Oral History # 032

An Interview With
Sue Lovell

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AN INTERVIEW WITH SUE LOVELL

ANN PINCHAK: This is Ann Pinchak interviewing Sue Lovell on June 13th, 2017, in Houston, Texas, about the early years of the AIDS crisis in Houston, Texas.

Please give me your full name.

SUE LOVELL: It’s Susan Lovell, but everybody has called me Sue except when I was young, and then they called me Susie, but I got too cool for that.

ANN PINCHAK: Tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

SUE LOVELL: I was born in Fresno, California, in the San Joaquin Valley, and I grew up there. I didn’t move away until I was 19, and then I moved to Houston, Texas, and have been here ever since.

ANN PINCHAK: Tell me a little bit about your family: your mom and dad, grandparents, siblings.

SUE LOVELL: My grandmother was born on the boat coming over from Ireland, and they settled in Chicago. She was raised in a large family of 13 children. My mother was adopted when my grandparents were older. Older then was 40. My grandmother and grandfather adopted my mom and then later, my aunt. My mother grew up in Chicago. After my grandfather died, my grandmother decided to move to the San Joaquin Valley to be with a couple of her brothers that had moved there and encouraged her. I was born there in 1950.

ANN PINCHAK: Did you have siblings?

SUE LOVELL: I do. I’m the oldest in the family. I have a sister, Nancy, who is two years younger; a brother, Donny, who is six years younger; and then I had a
youngest brother, Bobby, who was eight years younger, and he died in 1988 from HIV. Our family was evenly split. I’m a lesbian; my brother the youngest, gay; and then my sister and my other brother are both straight. It was an even split.

PINCHAK: Tell me, what was it like growing up in California? What was the attitude of the schools towards social issues raised? What was that like?

LOVELL: I went to Catholic schools. Actually, their views on social issues were very good. I went to high school in the 1960s. San Joaquin Valley is agriculture, so all the issues with migrant workers, with Cesar Chavez, were in play, and the churches became very involved in that.

My first view of the different attitudes and how sometimes things don’t fit is that the large ranchers and farmers in the Valley that used all this really cheap help, a lot of them were Catholic and big contributors to the Catholic diocese there in the Valley, and there was only one Catholic high school. Big donors. When the nuns and the priests started being active about the rights for these migrant workers, the attitude of those ranchers changed significantly because they felt threatened and they thought they’re taking away this cheap labor which allows me, the rancher and farmer, to give you money and contribute to your causes of building churches and everything, so why are you trying to stop that from happening?

Those discussions that went on were extremely interesting. Both sides were interesting. “How do you feel? What would you do?” That was my first kind of on really social issues, especially the schools, which were Catholic.

PINCHAK: Interesting to see that dynamic.

LOVELL: It was. My family was split. My father was a Republican. My mom was a
Democrat. My grandfather had been a ward boss, Democratic ward boss in Chicago during the Depression, so our family was very split. My father’s parents came from Nebraska and came to the Valley. My grandfather was a vet, and he went to work for someone there, so they migrated out there, and they were all Republican.

My first view into social issues was when John Kennedy ran for president. My grandmother, everybody, we were extremely excited about it. My father and his family were not happy. They were big Nixon people. The rule in our house was, it wasn’t dinner-table talk.

But when I would go to my grandparents’, my father’s parents’ house, they were for Nixon, and I remember walking in, in my Catholic school uniform, and I’d visit with them a lot, and hearing how the world would end if John Kennedy, that damn Irishman, Democrat, Catholic became president, and I was standing there in my little uniform. I was in eighth grade then. It was like okay. I guess this is sort of who we are, and this doesn’t really matter. It was a good lesson in people that are set in their ways; that sometimes even people personally aren’t with you. Their views stay pretty set.

Then during this last election we had, it was the same kind of discussions, because all my family is up in the San Joaquin Valley. The Valley is very Republican. It’s very rural and Republican.

PINCHAK: Tell me about your situation economically growing up. Were you middle class, and did that ever change?

LOVELL: We were middle class. My father was a body and fender man, mechanic. My mother didn’t work in those times. My grandmother lived with us, along with her
sister, my Great-Aunt Ann. My grandmother had a pension from my grandfather, a good pension. My Aunt Ann was retired from the Treasury Department, so she had a pension. We just converted the garage into a room, and they shared that room. A lot of families had that situation. I grew up in a pretty large family, and my Aunt Pat and Uncle Jack had six kids, and we were all very close, so essentially there were 10 kids. I was the oldest and had a cousin, Johnny, who was six months younger.

My aunt finished high school at San Joaquin Memorial, which is the same high school I graduated from and now three other generations. My Uncle Jack had an eighth-grade education, and he came from a poor, rural family with a lot of kids. He went into sheet metal, and he worked his whole life for the same company doing air conditioning, and he retired. He was a union man, and so he retired with a good pension when they had raised all their kids, and then they traveled, so I had a lot of texture. Middle class, blue collar, working, an aunt who had worked at the Treasury Department. It was a lot, but we were middle class.

Then my parents divorced when I was a freshman in high school, and we went from being middle class to being not poor, poor, but at least lower income. If it weren’t for my grandmother and her pension, we would have had a very difficult time.

PINCHAK: That’s hard, and that gives you a different view.

LOVELL: It does. It was different. I was the oldest, so for me it was very different. My siblings will give you a different kind of story.

PINCHAK: Tell me about when you decided to come to Houston, how you decided, why you decided, and that situation.
LOVELL: I knew I was gay since I was little. I didn’t know what you call it, but I knew, and I knew I was different. Probably everybody in my family knew I was different. Nobody just really said anything. I was this tomboy, and I didn’t fit in that little cube. My sister, who is two years younger, was very petite and feminine, and curly hair, blonde, curly hair, loved to play with dolls. We were so opposite, it was incredible. I knew, and I knew I was different.

I loved sports. Fortunately, there was in Fresno a softball league which I learned about through Catholic Youth Organization. Being in Catholic elementary school, had CYO, and so they had somebody that came in and taught PE when you were from the fourth grade up, and then from the sixth grade, you had teams in volleyball and basketball that you competed.

The woman that ran that was a woman named Kay Rich, and Kay Rich played softball for a semipro team in Fresno called the Fresno Rockets. When my mother told me about that, I was like, “Wow, oh, my God, this is incredible.”

I was like, “Ms. Rich, how do you play? How do you get started?”

She said, “I started in the — there’s the softball leagues in the recreation department.”

There was a team, and my mom took me for tryouts. I got on a team. I guess that was sixth or seventh grade. I played through there. I was in my element. I was so happy.

Then our CYO, our competitive teams, you played against all the other elementary schools. There were nine of them in Fresno, so you got to know a lot of the other people that you were going to go to high school with. Then when I went to eighth grade, I played all kinds of sports, but I continued then to play
softball, but by then I was good enough and tried out for the Fresno Rockets, the same team that Ms. Rich had played on. She’s in the Hall of Fame.

Then I got to play, so I traveled all summer up and down, all through California on weekends with this team. I was so happy. So I do that all summer and then go back to Catholic school, which ours was an all-girls’ on the same campus with an all-boys’. My friends that I had all knew that I was gay. It was good. It was really good.

