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SPEAKERS

Timothy Vale, Juan Rodriguez

Timothy Vale 00:00

This is an interview with Juan Rodriguez conducted by Timothy Vale on April 17 2019, at one's home here in Houston. The topic of today's interview is Mr. Rodriguez his life and participation in the Diana Foundation, Houston's oldest LGBT organization, whom he is a member of. How are you doing today? One? Great, thank you. So why don't we just start from, I guess, the beginning of your life, your childhood and everything, and we'll go from there.

Juan Rodriguez 00:28

I am a second generation Puerto Rican, I was born in Saginaw, Michigan. And both of my parents, of course, were Puerto Rican, and my grandparents. And we were raised in Saginaw, Michigan, because of the GM foundries and GM families anyway. So, um, elementary school was very interesting being a little, actually, we lived in a neighborhood where we were token Hispanic people amongst a lot of blacks. And that was always an interesting thing, because there was never a race issue back then.

Timothy Vale 01:18

Juan Rodriguez 01:23

And, to childhood, I was telling you earlier that in those days, it was like a respect to be around your elders. As children, we would go to one of our, one of my Grandparents, best friends. And the older men would play dominoes. And the hostess would always make food. And you were never one of those naughty children that were, were seen, you were always heard and not seen. But it was very interesting growing up in that in that neighborhood, in that, in that neighborhood, in that era of, of time, because it's nothing like it was today. It was always a fun loving, surrounding, and then always involved with a lot of Church activity. You know, so you always had your holidays with your, with your church family. And you always you also had a

really fun time with your immediate family on holidays. Those are some really fun memories that I haven't thought of since talking with you actually. And then going to going to high school and went to junior high school was fun, too. Because it's still the same thing. Those were the days when you walk to school. And that was quite fun. Also, you know, to think that you could you go past a friend's house and they join you to walk to your school. And, or else you'd slip half the way there because of the snow or the ice. And those are very fun moments of, of kindness and of natural bait. You know, because I those, those friendships don't exist anymore. And that's always warming to remember. And those days also, this is funny too, because in that in those days, there were a lot of migrant things that picking cucumbers and strawberries and tomatoes, Navasota I refused. Mine, my brother and my couple, my eldest sister sibling would do that. I just refused to do that. I said, You know what, that's when I started to being the bratty kid. So that was part of part of my rebel in me when I was a young child. And my teen hood became even more, more that way. But going to also growing up as a child. I remember realizing my sexuality when I was quite young, a nine or 10 I could remember being more attracted to men that I were women, period. And also I had a boyfriend that lived next door. So it was very convenient. You know, then I had then I had another friend that lived in the neighborhood that we were a close knit group of gay boys. So it was really fun at the memory of that. And growing up realizing your sexuality was very interesting. Because the stigma that there was not that stigma. Back then it was a lot easier because it wasn't so openly gay. You know, all the bars that we have now and all the clubs and, you know, now it's no big deal. I mean, now you have gay pride parades where there are hundreds of people marching down the street half naked, or, you know, or drag or outrageous costumes. But back then it wasn't like that it was the lot quieter. And it's specifically to when the Diana foundation started, people couldn't even go to the bars, there was like this, this Hide and Seek thing where you could be seen. And, you know, they couldn't, they'd have to park a couple blocks a few blocks away from the bars and not be so their cars wouldn't be recognized. We never had that stigma. We were here when we were gay, young teens. You know, today even going to college you had your group of gay friends that you hung out with and it was no big thing. You know, and I was telling you earlier about, you know, high school that we there were must there must have been anywhere from 30 to 40 out of color people that were we I went to a black school, a black high school Saginaw High School, and I was telling you, I had that deers group of friends that I call them. I call this The Ugly Duckling Club, because we're all very awkward. Not that we were out here, but we were somewhat awkward. Looking back at us today, now that we looked like movie stars, but and we're still good friends and those friendships, don't go away. Now going to how I how I got into hairdressing was very interesting and funny to my cousin was getting married and you know, you tell your hair, I don't college. I gotta tell you this. So in college, a rebel. I was on a grant. And so I had a professor that was Cuban. And he always made fun of my Puerto Rican dialect. So one day I cursed at them and they took my grant away. Because they expelled me from his class. So you tell your hairdresser everything. So I went to get my hair cut. And I had told her the whole story. She said, You know, when I dried my own hair, she said if you can do your like that you can do anyone's hair. There Kay mycorrhiza hairdresser. I started hairdressing 1976 And today, the woman Her name is Gloria Struthers, her and I are still friends to this day. And that's that's very unusual in these days to unless they're dead. But to have a friend for you know, 50 plus years, specifically in your career, and the things that we have gone through in our careers, even even that with I had so many so many dear talented, talented gay hairdresser friends that when that AIDS epidemic, hey, they was just the most horrific, horrific thing that has ever happened to the gay population. Because there were times where you could lose, you know, 510 friends a month. And to count a week or five of your friends would just die. Because that's not that they only had AC T back then they don't have all these wonderful drugs that they have now that's letting people live longer. That that was horrific. I mean to witness, seeing so many people drop like flies. And it didn't matter what

