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SPEAKERS

Vince Lee, Harrison Guy



Vince Lee 00:03

Okay, I think we're, we're on. Good afternoon. My name is Vince Lee and I am the archivist and curator at the University of Houston Libraries Special Collections. I am the curator for the LGBT History Research Collections. And today is Monday, June 28 2021. And I'm pleased to be joined by Harrison Guy, LGBT community activist, and founder of the Charles Law Community Archives, which is at the African American Library at the Gregory School, part of the Houston Public Library. Harrison just for our first time viewers, an audience could you reintroduce yourself and kind of tell us about your role and involvement in Houston's LGBTQ plus community?



Harrison Guy 01:01

Sure. So I'm Harrison Guy, I came to the LGBT community and about 1995 is when I was first introduced to primarily the Black LGBTQ community. Because at that time, that community was doing things really separately. And I started out in working for an HIV AIDS agency that was dedicated to doing testing and prevention work for Black gay men. It was the Donald R Watkins foundation. So that's where it started for me and through that work I did lots of events and planning things for the community around HIV prevention. And from there, I got involved in the club industry and started working the door. And I was the show cast director for one of the drag shows at one of the bars here in Houston. It was a called Bartini, at the time over on Westheimer in the Montrose area. And through that work, I decided that I wanted to join a fraternity which is a Delta Phi Upsilon, I'm currently the National President of Delta Phi Upsilon is the first fraternity for gay men in the United States. And I joined the Houston chapter. And once I joined the Houston chapter, I really got involved in politics and all kinds of different parts of the community. And so that led me to eventually chairing the mayor's LGBTQ advisory board, and being Pride Grand Marshal of the parade, the first Black gay man to be Pride Grand Marshal of the parade in 2019. And so, that's a mix of kind of art, activism, and community. And those are the things that I do in the LGBTQ community.



Vince Lee 02:30



VINCE LEE 04:00

It's quite a trajectory of Harrison, have you been part of the community and the various roles and involvements you've had over the years. For our audience that's listening in for the first time. Can you talk a bit about what the Charles Law Community Archive is, and kind of its story and inspiration for being established?



Harrison Guy 03:02

Yeah, so the Charles Law community archive is housed at the African American Library at the derby school. So it is both a community archive and archive that is at a library. And so originally, what happened is, I had a meeting with the African American library to do some archiving of my dance company. And so they wanted me to start putting items in the archive and making sure that we that we documented the history of the dance company that I founded 16 years ago. And while at that meeting, I kind of perused the books that they had. And notice that there wasn't any Black LGBTQ literature in the library. And so in the meeting, I just brought up that I thought, you know, it will be great to have representation in the library. And it wasn't intentional that it wasn't there. It's just, you know, you don't know until you know. And so in that conversation kind of about the lack of representation. You know, I brought up the idea of starting the archive, and perhaps naming it after Dr. Charles Law, who was an archivist. And so he was a huge black gay man who was a civil rights activist in the community, and did lots of lots of work around activism, but he also in his career was an archivist. So I thought it was pretty, pretty phenomenal to name, you know, an archive after him and Gregory Lincoln, I'm sorry, the African American Library at the Gregory School. They said yes, immediately. And so we decided to both have a community archive because there's such a, there's such a lack of kind of documentation of the Black LGBTQ experience in Houston, we thought that there may be some things that we didn't quite want to go into the library. And so simultaneous, we have both of them happening. And so some of the items will go to the institution and then some will keep within the community as our own personal archive. And so that's kind of the story started in February of 2019. And just really excited to kind of learn about the Black LGBT To experience in Houston and to document it and preserve the history of it.



Vince Lee 05:05

And I guess as an archivist, I think it's important that the community really sees themselves in a lot of the books that are collected and the primary source materials that are there as that special resonance with the community members where I think there's an emotional connection that's important to the community. And in terms of what archives, I guess, traditionally, we've excluded certain folks based on socio economics, sort of based on race and all that. So I think there's that role in terms of being diverse, equitable and inclusive, that we're all grappling with today, and going forward.



Harrison Guy 05:50

Yeah, for sure. I think that the the, that society is moving toward a, a more, a more broad way of looking at humanity and less hierarchical in all kinds of industries. And I definitely think that is true to be said about, you know, archiving as well, you know, there is a, there are some barriers to archiving African American history in that my, in my experience, it's just it's not, you

know, it's just not something that that Black communities and Black families have really made a priority. And so there's a lot of learning that happens with archiving within our community. And then also turning over your items. There's a big trust component, you know, that I've learned within our community. And so I think that, you know, Black people in general, have just kind of have a general distrust of institutions, period, and things that are kind of organized in a way. And I think that that kind of rings true as well with archiving is does the trust component. And so in my experience, what I've learned is that, you know, it takes a lot of time to build a relationship with people before they will submit their items or allow you into their personal lives. For archiving purposes.

