: Yeah and that there are still people that having their earphones on at home, hearing, being able to hear those voices and having access to the Internet it is a really wonderful thing because it is a way to reach people. I can't remember whose story it is, and I wish that I could because I always believe in giving credit where credit is due, but somebody that said that they would leave in books at the library that had homosexual stories or themes or something, something about: leave now for the nearest large city.

JG: Oh no, migrate!

DB: Yeah, so I don't know why that when I came out I was motivated to be an activist other than I already was an activist and that it's just who I am, that I can't not be doing something to further understanding for ourselves and for the larger world. We are a world community as well as the U.S.ans which is a term that a friend of my friend from

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South America taught me, because we are not Americans because South America and Central America and Canada area all Americans but we are of the United State's of America so we are U.S.ans. I think that is a great word.

JG: That is a good one. Do you have any more things, one more thing or anything?

DB: What other brilliant insights, what sagacious remark can I make? Well I'm looking forward to being an elder in the community and I'm very thankful that we have the vibrant community that we do in Houston and, you know, the University of Houston where I spent some time working and was exposed to a lot. I mean the fact that there are now, there is now a resource center now on the central campus and that University of Houston-Clear Lake, there's policies in place. Rice has an active group and there's the Women and Gender Studies Programs, you know that's another area that we can just kind of pat ourselves on the back about and say, "Well this is great because you have these... this new generation coming up that is going to have so much more in the way of information and tools and skills.

JG: It's not a secret world anymore.

DB: No it's not.

JG: It's studied in colleges and courses and departments.

DB: We kicked that closet door open and its like "Hello world, here we are. We are Houston and hear us roar!" I always say I'm a member of the Queer Nation, Houston tribe. I still say that!

JG: The Houston tribe! Well thank you very, very much.

DB: Well you're welcome.

JG: Very good interview.

End of Interview