culture you came from, or you know what Financial Group you were in, none of that. They were just dropping like flies and several of my dear friends. I'll just never forget. And, you know, we even I'll never forget I had an address book that I had so many people that had passed away from and I just had to throw it away period. I didn't want to see it. And for you to feel that way with what's going on and in the world. And today there's so many great drugs that people are living. I have a cousin that has been HIV positive for 20 Plus almost 30 years that with all these great drugs he's healthier than it was this big ol hunky bodybuilder and that those days that wouldn't have been heard of. You know, so that touched a lot of people's lives not only in this not only in the gay life because I have a I had an aunt that also was a fabulous hairdresser and she died of HIV also for me intravenous drug use, and where do you hear of a woman dying of, you know, a term intravenous drug use. And today to do something back, we have a group of friends, I have a group of friends that every other Monday we get together at one of our friends salons. And we do, some of the guys that are, are healthy enough that aren't at hospice, that come to get their hair done. So we get together, we cut these people's hair, we have a good time and make them feel good. Make them feel pretty as we tell them, because there's a lot of funny little gay boys in there. And we've gotten to the point where you become friends with that and you want to do something. That's that how I feel to about the Diana foundation for them to, for you to be able to give, you know millions of dollars to people to help them with college for, you know, these poor LGBT kids that were just thrown out on the street when their parents realized that they were gay, I think about that. It's for us to be able to help get, like we have a facility that we purchased use for these kids to be able to be, you know, the donations that these generous people have given to unbelievable, just unbelievable, the need was, the need was felt and met. And that's when one really at that makes me proud and honored to be part of this group. These guys are great people. And we make a difference in in the world today. And the other thing is is that makes me proud is that we're a select group of only 100 men. And that's a big deal today, to be a part of that makes me proud. And to even be doing this, this is unheard of that we're going to be in an archive of the University of Houston. And then there's another thing that's gone government wise that I don't recall the name of, but that's an honor to be part of all this. You know, because today, there's not a lot of things that you that you can really feel that strong about, you know, my career, I can't tell you, my career also gives me joy. I need to come from I know welfare. You know, my dad didn't want to get why my father didn't want to be married anymore. So one day, he just split. Notice I was raised by single parents. And I remember those hard times. But I also remember getting into hairdressing and somebody recognize your talent. You know, you worked with them for a year and then off you go to Paris for training, you know, then you get to know what New York is. And then my friends moved to London. So then you go to London to school, that was unheard of, from specifically people my ethnic background, and then New York, going to school in New York. And they asked me asked me to be a platform artist. And then continuing to go to California and bopping around the states that's pretty amazing for you to be able to, to do and to feel all of this there. There are some people that we have met, even in the Diana Foundation, some of the partners, some of the members, partners, designers and funny, quirky people that you know, some some great hairdressers also bet such a great group of people. I mean, to be just to be a part of its, you know, just like our 66th anniversary, I mean, come on, you tell me about a group of that celebrate 66 years of existence, specifically gay men's group. That's a big thing and to be recognized for a lot of that, that movie stars to give us that recognition that night also on screen. That was pretty cool. So so my line from the beginning to now has been pretty amazing that sometimes I pinch myself. You know, because realizing where you came from to working in modeling agencies doing all these, you know, incredible models flying in people's private planes to go and do stuff. You know them letting you use houses that are in the millions of a client that lets me use this house in Vail. That's \$26 million. I know that coach, Oh, that wasn't happening. And so my life is very blessed and wonderful. I think of that every