V

Vince Lee 06:58

Yes, for sure, relationships and trust are big steps in turning over materials. And I guess the last thing, folks who want to see would be an institution or individuals trying to appropriate that history, their history,

H

Harrison Guy 07:13

yeah, they want it to be to be well taken care of. And if you, you know, they have no knowledge of how that will go, you know, there is, you know, some hesitancy with connecting with institutions.

V

Vince Lee 07:28

Besides yourself, who else is involved with the Charles Law Community Archives?

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Harrison Guy 07:34

Sure. So right now, you know, it's really just me from the community standpoint, so I'm really a liaison between, you know, the library, the institution itself, the archive and the community. Fortunately, we've had some interns that have been provided to us by the University of Houston, who helped us do a little bit of work with the archive, and then the staff at the Gregory School is just phenomenal. They are just the other people that are heavily involved, you know, I build the relationships, you know, I do the research and talk to the community and ask the questions and, and do a lot of the kind of movement work inside of the community, to get people interested in the archive to bring awareness, and then to uncover and research some of these histories as well. And then once you know, I learned that there's something that people may have that they want to donate, I do some of that relationship building, before I transfer them over to the institution or in some instances, I literally take them over to the institution, so I'm really the person in the middle. But right now, it's just me and definitely, now that it's really going and it's getting a lot of attention. Definitely, we want to grow that at some point and have more people involved.

V

Vince Lee 08:42

So it sounds like a partnership of sorts in terms of would be the conduit and facilitator and the

So it sounds like a partnership of sorts in terms of, you be the conduit and facilitator and the insurance and the Gregory School kind of helping to do the day to day of the materials and processing it making it available to researchers and visitors.

H

Harrison Guy 08:58

Yeah, and I think that that's the where we have been successful with getting items. I think that that's the beauty of the collaboration is when we're allowed to kind of soar in our lanes, right. And so I know that, you know, archiving is what they do every day, I know that they're the experts. So I'm definitely not going to try to do that. And they understand that I am the person who is in the community and can build that trust and relationship a lot quicker than they can as an institution. And so allowing each other to really operate at full capacity in our lanes is the beauty of the partnership.

V

Vince Lee 09:33

I guess my next question that leads into that is what's the vision and goal the the Charles Law Community Archive and can you talk about some of the materials that you've collected thus far?

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Harrison Guy 09:44

Yeah, so I have a very, you know, a kind of different approach to what my vision is for the archive you know, I want it to be more than just history because you know, I believe that wrapped up in all of this is the future and wrapped up in all of this is right now. And so I, the I see the archive is really being the launch pad for just a Black LGBTQ hub of culture. And so out of this will emerge a, a Emerging Leaders Program that we're facilitating. Also out of this, we have plans to do something for elders for parents of LGBTQ youth. And so we really see it as being kind of like the core place that these other programming happened that really just helps the community period. And alongside of that, we are also archiving and documenting what we're doing and going back and reaching back and getting some of those some of those histories as well. So the archive itself will kind of serve as this kind of hub of community for us. And I think that's a little different approach. But I think that what I've learned too, about our community is that it needs programming to drive this, you know, it's not necessarily panels and kind of historical programming that really energizes our community, but it is creative things, it has things that they need things where they can develop and grow. And so in lonely the community and knowing what the community needs, I'm kind of putting that along with the archive as well. So my vision is, of course, for it to be a thriving, archive, that that is always getting new things and being able to put out exhibits with some of this great history, but alongside of that, also really being able to really energize and inspire the community.

V

Vince Lee 11:25

So it sounds to be like, not only from a historical standpoint, but what are you going to do with that knowledge? What are you going to do with that history to move things forward?

H

Harrison Guy 11:36

Yeah, for sure, like, once, you know, these incredible stories, like what else right, we just don't want to leave them kind of like at knowing them. But we want to think about how they inspire us to do things today. Because when you have a community that lacks representation, you know, it also lacks dreams, right? It also lacks vision, because maybe you think it's impossible, or you, you never thought about doing it because you've never seen anyone like you do it. And as we see people and learn that people have always kind of done these things, similar to what we want to do, I know that it burns something in you, right. And so if you've learned that a Black person did something years ago, and now you know that you could possibly do it, who's going to be there to help you and inspire you to go forth with it. So I want to make sure that we're able to be for the archive to also be a place of action, and to really drive action within the community.