As I graduated from high school, our team did not make the national tournament. The Rockets did not. But there was a national tournament in Phoenix, Arizona, so a bunch of us got in a car and drove, and then probably 10 of us had a motel room, and we came to watch the games. While I was there, I met these two women from Houston, Nell and Karen, and I sat with them the whole time, and we just hit it off and right away became friends, and they invited me to come that Christmas. This was in 1969, the Christmas of 1969, and I again drove with another friend. We came down here. I spent one week. They said stay another week.

I went home on January the 2nd, and I moved back on January 31st. I went home and told my mother, “I’m leaving. I’m going to Houston. I’m going to live with Nell and Karen. There’s work there.” I went around and cut lawns. I did everything I could to have money to come. They paid for my ticket, and then when I got a job I paid them back.

My mother was really upset, very freaked out. First, she doesn’t know, and then I didn’t think anything of it. Of course, now, being a parent, I would have been like, “You’re going where, with whom? I’ve never even met these
people.”

Also, in the family structure, since my father left, I took on responsibility with my mom. She was having a really rough time. I was like hey, I’m working here. I’m doing work. I’m giving you money, helping take care of my brothers and sisters. I’m a coach for CYO. I mean, I’m doing all these things, so it’s not like I’m not responsible. I just don’t know what I want to do, and there’s nothing that I want to do here in Fresno. There’s no way to get a skill set. I had picked grapes. I had packed peaches. They’re not fun.

So when I came here to Houston, it was like big city, and it was. The farthest exit west was Gessner, but the Hyatt had just been built, and there was a gay community here that knew Nell and Karen, because they had been playing softball. They were in their thirties when I met them, 30, 31. I thought they were so old. But they had friends and a group and a community, which is not what I had, did not have in California at all. Of course, I was underage. The bars were like out in the vineyards outside of the city, and they got raided regularly, but when I moved here, the bars got raided regularly too. There was just no sense, and the older lesbians that I played, nobody talked about it. Of course, everybody knew. I was young, and in some ways they were very wary of me because they were all teachers and stuff. They could lose their jobs. My mom could just go on a nutter and accuse one of them. It was great to be playing and being around, but there weren’t any, really, friendships.

PINCHAK: It took a lot of guts. Tell me about what kind of work you did when you first came to Houston.

LOVELL: I got a job. In fact, it’s right across the street in this big building right here, in
the American General building there, for Riviana Foods. I was in their office services department. I delivered all the mail and picked up all the mail to the three floors, so I knew everybody in the whole place, but then I had to learn to run a printing press because there were no copy machines then. When they sent out really nice letters from the president or vice president, they wanted them to look really nice, so I had to learn to run a printing press, which I did.

Now I had a skill. So when I had reached the highest pay rate with office services, they were like, “We want to promote you. We want to promote you to accounting.”

I’m like, “I’m not going into accounting. You don’t understand. Math and numbers are not my strong suit.”

I then heard about Marion Coleman, who owned House of Coleman, and that she was looking for someone, and so I went over and interviewed with her, and I ended up working for her. She was one of the first women printers in the city. I was probably the second or third. I worked at House of Coleman for her, and she then had a small garage apartment behind there, and I rented that apartment from her.

Now I’m living in the middle of Montrose, almost at the corner of Alabama and Montrose Boulevard. Now I’m 21, so I could go to the bars. There were in Montrose a lot of bars and a lot of places to go and meet people and have fun.

Because of moving here, that one skill of printing, actually that kind of set me on my whole life’s course. It took me there, and then I left there, and it took me somewhere else. Consequently how I ended up being involved politics was
because by then I had my own little, small printing company.

PINCHAK: Tell me about that. How did you first get involved in gay politics?

LOVELL: I’ve been to all the parades. By then, I had friends and went. The Caucus had started. There was a movement here, but it wasn’t anything I was really involved in because I was like, “I’ve already done that.” I did it in California in the 1960s. I went to Berkeley. I marched. I marched Cesar Chavez. I did all that, so I’m like, “Check that off my list. I’m done with that.”

My brother then graduated. Bobby graduated from high school and came here to visit. While he was here visiting, by then I was living in a three-bedroom apartment with some friends, and he kind of said to them, “I think I’m gay.”

They’re like, “Well, have you told your sister?”

“Well, no. I thought maybe you-all could tell her.”

“No, we’re not telling her.”

Consequently he told me, and I’m like. “Okay. Well, good. Real good.”

He said, “Well, I want to move here.”

I’m like, “Okay. I understand all that. There’s not anything.”

So he stayed here for a while. Then he went home, got his car, came back here, then decided no, went back home, then came back, and then he was here. So then he was then working in restaurants, but he met a whole group of gay men, and within that group there were people that were politically involved with the Caucus, and so he was hearing all of that, and he’d kind of tell me about it.

“Well, that’s nice.”

Then one day, he called me and he said, “I hope you’re not upset, but I volunteered you to print the newsletter for the Gay Political Caucus.”
So I said okay. I would do it. I said, “But here’s the deal.” My shop was out in Spring Branch. “I’ll do them, but somebody has to come pick them up. You do, or somebody, but I’ll do them. Bring me the stuff, and I’ll do them.”

So one evening, he couldn’t come get them, and he said, “Can you please take them to the meeting?”

I’m like, “All right. I’ll take them to the meeting.”

So I walked into the meeting, and I remember they were meeting at the Holiday Inn on South Main. Now it’s housing for veterans. It’s kind of right there almost underneath the freeway. I remember I walked in the room, and the meeting had started, and there was this gentleman at the front of the room, and his face, his eyes were closed. I mean, his face was puffy, and it was horrible. He was telling how that weekend he had been in Montrose going to the bars, and these people came along, got out of a car, and just beat the hell out of him.

I was like, “Wow, how does that happen?” because I hadn’t felt that when I was in Montrose, but obviously have, just because I was gay.

“Wow, well, that’s not right, but here are your newsletters.”

So I had to wait, and I just sat down. I was sitting there listening to him, and then I looked around the room, and there these, some young, some old, but they were sane and they were smart, and it just hit something. It was just like, “Hey.”

So then I said, “Okay. I’ll do your newsletters. That’s what I’m going to do. That’s what I’ll do for you. That’s my contribution.” It’s kind of like not going to church, but I’ll buy the altar flowers.

So I started doing that, and of course the more I would deliver them, and
then I would whatever, and then I got to know people, and then they just kind of slowly kind of pulled me in. But by then it just hit me like, “Wow, I could really make a difference here. I’m really kind of smart about this stuff, what to do.”

That’s how I got involved, and I came in as a board member, and then became vice president, and then became the first woman president of the Caucus.

PINCHAK: That’s amazing. When did you first become aware of young men dying, and how did you become aware?

LOVELL: My brother’s group of friends, he was really close to a guy named Michael Wilson. Michael Wilson was at M.D. Anderson. He wrote a lot of their medical pamphlets and everything. He worked in the cancer area with Dr. Mansell, Peter Mansell, who was one of the leading researchers on cancer. We were having a discussion somewhere, and it came up. Bobby came and said, “I’ve got friends, man, they’re looking sick. They’re bad. There’s this thing.”

Michael said, “Yeah, we’re hearing about it from L.A., Dr. Mansell is, and from New York City, sort of big centers, and it seems to be only in the gay male population that’s at risk.”

I said, “Well, is everybody kind of concerned about this?”

“Well, yeah, but not really.”

“Well, are we concerned in Houston?”

“Well, we don’t really know.”