morning when I wake up. Because 12 years ago, I had the misfortune of having a half In brain surgery, so when I wake up every day, I'm very happy to wake up. Because it's just scary when somebody tells you, you have to have brain surgery, and they cut your skull open, and they literally put a laser in your head to characterize a virus, that and now I'm walking and talking. So I don't know, I'm thankful every day I wake up, life is good. Life is good. And I guess that's about it on a nutshell. I'm very blessed. Oh, you know, what we were talking we haven't touched either is what you would tell a teen today. Stay safe, safe sex, choose your friends. Get educated, make a difference. Hang out the with the winners. Because that's very important. People look at you and judge you for that. So be a good example, and look for the winners that you can hang around with. So that's my most important message to the youth, the gay youth of today's like, you know, come on, let's have safe sex people. Right now there's a, there's another strain of HIV that's going through that teens up to 2021 years old for not protecting themselves because they think they're, they're not vulnerable because of their age. Well, come on, let's read up. Let's stay educated.

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Timothy Vale 16:38

And I also remember you and I talking a little bit in our last meeting about the importance of I guess, spirituality. And what it means to you,

J

Juan Rodriguez 16:50

you know, a spirituality is a big thing to me, because no one knows what's in your heart. And actually, it's no one's business. I had the opportunity to go to Israel twice with by no one's with my mom. And two other times with friends. And the difference between letting anyone direct you to what their thought of of religion is, is what's in your heart. You know, because my God doesn't point to and say, Oh, well, you know, he's a nasty. Here's the deal, nasty queer boy. You know, it's even right now. The madness is going on with this political issue about this. This man that's running for president, it's like, you know what, I'm, I'm a practicing Christian. I don't claim a religion. But I believe in God. And that's it. I was raised by an apostle. And because of that, I could have a poison mine about that. But it's, it's my God is a God fearing person of God fearing God, he doesn't point at me because of my sexuality. Truthfully. I think a favorite says more because we're more fun. No, no, but my spirituality is very strong. You know, but it's my belief too. You know, so don't tell me what I can or can't do. Or what I feel in my heart, because you just don't know. And pacifically another thing, it's not there your business. You know, what I feel in my heart, I feel in my heart. And there are, you know, that's like even I was laughing at my mom. One time, she was picking up pebbles, and says Surya said, What are you doing? She said, When am I going to come back here. And that's, that's very special for you to be in it on that, on that side of the world. And we had communion with a bunch of strangers in the garden of get sent money and there wasn't any difference between us. You know, they didn't know my story who I was, you know, my little mother picking up rocks to give her friends. You know that that's very, that's heartwarming. But the people that you met, the strange people didn't know they didn't know about your sexuality, they could have cared less. And that taught me even more. It gave me more respect for myself and more more respect for religion. Because just going to Israel and seeing all of the I really have a found a new respect for Judaism also. Because the Jewish people are very close knit family also. And I got to see a lot of that camaraderie amongst them and how it's no stigma on who you are, what you are, that it's what you have in your heart. You know, it's it's your own journey. So I don't feel like my god is

appointing evil person that says, you know, sending this Brimstone for being gay people. And it's, well, even now in Houston, there's there several gay ministers, and gay found churches that are that are really wonderful for you to have that sense of spirituality that you didn't have before. So