V

Vince Lee 12:27

Great. And that sounds like a model that a lot of folks can emulate and learn from going forward to traditional activity, those that are thinking of establishing archives.

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Harrison Guy 12:39

Yeah, for sure. I think I think knowing, you know, the community that you're serving is really, really important. And that's why I think, you know, even though I am on a learning curve with archiving, you know, in the in the academics, you know, sense, because it's not something that I did before, for, I love, I've always loved history, I've always, you know, been a a lover of items. Some people would say, a hoarder, maybe. But I've always kept things. And so now, knowing the community also helps me in that. And so because I don't come from really academic archival place, I'm able to kind of stretch my imagination into what this can be. And so in knowing what the community likes to do, and what the community needs, it helps me to kind of fuel all the possibilities for the archive

V

Vince Lee 13:27

rate. As a new archives within Houston, is there a process that you all have in terms of identifying potential materials or collections or even donors that you're considering for the archive?

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Harrison Guy 13:42

Yeah, so my strategy really was to go where I knew for sure things already were, because I knew that it would be easier to obtain those things. And I wouldn't have to spend a lot of time just hoping, wishing and digging. And so we have some key people that that have done great things in their lives. So I started out with kind of prominent people that may have awards, they may have, you know, programs, they may have things like that, that they can donate, but also people who have kind of in their own way served as archivists for different parts of our community. We have people who've taken pictures at the club for years, who have lots of

photographs, we have people who, who document drag shows for years, who have lots of videos. And so that's another strategy. We have a person who ran a magazine for years, so I knew that they probably have some hard copies of those magazines. So I really started out with kind of people who've done some things. And I definitely make it very clear that you don't have to have done something, you know, pivotal to put something in the archive. But it was just kind of like a great starting point. We're getting items in. And so that's been my strategy is to go where I knew first where things certainly was. And of course along the way you kind of learn new things as you talk to people they tell you, Oh, have you talked to this person and did you know that they may have this? People People just have ideas and say is this something You would want. And so it's a mix of kind of like starting out with those core kind of people, and then it kind of branching out from there.

V

Vince Lee 15:10

And can you tell us a little bit about who within the community are folks that you already know that use the Charles Law Community Archives? How can we access them? And are they available to the public?

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Harrison Guy 15:23

Um, yeah, so so far, the things that we collect are, are in the archive at the Gregory School, we have not really done anything yet that we thought, okay, this should be, you know, just something on the community side. And we should archive this as a community and maybe not Gregory school. So so far, everything that we collect is going directly to, to the Gregory school. And that's where, where you can go to research and find those things that, you know, there'll be digitizing them putting them online, but you can actually see the materials there at the Gregory School.

V

Vince Lee 15:50

Okay, great. And being part of the Houston public library, folks will know how to get to them through their website and to make an appointment.

H

Harrison Guy 15:58

Yes, for sure. For sure. So since they are, you know, an actual library within the system is very easy to find them.

V

Vince Lee 16:04

Okay. As, I guess, the founder of the archives, what do you hope that visitors take away from using the archives and interacting with the materials that are there?

H

Harrison Guy 16:15



HARRISON GUY 10:10

You know, I just really want people to know the whole story of the LGBTQ community and Houston, I think that for a long time, we have seen well documented a part of the LGBTQ community, right. And so that is a part. And I think the people that did that did a great job of documenting what they saw what was around them. But I also think that they would not see the things and in the places where they were not. And so, you know, it is very clear to me that we do not have the whole story. And so I just hope that this adds to what we already know to be an incredible, vibrant, and just amazing history of the community, that this adds a new layer, and we see it as a part of that history, a part of the overall LGBTQ history of youth of Houston, but also that we see this as City history, right, like these things that people did. We're not just, you know, over in the corner or over in Montrose. These are things that makes the city vibrant, that makes the city equitable. And so my hope is that they walk away just knowing a little bit, knowing the whole story.



Vince Lee 17:15

Yes. And then I guess my next question I have for us a two parter. As the founder of the archives, what have you learned since establishing the archives and being an activist in the community? And my second question to that would be where do you see the archives and community moving forward, since we're kind of in a unique time of grappling with these, you know, the themes of identity, race, inclusion, and of course, politics.