The other cities are starting to do epidemiology. They’re starting to be able to look and see how many other doctors in their health departments are now involved because they’re concerned about this. They don’t know how it’s spread. Nobody knew how it was spread. They hadn’t figured it out yet. They thought
maybe it was doing poppers. It was like anything that was gay-related. Maybe it’s this. Maybe it’s this.

PINCHAK: Just to explain, poppers were?

LOVELL: Poppers were amyl nitrate, whatever. It’s like those, when you’re going to faint, what do you call them? Anyway, you pop it, and then you sniff it.

PINCHAK: Like a smelling salt.

LOVELL: Yeah. And then it was like speed. They would pass them all around.

Everybody would be [indicating]. That’s why everybody would be so skinny.

So nobody knew. They knew it was going on. They were waiting to see what was here. M.D. Anderson people becoming concerned went actually to the City of Houston Health Department. They didn’t really want to hear it. They weren’t really concerned. Part of that was because the year we had a nondiscrimination ordinance not passed during that time in a referendum very much like what happened with HERO [Houston Equal Rights Ordinance]. We got our butts kicked 4-to-1, and it freaked everybody out, and all of a sudden you had this huge antigay organized group in the city. You hadn’t really felt that before. All the electeds, the mayor, everybody was really freaked out. They had really backed away from us.

PINCHAK: Who all was involved in the research at M.D. Anderson?

LOVELL: Peter Mansell was there. Guy Newell was there. He was one of the heads of.

What they did is, there was a group within the community that formed a group called the KS [Kaposi’s sarcoma] Committee because they were talking to their friends in New York and L.A. and San Francisco, who were saying, “Wow, this is really serious. People are afraid. Nobody is seeing them. The doctors
don’t want to see them. They don’t want them in their pharmacies. The dentists won’t see them. They’re getting kicked out of their apartments. Everybody is freaked because nobody knows what this is.”

So they formed a group here, and they asked me to join. I joined because I was still involved with the Caucus and we needed a liaison between the Caucus and them. We felt really strongly at that point it should not be a political issue. It really at that point was still a health issue, but to keep the Caucus apprised of what was going on.

The first time we realized how very serious it was, was sitting in a meeting with Guy Newell and Mansell. Michael Wilson was there. Michael McAdory, who would become head of this KS Committee, who was one of the managers of one of the more popular bars, who was sick, very clearly sick with what was then called GRID, gay-related immune deficiency, of which it became HTLV-3 [human T-lymphotropic virus type 3]. It had not become AIDS or HIV yet.

We were sitting, and they said to us, “We really do believe strongly that this is passed through body fluids.”

We’re like, “Okay. Like getting sweaty or whatever? Yeah?”

“No, not really. It’s either passed through blood, or it’s passed through sexual activity.”

It didn’t really register. Everybody was like, “Huh? Oh, okay.”

“Here’s what you need to do,” and this is what they said. “You need to go tell your community to quit having unprotected sex, or they’re all going to die, given the activity, and given what we’re seeing, and given what’s going on.”

We’re like, “Okay. But that isn’t going to work. I mean, really? Do you
really think so?”

Somebody said, “Well, there’s no difference. That would be like going and telling all heterosexual people, ‘You have to quit having sex.’ That isn’t going to happen. So let’s not lay this thing on about we’re different. ‘We really don’t like your behavior.’ What a great opportunity to say, ‘You’ve got to quit it, now.’ But you would not say” — and it has been shown since, heterosexual people get exposed, they don’t stop either.

Then it really did set in, and then we were all mad, like, “Why did you tell us this?” But we were mad because, “Why did you let us see our future? Why did you put this crystal ball in front of it?”

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

PINCHAK: That’s terrible.

LOVELL: Yeah, it was.

PINCHAK: What did you do? Did you organize a group?

LOVELL: We already had a group. It was a very small group, and they had already started to raise some funds, but the purpose now was to go to the City of Houston Health Department, ask them to do epidemiology, which was for all the doctors to go through their files. By then, there were symptoms and there were markers. Hepatitis C was a marker. STD’s were markers, what they thought were markers then. Go through how many people do you have coming in that have KS? That have pneumocystis pneumonia, which nobody had seen. How many?

The City of Houston Health Department refused to do it. They wouldn’t do it because they didn’t want that crystal ball either. It was like, “If we don’t see it, it will go away.”
It’s not going away.

Then what we did is, there were a lot of doctors that treated men in the community, and that they felt comfortable going to. We actually had them go back through and look. What they found was very alarming. It was like, “This is real. It’s here. Here’s how many of these I see new a week. If I see this many here, and now we’re asking about, like, ‘How many sexual partners have you had?’ When we see that, this is an epidemic. This is catastrophic.”

PINCHAK: Who were some of the members of that original group?

LOVELL: It was Michael McAdory, Michael Wilson. I have to go through. I have the original. I can give that to you. Not all of them, off the top of my head.

[Minutes, By-Laws Meeting, Kaposi’s Sarcoma Committee of Houston, June 28, 1982.
SEE APPENDIX]

PINCHAK: Did you get out any information? Print anything?

LOVELL: What we did is, after we saw that, and then nationally there were all these big national gay health conventions that happened. Within that, after that, the sole thing was based about HIV, HTLV-3, finally KS/AIDS is what it was called for a while. “What’s happening? What are you-all doing?”

By then, the other cities were smart, because they saw it as a public health threat, and they were giving money to these groups. San Francisco, L.A., New York. We were getting nothing. We came back and decided we had to do something because our community had to hear what was going on.

Once we were told that this was body fluids, sexually transmitted, there was a group here that raised $5,000. I had my printing business. They came to me. Michael Wilson wrote the booklet, along with Dr. Mansell and Dr. Newell,
about, “Here’s what this is. Here’s what it looks like. Here’s the symptoms. By the way, it’s sexually transmitted, which means you cannot have unprotected sex anymore. Condoms are your best hope at stopping this.”

We printed it. We distributed it ourselves, put it in all the bars, of which you had to convince bar owners, “You need to put this in here.”

First of all, “It will be bad for business.”

“Well, it’s going to be really bad for business when all your customers are dead. So it is, it’s the socially responsible thing to do, and we must do it. We must do it.”

When it hit the other cities, we were vilified. “You’re going to be the downfall of the gay rights movement. We’ve all made this progress. You-all just got your butts kicked in a nondiscrimination ordinance, and now you’re trying to kill it for everybody.”

It was like, “Excuse me. This doesn’t have anything to do with it. This has to do with lives, saving lives. You might feel comfortable, because you get $1 million in grants for this. Well, okay. But we have to do this on our own, but we’re doing it because it’s the right thing.”

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: It was the first-ever AIDS booklet ever printed, ever. We’re trying to submit it to the Smithsonian. It should be there. I mean, the first, ever, in the whole world. I can still close my eyes and remember standing at the press, printing this booklet, really going, “Oh, my God.”

Of course, having a brother who was popular, beautiful, and my mom and family now calling and saying, “Do you think Bobby has it?”
I said, “You have to talk to Bobby.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

Of course, I had already figured out more than likely he did. He probably figured out more than likely he did, but there was nothing you could do. So you can live your life and be happy. You were happy except your friends were dying all around you and nobody was helping them. Or you can just be consumed. And so that’s how we went for a while.

Then when they finally got a test, then being in a city that had no discrimination ordinance, we now did become very different from the other cities which did have nondiscrimination ordinances. Now we had to say to people, “Don’t take the test. Don’t take the test. If you take the test and they find out, you’re going to lose your job because you won’t be protected. They can throw you out of your apartment. They can throw you out of your job. They can whatever,” thinking, I think, actually that we might could come back on a nondiscrimination ordinance, but that isn’t how it played out at all. Nobody really did any big AIDS until it got so bad that people knew people, people in their families, their workers.