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Timothy Vale 20:27

and I guess maybe kind of talking just a little bit more about like it's kind of a gay community in general, what kind of differences have you noticed? Or did you notice between the communities that you grew up in in Michigan compared to like, say, the gated communities,

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Juan Rodriguez 20:45

big difference? In, in Michigan, the communities aren't nearly established as they are here. They're a lot smaller. And they're like the town where my mom lives, there is one gay bar. I don't even know if there's so little existence, because I don't go to get to bars anymore. But

J

Juan Rodriguez 21:06

no comparison.

J

Juan Rodriguez 21:08

I mean, from that small? No, but you know, what, in Detroit, there were gay bars, but I was in from the area, Parliament, and then, but compared to here, I mean, there is no comparison they are so they're so organized, and so much more professional, there's so many more things to do. In the past, I mean, what that's 50 some odd years ago, and it was not like that at all, it was not heard of or, you know, you didn't have gay parades or, you know, noticeably homosexual men, you know, not that you have to run around with a wig on your head or in high heels, because that's a little bit uncomfortable. But today, and this, you know, from there to here, there's no comparison. I mean, when I first when I first came to Euston, I came for I was I started hairdressing at this place called Jacobson's with his like, like Neiman Marcus. And my dear friend worked here. Peter Begley that's no longer with us from the AIDS epidemic that came to visit, we went from the airport to the pool, and I call my mom, I said, I'm moving in, and then the difference in Oh, from all of that to here, I mean, my God, not only the money, but the gay scene was totally different. It was more hip more organized. And there is no comparison. No, there still isn't that comparison that there is today. You know, of course, Houston's a fourth largest city in the United States. I mean, we have a lot going on that is phenomenal. Phenomenal. And some of the yearly things, bunnies on the Bayou was just coming up that's been around for like 27 years. And oh, a lot of stuff. I mean, the gay pride parade that we have in Houston even has turned into this amazing, amazing thing now, whereas it used to be down the streets of Montrose and now it's downtown. But that's unheard of that was that ever seen where where I was raised at all period. So there's a vast difference also with the money I mean, in the game in the gay community over there's nothing, nothing at all. Like advances you have here. monetarily. But that's one of the big things because it didn't have that top being there this the there was no I mean, we're in such a large makeover. There's

nothing to compare with all this. There's the the Michigan film actually what they call it, they all have gay areas, but nothing like this. This is just unbelievable. And even going to I've been as an adult and there's just nothing like what we have here. The the main the Chicago Detroit are kind of populated with that Lansing, Michigan. But other than that, no, there's nothing that can compare to this. Nothing in it. It has taught me a lot in life. That's just like this. This group of men who think that you'd come here and there and it's just not like I want to be a Diane I mean, you have to have a sponsor. Then they just don't say okay, you can be a member you have to go in front of the board does If they they let you appeal except you as a member and I like that that's a very strong message and our community also that you didn't have any of that from those little country words that I can't even say that from that little small place where you were raised

T Timothy Vale 25:28

so how did you how did you come across to Diana's in the first place?

J Juan Rodriguez 25:32

Remember a friend Bob Reiner? Well actually no I am know that Diane as from years ago, some one of my former bosses Michael wittmeyer, was big into the Diana's and he he he was so funny because he wasn't an attractive woman. But during the during the Diana Foundation, their award shows were just phenomenal that they were at the top at the top of tower theater down Westheimer it was like motion picture people waiting for the year. Him and some other friends Michael wittmeyer Also I mean, Michael camper, all those guys, were just such a big deal. I mean big known do with this the with this group that I always heard of them. And my friend Bob Reiner is a member of the Diana's. And he said, you know, he said, Honey, you need to be a Diane and I was like, What are you talking about? And so when I found out what it was, you introduce yourself, obviously I made it through the through the board search.