Harrison Guy 17:44

So what have I learned, and what I've learned, what I have already known, and why I thought I would be really good to do this is because I'm a very patient person. And so maybe it's just a reminder, more so than a learning is that relationships take time. And I think that there are a lot of people who don't understand that. So people, you know, have constantly asked me what's going on with the archive, what's going on with the archive, what's going on with the archive, because I think that people are excited. And they, they want to just see a bunch of things, right, they want to just see a bunch of items, you know, going there, but I think what people don't understand is that, you know, relationships take a lot of time, and especially with people who have a history of just being mistreated, and so our community doesn't trust easily. And so that me being a patient person and understand that, that, that that's a part of this process, has been a reminder that relationships take time. In the future, I just really want to see, you know, this archive used as a great, you know, place for research, you know, I want people to, to, to come here and learn about, you know, these people who should have been, you know, honored and talked about a long time ago, that just kind of missed the opportunity just because of the way that the way that the community was set up. And so I really hope that at some point, you know, schools, universities, and people all over the United States are really looking to this archive to learn more about Black LGBTQ people. As an aside of that, I really hope that at some point, it's a national archive. I'm starting out with local LGBTQ history. But you know, I've had conversations with people who say, well, we don't have this for our amazing thing that we've done in our city, would you take this for your archive? And I was like, Hey, that's a great question. And so there may be some opportunity for this to really highlight just Black LGBTQ people period.



10:27

 V**VINCE LEE 19:37**

Very interesting. And that's a very, I think, create a model to explore because archives have been very, I guess, parochial, or they focus in on certain areas or locales instead of looking at more nationally or internationally big picture. So for sure. The only other question I have for you, Harrison is Is there anything else you'd like to add? Talk about or maybe give a final takeaway to to our viewers about what we didn't cover from Christians. Yeah,

 H**HARRISON GUY 20:07**

I can talk a little bit about some of the items we now have, which are, which is very exciting. So most people probably know, because it was, you know, something that we talked about in the launch of the archive is that one of the first items that we received was the wheelchair for Barbara Jordan, from Chase bank when she was a, a board member at Chase. Once she was her, her, her health was failing. She needed a wheelchair to get to the board meetings. And so we were able to, to, to acquire that wheelchair from Barbara Jordan, which was an amazing first acquisition, right. And then Monica Roberts, who was just a pioneering trans woman in media, she passed away and we were able to get all of her local awards. We have her obituary the mask, or funeral happened during COVID. We have the mass that was that was distributed to all of the people at at her funeral. We have, you know, her her certificates from the mayor from serving on the mayor's board or pin from the mayor's board. So like all of her local kind of accolades. We have that in the archive, and then the founder of of our pride parade, Larry Beck Neris. You know, just this weekend, I did an interview with him. And he brought some amazing items. So I have his gavel from when he was president of the GLBT Political Caucus in 1980. He was the first Black man to be a delegate, at first out Black man to be a delegate for the Democratic National Convention. And I have his delicate pen. He gave me tons of buttons from all kinds of things from Mickey Leland Mickalene, his campaigns and got letters from Sheila Jackson Lee from Kathy Whitmer. And just all these politicians, because he was someone who was both in politics and doing activism in the LGBTQ community. So the items that he gave me are awesome, I think my favorite item that he gave us was two things a VHS, so we have a VHS of the full 1984 Pride Parade. And we have a cassette tape of the first radio ad for the parade that was on the radio. So, you know, it took a while to kind of get here. But those are some of the amazing items that we were starting to acquire.

 V**VINCE LEE 22:13**

Those are some very impressive materials and collection to bring in. And as an archivist, I'm excited to visit and also learn more about the history. That's that's Derrick within the community. Harrison, I really thank you for taking the time today for the interview, that we're working together in terms of doing for the collaborative exhibit that's going to be hosted at the Cushing Memorial Library on our, on our LGBTQ history. And I want to continue with luck and success in building the Charles Law Community Archives at the Gregory School, and in general is an archivist, I'm happy to lend a hand or help in any way that I can. So thank you so much, Harrison, I appreciate you taking time for the interview. Yeah, thank

 H**HARRISON GUY 23:00**

you. And it's really great for these archives to be in conversation with one another, I think in telling the whole story. which is kind of the mission of the archive. you know that we shouldn't

be in conversation with one another, because that indeed is the whole story.

v

Vince Lee 23:16

Thank you again for your time, sir. Thank you