Actually, it was Ken Lay and Linda Lay from Enron fame that hosted the first big AIDS fundraiser at Jones Hall, and Dionne Warwick was the performer that was there. That actually was the first time that the nongay community said, “Wait a minute. This really is public health. We really do, we really do have to do this.”

Finally, we did work a way on the testing to where people wouldn’t know.
The test would be confidential. The results of the test would be, which then also led into the fact of our community gave blood. We thought it was a good thing to do. We thought it was one of those citizenship things. Now you had to figure out. You can’t go to somebody who was a teacher, who joined you in the blood drive every year at the school and now is not going to and they’re a single man because now everybody is going to freak. “Oh, well, you’re gay. Well, you have AIDS.”

So we sat down with the Gulf Coast Blood Bank. Bill Teague was the head of it. The bar codes had just come into existence. “So here’s what we can do. You have an application. We believe our community will tell you the truth. They know this is — they will give you their history, which will be able for you to determine if that blood comes out and doesn’t go into the system.”

So they took just a bar code so the people were able to put their name and they put the bar code. That was protected, of which then they would take the blood out, but they would also be able to — they felt like they could then stay in touch with them. In fact, I think in the beginning we did keep it anonymous. You were just a bar code.

PINCHAK: So you worked it out as you went?

LOVELL: We did, and we were one of the few blood banks in the whole nation that never had one contamination, ever, which says volumes for our community, in responsibility.

PINCHAK: It does, and leadership.

LOVELL: Also, again, every other city is getting a lot of money. Everybody else is working all this out. We in the community had to sit down and work it out with
people, and so we had to do a lot of this, which I think, in the end, ended up why we have so many people in this city that are leaders involved in things, because we had to pick up and take responsibility for all of this. We weren’t just money managers or money changers. We had to do the whole thing.

PINCHAK: Along those lines, when you first printed that groundbreaking pamphlet, who provided the money? Where did it come from?

LOVELL: It was a group called C.H.E., Citizens for Human Equality. They were a split-off from the Gay Political Caucus. The Gay Political Caucus, a guy named Steve Shiflett was the head of the Gay Political Caucus. He was a friend of my brother, Bobby. That’s how. A guy named Larry Bagneris decided to run. Larry Bagneris is from New Orleans. He was Creole. He could be anything. He really could. He moved for more diversity, women and diversity in the Caucus. He put together a coalition of women that he knew from NOW [National Organization for Women], lesbians who then NOW was trying to purge them out. After doing all the work, “We don’t want you anymore.” He convinced them to join the Caucus and vote for him, and then the Caucus would become more diverse and open to women. In the beginning, the Caucus was just a bunch of white guys.

He won. When he won, Steve Shiflett was upset that he had lost, and he broke off. At that point we had some Republicans — these Republicans were very different — in the group. They broke off because they then viewed the Caucus now as all these NOW radical women, all these Democrats. Now you’ve got Larry Bagneris in charge, and my God, you’ve got a woman who was the vice president. I mean, it was not what they had bought into. It wasn’t it at all. So they broke off and formed their own group called Citizens for Human Equality,
which you notice didn’t have anything gay in it at all, and we called them the brie and Chablis crowd because they liked to stand and have meetings and eat brie and drink Chablis.

PINCHAK: They raised the money.

LOVELL: They raised the money. They did. To all full credit, they did. A lot of their group was being affected, and they stepped up. They raised the money. Then they got Michael Wilson to — they went and said, “If you’ll write this pamphlet, we have the money.”

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: It is.

PINCHAK: You mentioned that Houston had its own groups and formed its own, and that on the first group was the committee with Michael McAdory and Michael Wilson, and they called it the —

LOVELL: KS/AIDS Committee.

PINCHAK: Were you on the board?

LOVELL: I was.

PINCHAK: Who set up the organization?

LOVELL: Michael McAdory was the first president, and he set that up. Then when Michael got so sick — Michael was good because he was a bar manager, so he wasn’t afraid of getting fired. We called him Mac. He was this big, tough, macho-looking guy. He was really the first president. But then when he got really sick and he could not anymore, Michael Wilson then became the next president of the organization. There were about eight or nine board members then. Then people from the Montrose Counseling Center, the clinic, organizations
that were really being kind of affected by all this, stepped up, but it was all people just from the community, and the goal was only to be an educational — we had the pamphlets, so first we did the booklet.

We also reprinted, out of New York, which was “When a Friend Has AIDS,” that Luis Palacios, Dixie Beckham, and Michael Shernoff, they had a practice in Chelsea. It was called Chelsea Counseling. They wrote that for the groups in New York. So we used that, that we could give to people so that you would know how to treat your friend or for families.

But then now having a campaign and having to tell your community you have to have safe sex, we sat down and actually designed and were the first people to design and promote — literally had a whole campaign which was pamphlets we handed out in the bar. We used teddy bears. That’s how teddy bears came in because teddy bears, you could use to show certain sexual positions and different things, and I guess it wasn’t offensive to people as is using real human beings. We designed them so that they would fit in the back pocket of 501 Levi’s, which everybody wore 501 Levi’s, the button-ups. It would fit in the back pocket.

There was a thing that guys had handkerchiefs in their back pocket, you know, were different things of “what I like.” So we did a black-and-white checkered. That’s what we used, which meant you could go out and use that, which means, “I’m into safe sex,” because guys in gay bars didn’t really talk to each other a lot, so it was like, “So that’s said.”

Then we found some of the hunkiest guys in the community and said, “Would you be our models, our role here? ‘Here I am, man. I’m hunky, but I’m
They went out to all the bars, and they had different events and all of that, just different things to say, “Hey, it’s cool. Hey, it’s the only way you can be. It’s the only way you can stay alive. It’s not the most effective. It’s not 100 percent effective, but it’s all we have.”

The groups liked it so much that we picked up and went into different cities and showed them, and they all customized their own, but essentially how we had done it. We had a safe-sex calendar of these guys like the firefighters and the police do and give to people, and these guys became celebrities in the community. I like to think that it was effective. The bars had the condoms. It was like, “Hey, people can continue to drink. But if you drink, that’s when people get in trouble, or if you do drugs, that’s when you get in trouble,” and really talked about that, like, “You’ve got to have a condom with you. You must. You just can’t.”

If somebody says, “Hey, do you want to have sex with me?” and they won’t use a condom, it’s the same as somebody walking in and sitting down with you with a gun in their hand and saying, “I’m going to put a single bullet, and then you know what? We’re going to play a little Russian roulette before we have sex.” It’s absolutely Russian roulette with your life.

PINCHAK: That’s great. So it started off as education. Then did it evolve, and how did it evolve?

LOVELL: Right, it was education. It evolved. First we met. We had a little office over on — the building is gone now — California Street, little bitty, tiny. It was like a closet. Then the people — which now where Spec’s and all that is, Liberty Bank
was there; it was called the Liberty Bank Building then — they gave us an office that we could have over there for our meetings and stuff. Everybody knew that we met there.

We were meeting one day, and we were discussing different things. We’re sitting there, and we’ve got all these people that are being thrown out of their apartments. We can’t stop that, but we can figure out where we can put people temporarily until they can get their Social Security disability. By then, we were working with Social Security to speed up and help people. We had that, which wasn’t educational, but it really wasn’t a big social service program either, but we started to do that.