J Juan Rodriguez 26:51

And that's how I came about the Diana's I'd heard of it, but never,

J Juan Rodriguez 26:59

never thought I'd be involved with something like this. Because like I told you earlier, I said, I'm very proud and honored to be in this organization, because we do something to make a difference. And but knowing remember, remembering Michael and the guys are getting ready for these for these events. And specifically for like the 65th anniversary that we had. Oh, it's a big deal. I mean, it's not something that falls that falls together in a week. So I got to see all this, this energy and fun and wonder I never thought of being a member of them. But when my friend Bob Ryder introduced me to it, I said, You know what, why not? And the other thing too, is that you can just didn't want to go there. But no, it was wonderful.

T Timothy Vale 27:56

Timothy Vale 27:00

So why don't you tell us a little bit more about your experience in college.

J

Juan Rodriguez 28:00

My experience in college was very interesting, because first off going to college, we were members. I was member of the honors the Martin Luther King honor society where we actually tutored children in elementary schools. So we were able to get a grant from the honor society for college. So I was able to go to Central Michigan University. And I was going into bilingual education because that was the thing then. And funny enough, at the end of my high school days, I was I worked at Burger King. And so that was extra change. And when you had caught out when you had a car back there, you had to pay for your gas. And that was funny too, because we chip in like 50 cents 75 cents and we get gas money. But going to CMU was funny because I worked as an assistant manager in Mount Pleasant, close to the to the campus. So all the guys afterwards, you can obviously you can use the food. So I take the eggs, the food that was left, and I'd have all of the guys in the in the dorm fed. And I also got all my laundry all my car services, and everything done Tuesday. That was really fun. And also having a group of a friend is there too. That was really fun. There was that girl. One of my favorites or good this girl Carol Klosterman, she had wreck so many cars that her family owned funeral parlors, or funeral homes. And so she got a she had a limo from the funeral home because they figured that was a lot of car damage. And I guess she damaged A lot of them were still friends and she's in Manila, Manila in the Philippines or something. But she went to she went there and never came back. But what a great memory then my brother. My brother started playing baseball at the end of the middle of high school, then going to Central Michigan University, he was scouted and started playing for Kansas City Royals. So that was a nice adventure from college to getting to see him do that. That was a lot of fun being specifically the way we were raised, to be able to come into that type of situation was really cool. Hence, my brother and my dad were all aware all car guys. My father was a stop car driver. At Dixie speedway. Do you remember that when Dixie Speedway was a famous racecar track that these guys all got together and whatever race then they always got together at our house to work on cars I'll never forget. And so my dad always told us never drive a dirty car. That's why nobody washes my Porsche. But that's one of my biggest hobbies. My other hobby is cooking. Because there's not just one way of cooking Puerto Rican food is totally different than the spicy things different. Italian food is different. American food is different. But knowing the difference and combining stuff. Another one of my hobbies is fashion. I collect shoes, I have over 150 pair of shoes. And I like them all. And I love clothes because at one time before sobriety, I've lost 60 pounds. So anything being in the fashion business period, I just love clothes, period. And those are some of my big hobbies. I mean, I would my mom was visiting me one time before moving here. It's his she was hiding him or she was in my closet. Yeah, where are you? I mean, your closet. What are you doing in the closet? Just I'm counting your shoes, you should be ashamed of yourself. I said mom is one of my hobbies. So that's one of my fun fashion jokes. That that's just that. My hobby is and I love, love good things. I love beautiful furniture. I love beautiful things. That's why I wanted you to be at my house. So you could see that we just aren't a fly by night group that have, you know, milk crates for tables. And so it's been a pleasure. What fun.

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Timothy Vale 33:09

Well, thank you for your time today. One. It was very interesting and really enjoyed having you.



Juan Rodriguez 33:16

You're welcome. It was a pleasure.