Then at one meeting there was a knock at the door, and there were a couple of people there, and they were very, very sick, and they were like, “Hey, we’ve got nowhere to go. We don’t have any food,” and everybody dug in their pockets.

I remember sitting back down and saying, “Well, next time we meet, we better bring some more, because there’s going to be other people, because there was an absolute need. We really need to rethink.”

Everyone said we need to rethink our purpose, because the education is there. The real focus now is on taking care of people. There were no other big groups that had really stepped up. People individually stepped up. Bruce Smith stepped up over at Bering, the first dental clinic.

By then, we were now the AIDS Foundation, and so we’re like, “Okay. What can we do?”

Well, food is a big issue, but we can’t keep helping people out. So we put
together a committee, and they started the first AIDS food pantry. We did that. That was down on Westheimer. People could come, get good food, healthy food, whatever.

We went from having just a temporary, like three months while you get your SSI, to looking for somewhere people could permanently live, and we bought an apartment complex in Montrose. We started all this. So we did the food pantry, had the first apartment complex.

None of the other cities were doing this because by then, their cities had kicked in. Their housing, everybody, they were finding housing. They had laws that they can’t throw people out. It was very different dynamics. For us, we had to figure out all of this pretty much on our own and raise the money to do so.

The first AIDS apartment complex that we bought is back behind Dunlavy Park on a cul-de-sac there. We decided we would buy it. There were two small units. It was a good buy. It was a good thing to do. It’s in Montrose. It will be good.

We go to buy it, and the neighborhood over there files a suit, a lawsuit, which I have to tell you just about took the wind out of everybody’s sails. It was like a kick in the gut from your own community, your own neighbors, your own. Like, “Come on, we’ve told you.” It was on a cul-de-sac over here. It’s wasn’t in the middle of a block here. These people have to go live. They’re going to live somewhere. Why not have it here, where we then could have case managers come in and take care of people?

Vince Ryan was the council member, and to Vince’s credit, he stood up and said, “Huh-uh, I’m for this.”
By then, John Paul Barnich, who was an attorney — and John Paul Barnich looked like Grizzly Adams; he had this beard. He was the kindest, gentlest man ever, except when he felt like people were being treated unfairly, then there was a part of him that came out that you better watch out for. And he was a really good attorney, and he’s like, “Thank you, Vince, but we think we’re going to file our own lawsuit. We think that we’ll win in court.”

He filed, and on behalf of the AIDS Foundation, a counter lawsuit individually that held all of them individually responsible that if we went to court and won, individually they were all responsible, all the people in that neighborhood. When that happened, they backed up and rethought their position.

And then we did win. Of course, we didn’t go, because by then, they had said — and they thought we would drop the suit. We didn’t drop the suit until 10 years later, when John Paul finally said, “Well, I guess I’ll go ahead and drop this suit.”

I said, “Yeah, because none of their neighbors are probably there anymore, not a lot of them. Yeah, that would be a good thing to do.”

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: We did all these firsts, did all these things to set up for people, and then the Counseling Center kicked in with their services. The Montrose Clinic kicked in with their services. We had a group set up for people’s pets. It was under us, the money that was raised. I’ll tell you, it was far easier sometimes to raise money for those pets than it was for people. Actually, at some point in time — we could never raise enough money, I mean, so we had people that were hungry and we didn’t have the money to feed.
The pet program had a bunch of money. We took and transferred that money over to feed people with it, that we would pay it back, but at that point, there weren’t any hungry dogs, but there were hungry people, or cats, there were, and the group got really upset, and we decided we should split, which I was like, “Yeah, you have to make your decisions; we have to make our decisions.” If it came down to it, we would all choose, if the money is there, to feed people, and then we’ll figure out how to do the pets. That was the only time we ever had any kind of split within anybody in our group.

PINCHAK: You talk about funding, and you talk about having to do it yourselves. What about organizations like the United Way?

LOVELL: There were people within United Way that were very supportive of us, that saw what we were doing. We made an application to United Way. We made it through all the committees, and we made it to their appropriations committee, and we were on the list to be funded. It was like, “Wow, we finally have an ally in the whole burden on us.” And then all of a sudden, we got a call from somebody on the appropriations committee that’s saying our name had dropped off the list, just dropped.

The head of United Way at that point, her name was Betty Beane, and I remember people that were involved in that process going to her and saying, “What are you doing? We know that name was on there,” and went to the board and had a closed meeting, but the real thing is that it was decided by that then-the-board that it was still too controversial and they were afraid if they’d have funded us, that they would lose donors for other — and all the people they raise money for, they’re all good causes. They are. They were afraid that if they funded us,
the money would drop off, and then those causes would hurt too. It was a real kick in the gut.

The good thing that always comes out of this is, you pick up more allies and more people that pick up the sword with you and that see what’s happening and understand what’s happening to you. So now we had a big, huge group of people. I worked for FedEx, and there were other people that worked for big companies that were big contributors to United Way. We just went to our people and said, “You know, instead of giving money to United Way, why don’t you give some money to us? Or you know what? If you’re for Big Sisters, Big Brothers, if you’re for another group, don’t give it through United Way. Just give it directly to those groups. Could we give you information on how you could do that?”

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: We essentially boycotted them, boycotted United Way, not the organizations they funded. We were very clear about, “You should give to them, but not through United Way.” There were some people under Betty Beane that were with us. Consequently, right after that, Betty Beane left to go run the United Way in New York, which we just alerted all our Gay Men’s Health Crisis friends in New York about Betty Beane. I think she probably changed the way she did things there. There was kind of a preemptive to her, like, “You better not do how you did to Houston.” In all fairness, it was her board that made that decision, but also she didn’t push back because she was ambitious within the organization.

So then the next time around, we did. We became a United Way agency and were funded, not like all the other groups, but it was something you could go
out, when you went to do fundraising, and say, “Here.”

Then the AIDS Foundation, we grew. The City never — even now, the City probably only gives $1 million, compared to other cities, but we were able to go out and raise funds and do other things. We left the Liberty Bank Building. We found an office. We decided that the board couldn’t do this anymore we really needed an executive director, and kind of set this up because we were in this for the long term. I mean, this was not something that was going away at all.

I stayed on the board for 12 years, and then finally I left. It was time to leave, but I have to tell you, it was discouraging to look at new statistics, and you’d look, and we had a breakdown of the new people that were coming in, and it was like by then, after 12 years, the first wave of people, most of them were dead. In 12 years, I had somebody coming in that’s 24. You were 12. You’ve had a whole teenage and young years of being educated about this.

It was at that point I said, “I’ve done all I can. I need to pick up and do” — but other people come in, but really, like, this is not how I’m going to spend the rest of my life, and I need to move on and do other things.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

PINCHAK: That makes sense. You talked about that Houston initially raised money itself. What were some of the other organizations?

LOVELL: It was mainly around the bars. The Colt 45’s, which was a group out of the Brazos River Bottom, that they raised money really for social service, taking care of people. The drag queens in the city were tremendous, and they slowly died one by one. They would have big drag shows and raise money and do things for you. It really did come out of the, initially through the first years, really through the
gay community and through the bar scene.

PINCHAK: Then you talked about that it eventually grew outside the community?

LOVELL: You know, the community is not the same. There are different — there was a group within the community that thought, “This isn’t going to happen to me. I’m not going to bars and running around and being crazy and whatever. This isn’t going to happen to me.” But of course, it did. So it was a more professional group.

There was one group called — and they’re still alive — Executive and Professional Association of Houston, which was initially mainly gay men. Some lesbians did join in. All of a sudden, it was reaching them, and so they were raising money. So it wasn’t just the, “Hey, you guys in the bar scene that are going out and doing all this, and we’re in relationships, and we’re not doing that, it isn’t going to affect us.” Well, of course, it is. So it just affected more and more people.

As it affected more people, the lesbian community kicked in because at first, they were like, “Hey, this isn’t” — whatever. But then as they saw, as we saw what was happening within our community and our friends, they stepped in and started to do.

Then, of course, the organizations, when they did the first, down at Jones Hall, the big fundraiser then, then after that there were a lot of different groups, different organizations, PFLAG, all those organizations. At that time, everything was about AIDS. The Gay Political Caucus was still in a very valuable role of electing people that were going to help us, so I mean eventually the health department did do epidemiology because there was pressure.
But in Kathy Whitmire’s administration, there were gay men and lesbians that worked for her that were more protective of her than they were of their community. There was a community that had elected Kathy Whitmire, our community, who had what we’re told — I was one of the voices that said, “She’s letting us die. She’s not doing anything. They’re more afraid of their political than they are about what’s going on here.”

PINCHAK: Tell me about early on. Politically, what kind of clout did the gay community have? What was going on in Houston? What was it like, and what kind of pull did the gay community have initially?

LOVELL: There was a very active, large gay community in Montrose. Montrose then was like what you see on the north side now, or the east end. People had left because of desegregation. You had a lot of wonderful homes here, but people had moved out. At first it was kind of a hippy, Haight-Ashbury kind of, artists and whatever. Then in Houston — other cities’ gay bars were run by the — they were Mafia, uncontrolled. They’re a way of laundering money. Our bars here were not Mafia-controlled. They were just individuals opening bars, business people. It's all, “Hey, there’s a lot of people want to go out dancing. I’m going to make some money,” a lot of them. And so we had a lot of gay bars. Cheap rent here, community moving in, but mainly the bars were here. And then over at what is now Midtown, but that Midtown, the top part of it was Fourth Ward and the bottom part was Third Ward. Over there, all through there, where the Brazos River Bottom used to be, Depository, but it was cheap, so they could lease them, but through here. So it was more bars and more community came here. Well, I could just go to the bar.
It grew and grew and grew, and more people here buying homes. They were inexpensive, and we just kind of built the community here along with different artists and different people that had moved in here.

The Caucus started because they were raiding the bars and gay people were not being treated right, although we were here. There were people being beat up. But the bars were being raidied, and so it was just during that time when there was after Stonewall, the cities were standing up and saying, “We’re not doing this.”

So there was a corps of people who were like, “This isn’t right. We’re having to pay taxes. We live in this neighborhood. We go to the bars. Why should they be raided?” So they decided to start the Gay Political Caucus. Then you had all these bars, and then you had what is now the Bayou Art Festival used to be the Westheimer Colony Art Festival on Westheimer. They had an art league here. It was one of the best festivals, because it was funky and it was fun. It was a perfect opportunity to build a base by registering voters, so you could stand out in front of the bars and say, “Registered to vote?”

“No.”

“Would you like to register to vote?”

During the Westheimer Colony Art Festival, we would be all up and down Westheimer. “Hey, would you like to be registered to vote?”

“Sure.”

“Would you like to get a newsletter from the Caucus?”

“Oh, okay.”

There were no computers. It was kept in shoeboxes. But now you’re
building a base, which if you’re going to have an organization, it’s about electing people, it’s about having votes, it’s about having a base of voters you can deliver to people. It built itself up to finally Eleanor Tinsley was running, from the school board. She was running for city council at large against an incumbent. There was a group of progressives in this city that were not just gay people, but were — there was still not an African American on the school board, and then Hattie Mae White was elected, and then she’d make a motion, but nobody would second it.

Then Gertrude Barnstone, who was married to Howard Barnstone, was elected by a coalition here through Montrose simply to second Hattie Mae’s motions. What she was saying, “Get out there.”

So now you’re throwing all these gay people in, all these art people, progressive, old hippies. Now you’ve got an area that’s really progressive and really wants to make a change and do things.

When Eleanor Tinsley decided to run against Frank Mann, who had been there 12 years, her advisors said, “We need to pick up some new voters. There’s this new group. It’s the Gay Political Caucus. We think you should go and screen.”

Some of her advisors were like, “No.”

But she was like, “I’m doing it.”

So she did. She came and she screened, and the Caucus endorsed her. The minute we did, Frank Mann said she was endorsed by the queers and odd wads.

They made T-shirts. Nobody would wear a T-shirt that said “Queer,” but
everybody would be an odd wad.

We started working the Montrose precincts, which there are 10 of them. In the meantime, people started running for precinct judges, and the precinct judges were all gay through here. This was our area. This was our turf.

What happened then was, when it was time to take all our voter registration cards in, we walked down there with 5,000 voter registration cards — cards — and we put them in small boxes. They were in small boxes — not one big box, small boxes — so there was a whole train of people and dollies bringing in these cards. Of course, all down through the tax assessor’s office, it was like, “Oh, my God, they brought in all these cards. Oh, my God, all these people can vote.”

So now we’re the only people that had all those names, and it was actually on cards, duplicates, addresses, that we could then say, “We’ve endorsed this person. You need to vote for them, and here’s why.”

It was, “Yes, we ought to be able to go and socialize without the police raiding,” but it was also about, “Eleanor Tinsley came off the school board. We want to have good schools in our neighborhoods. It helps raise your property values,” those issues, and so she won.

PINCHAK: What happened with Kathy Whitmore?

LOVELL: With Kathy Whitmire, back in the days, there were no computers. You had to send out newsletters, essentially what you did. Everything had to be printed and delivered. In order to do that and do it cheap, you had to do bulk rate, which meant you had to have an assembly line of people. My printing business, I had a folder. Everybody that ran wanted me to endorse them so they could use my
folder for their mail lines or to print their stuff. The Caucus would bring all these volunteers, and that’s what we did. We could do a bulk mailing in nothing flat because we all knew how to — we folded stuff. We knew how to do it and do it quickly and how to put all the zip codes together and how to take it down there. Also there was this lesbian that worked on the dock down there at the post office that was like our bags got thrown in first. It was those little connections, but it was invaluable in those days. It really was.

So Kathy ran. She needed a lot of volunteers, and we were her volunteers. Whenever they needed 100 volunteers, we could get volunteers. We essentially were very instrumental with our votes and volunteering and helping her get elected and beating the sheriff, an incumbent.

The night that she won, she had promised she would come to a gay bar, which was the Parade, which has since been torn down, on Richmond. There were people that were there, and that’s when it became first like, “Well, thank you-all very much, but” — and she was told she had to go. I mean, she had to go. There was a promise. She came in, and the community erupted, and they thought everything was all good.

Then the Caucus got shoved into this nondiscrimination ordinance, and this was again through the group C.H.E., who had supported Anthony Hall. We supported Nikki Van Hightower. We lost. He sponsored the ordinance. And then just déjà vu all over, just like HERO, which was the first, HERO I. Nobody raised any money. There wasn’t a good campaign. Got our butts kicked. When we did, though, then everybody got freaked and backed off.

I was president of the Caucus then. When all this happened, they all got
freaked out because there was this now — they ran what they called the Straight Slate against people that the Caucus had endorsed before. They were organized. They came out of the Moral Majority. It was here. It was something we hadn’t felt before.

Then part of it was fueled by the fact there were people that were mad that Kathy Whitmire, a woman, had become mayor, that the old guard had. There were people on council that had been Kathy’s allies, our allies, that they felt like Kathy had not treated them with respect and treated them well, because Kathy is very introverted and not really good people skills.

Now she’s vulnerable. So the Chamber of Commerce, Louie Welch and them, used this, thinking they could take her out. People on council were going to use this, thinking they could take her out based on this. Kathy backed up. She’s the one that had more to lose, a lot to lose, and it wasn’t until the very end before the January election that she decided she should get involved, and it was way too late.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

PINCHAK: What role did AIDS play? Was there a question at any point about what Louie Welch would do about the AIDS crisis, with a mic?

LOVELL: Did they ask him? There were rumblings about that the health department should be involved with this. At that point, nobody really understood the magnitude of this, but, “What would you do?”

He goes, “Shoot the queers.” He did it off the mic. He thought it was a flippant, funny remark.

I mean, I was Caucus president. I was working for FedEx then. There
were no cell phones. I’m running my route, and I come back in, and my vice president of the Caucus, Tom, had left a message at FedEx, and they came back and they said, “You have to call this guy. He’s frantic.”

Then one of them that I knew said, “Louie Welch said something like this.”

I said, “What?”

So I called him, and he goes, “We’ve got to be down at Channel 13. They’re going to interview.”

I said, “Well, you’ve got to bring me a shirt or something, or I’ll just put my FedEx shirt on inside out,” because I can’t be on in that. And then we talked about — and they interviewed, and what our response would be. Our response was to use it as a forum, to be educational. It was a very poor, sick joke. We believe it was. It’s just this kind of ignorance and flippant behavior when you have a community of people that we believe there’s a serious issue.

The serious issue, which the City needs to step in and help with solutions, of which Kathy didn’t.

PINCHAK: You mentioned that Kathy didn’t. What was the gay community’s response in the face of that?

LOVELL: It’s like a puzzle. There are always different steps, realizations. It’s kind of
like being in an abusive relationship. There are different steps until you finally go, “Ah, man. I can’t believe this.”

“Yes, it’s really true.”

So really, it was with the community. We had helped Kathy. She had come to the bar. Most of the community could understand there was a reluctance for her to do that. Part of it was, she just wasn’t a people person. It just wasn’t her, part of that was.

The other part was, after we lost 4-to-1, she was freaked. This coalition, she finally realized they were coming after her. All elected officials didn’t come screen. It was the first time ever we didn’t. They ran what they called a Straight Slate, of which there was a run-off. One of them was Council Member Anthony Hall, who was the guy that had sponsored on council the ordinance; and somebody else. Everybody was freaked they were going to take out two incumbent council members.

Now you have all this political. Everybody is freaked out how we’ve come all this way progressively, and now it’s going to fall apart. On the other hand, you had this disease, this sickness in the community. Nobody really knew what it was. Nobody was for sure. Some people really had looked at it and believed what was going to happen. A lot of people denied. Then you had a community over here looking at this mayor like, “No, she wouldn’t abandon us. We helped her get elected. How could that happen? This isn’t the way it’s supposed to happen.”

Then that same community looking over here, going, “My community is really sick. Is this going to happen to me? I was going to help.”
But Kathy would not help us. We helped her get elected. All of that is hard to digest and to come to, but you don’t come to it in a snap unless you’re close to it and you actually do see it. Then the leaders that were coming out and saying this, it was like, “We’re not going to be mad at Kathy. We’re going to shoot the messenger. Why are you saying this? This can’t be true. Can’t be right. Just cannot be so.” Of course, it showed up that it was.

Actually, it was showing with AIDS, but the next year everybody came back and got screened, and we moved on. By then, Kathy didn’t even make the runoff. It was Turner, Lanier, and Kathy.

PINCHAK: You talk about different parts of the community. What was ACT UP, and what was its role?

LOVELL: ACT UP was wonderful. When it did get to a point the people that did believe and did see, and they were younger, a lot of them were younger and they were angry, and they didn’t want to act up and act out, so what it did for me is, because I was older now, and so the Caucus is, it was like, “Heck yeah, we’ll talk to that radical Sue Lovell, but I’m not dealing with those ACT UP people.” All of a sudden, people wanted to talk to me. I wasn’t the crazy person anymore.

There were people that they thought were a lot crazier and would do a lot more crazy things, things like when Kathy was announcing that she was running, they snuck into the — this was right on the edge of ACT UP. They were part of this, but they weren’t really. It was we that were just fed up. She went to the Hyatt, and there were picketers outside, but during the day we had people that had gone before they did the security on the room and brought in this big banner and then brought in the poles and set them behind this curtain. When Kathy went to
speak, they went into the back and they laid it down and unfurled it, and I think it said “Kathy kills.” It had this red paint coming down. It was very dramatic. Of course, she was just stunned by it. All the news people were there. It was incredible, and they were mad.

It was like, “Yeah, those ACT UP people, I can’t control them.”

PINCHAK: Was there something with birthday cards?

LOVELL: There was, actually. On Kathy’s birthday, again, no money, not really doing anything, not any help from the City. There were some birthday cards that were printed to her, and it was the amount of people that had either died or that we knew were infected, services. I forget how many, but it was hundreds. Actually, it was my brother. By then, he was sick and he looked sick, and delivered them to City Hall, that essentially said, “Hey, happy birthday. You get to celebrate a birthday. This number of people won’t, and this number of people probably next year won’t either. Why don’t you do something?” and delivered them.

By then, it was now, by her not, and it was causing — by now, the media hoops became sympathetic to us, but also it was a way of kind of poking at her because she didn’t handle the press well. She got snarky with them.

Well, anyway, and her most trusted political advisor, a really smart woman, Clintine Cashion, had died of a stroke, or had a heart attack. Just boom. Now she didn’t have her political brain, and so it just created this kind of vacuum. By then, the community was looking and seeing that, “Why aren’t you doing this? Other cities are doing this, and how come this isn’t happening? Why can’t we do this? Why is my family thrown out of their apartment? Why is there no money for the City to do anything?”
PINCHAK: What about the City health director?

LOVELL: There were a couple of them. We went through a couple. Arredondo, I think, was his name. There was another one. But he was asked why he wasn’t concerned with it, and he said that he thought that the numbers that they had seen, that there were far more people with breast cancer than there were with AIDS, which totally went against what all the other health directors in the whole United States were saying, and in a very large gay population here. It wasn’t like we were in some small city of which there may not be a lot of gay people. Even if there were only two gay people, it was the wrong position to take. It was a concern.

Then the State health director wanted to move and do quarantine. Dr. Krim, Mathilde Krim from New York, came down here and testified in front of the committee, and she was wonderful, and went to Austin, and Glen Maxey, this was before he was a state rep, we met her and kind of briefed her and went in front of the health director. Bernstein was his name. She pretty much very surgically cut up their argument for a quarantine, and then they ruled against doing it, which was crazy anyway.

PINCHAK: Wow.

LOVELL: I mean, where are you going to put everybody? It was crazy. The money should be in education and educating people that, “Here’s how this is transmitted.”

PINCHAK: Right. You talked about some of the other organizations in the early days, like Montrose Counseling Center. What were some of the organizations in the early days?
LOVELL: Mainly the Montrose Clinic was very important, which is now Legacy Community Health. It was just really a little STD clinic. It was mainly to deal with men and their STD issues.

PINCHAK: What did that become? How did they help with the AIDS population?

LOVELL: You saw a lot of men with STD’s; that they were coming in. First you have access to people that are coming in on a health issue, and then you could educate about, “Look, first of all, you need to use protection. You need to look at this. You need to know these symptoms, and you need protection.”

The STD’s went down as more and more of the HIV came in. Of course, the AIDS Foundation, we were here as an educational group, and the Counseling Center was bombarded with dealing with people that were dealing with all kinds of issues, not just have HIV, but, “Hey, my family won’t let me play with my nieces and nephews,” and then just the psychological of young, very young that were healthy people.

PINCHAK: How did those organizations get along?

LOVELL: We all got along pretty well. I mean, we had to. We couldn’t afford to be against each other.

PINCHAK: What about the Caucus?

LOVELL: But we were very respectful of each other’s positions. I mean, here’s what we did. Here’s what the Counseling Center did. There were some other groups that started up, like Body Positive, which was about working out, keeping your body healthy. Other groups like that, that came along. As people saws needs, they stepped in. AIDS Foundation became very clear what we were doing, everybody. “But if there was a need, hey, don’t let us stop you from setting up.”
AIDS Foundation became like the mother sort of satellite where, “If you want to set that up and do that, let us help you. If we have space, we’ll let you do it.”

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: We had to. There was. We had nobody else helping us. We had to be.

PINCHAK: You talked a little bit about the Caucus and AIDS. Did the Caucus support closing bathhouses? Did they not? What was their position, and why did they take it?

LOVELL: Our position was to support whatever the medical health community said. They were the experts on this, not us. There was nationwide a big debate. Our standpoint was, we needed to use our energy and whatever to figure out we went and raised money. Again, if you’re getting $5 million from the State, you have time, resources to burn having this. Ours was more, and in our health community was, why not use them?

First we found out changing people’s behavior was very difficult. People didn’t really believe that what was happening to their friends was going to happen to them because it was too horrific to believe. But use those facilities as a way to get in and educate people about use condoms, be safe. By the way, just like now we tell women, breast cancer, do a self, you need to know yourself. You need to know what’s going on with your body. Now we know the quickest way, because by now there’s AZT [azidothymidine]. You need to go get tested. You need to know your status. You need to know what’s going on with your own body.

Use it as a way. They’re there. Otherwise, how are you going to go find them? I mean, it was a lot of people that just came to the baths. They weren’t involved in any organizations, any group. They weren’t really fighting it. Use it.
that way rather than just — because shutting them down doesn’t mean you’re going to stop the behavior. That was our view. Use it for a good purpose.

PINCHAK: You talked about the Caucus and registering voters. Any other things that they were involved in with AIDS and other things around AIDS as far as —

LOVELL: Immediately when the Caucus, which does one of the best screening processes in the city — immediately then there became, on the screening questionnaire, questions about their positions. Part of a good screening process is that you ask people questions that you really know they don’t know the answer to, but are they going to seek those answers? In seeking those answers, they then become educated.

A lot of it, you could simply say, “Will you be with us in the fight against AIDS?”

“Oh, yeah.”

A lot of it was, “You know what HIV is. Do you know what the current City health department stance is on testing?”

Those things which made them or their campaign people have to go out and find that information, that was on the written questionnaire. They brought it. So we knew that they knew on their own they were finding out these things weren’t being done, and so because of that, it was a great education process for people wanting to run for office. You found out very quickly who was going to be with you, because who was going to go do that extra work to really find out about really what was going on?

PINCHAK: That’s great. You talked a little bit about your youngest brother, Bobby. What happened with Bobby, and where did he go when he got sick? What was
the course?

LOVELL: He stayed here. He died here in Houston. When finally it was safe to take
the test and it became apparent that he was getting thinner, what I said to him was,
“Look, there’s AZT. There are things now. There’s a reason now why you want
to know, so you probably need to go get tested.”

We went out. That’s when there was the AIDS hospital out on 45. We
went out there, and he tested. It came back, he had 9, 10 T cells. So then it was
like we know where we are, here. He wasn’t even a candidate for AZT, although
they were giving him something, but it was not. So now it was kind of like now
here we know what the rest of the journey is, so you now need to start planning
that journey. “What are you going to do? What do you want to do?”

“I want to go back to California.”

“Okay.”

“Not to live.”

“Yeah, because you have to go. I’m not telling them. You have to tell
them. This isn’t anything I can — you need to go back and have those
conversations with everybody. Figure out what you want to do.”

I have a sister who is a nurse. You know, all of that.

And he did. He went back, and he visited everybody and had a wonderful
vacation.

Then he came back here, and then it was a matter of — and I said,
“Explore in Fresno. When you get sick, where can you go? How are they
handling it?”

“Not well.”
“Come back here when you do get sick. We know everybody, and so I think you can be taken. You never know. You never know during this journey if somebody comes up with something that could help your status. You never know. You just don’t.”

So he stayed here, and then he moved in with me. He would go to the Medical Center to see Dr. Rios, was who he saw. He developed KS, which probably — he was very handsome. The cruelest thing was, he got KS and he got it on his face. I thought, “Okay. Wait a minute. You’re going too far. Now, this is not right.”

He would go to the Medical Center, and they would help and do whatever, and then he lived with me. And then during that time — I told you about Nell and Karen, who had moved here — as I became more active, they became older. They weren’t out to their families. As I got on the TV and whatever, they decided that I was risking their families’ asking about them, like, “You think they haven’t figured it out?”

So they came to me and said that either I had to quit doing what I was doing, and if I didn’t, they just had to cut ties because it was just causing too much stir in their families, and I was like, “I can’t quit doing what I’m doing. This is my purpose. I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing.” It was very painful. They were like my parents.

It was a good three or four years that we didn’t speak. When they had met Bobby, he was eight or nine years old. When he got sick, he reached out to them and said, “I’m sick. I’ve got AIDS. I’m going to die. I want to see you.”

So they would come to the house. When they were coming, I would
leave. I would tell him, “I’ll be back by,” and this was my choice, “by such-and-
such time.” It got to just he would have them stay longer so we would bump into
each other. What he was doing is, he wanted everybody to be back together
again, and he achieved that. He did.

Eventually he got so sick, and he got pneumocystis. Really at the end, we
took him to M.D. Anderson. Because of KS, he could be at M.D. Anderson. He
was well taken care of over there, and then when it was really bad, I called my
sister and told her, “You need to come.”

He really just waited for her, because he was never going to die with me in
the room. He was not going to do that.

So she came. I was going to breakfast with someone, and she said, “Go.
It’s going to take time. He’s really shutting down. It will take time. I’ll call you.
Where are you going to be?”

It was at Lola’s on the Park. I had just gotten there, actually with my
friend Lance Lalor, who was the former controller of the City, and she called and
she said, “You’ve got to come,” and so we flew over there.

Well, what had happened was, she had gotten on the phone and called my
mom, for him to talk to my brother. Actually it was my brother and then my
mom. He was sort of comatose on the phone, and Nancy turned around to put the
phone down, and when she turned around, he was gone, and it was incredible. I
walked in. I was like, “Wow, good for you.”

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: “You got to choose your moment. You got to get everything. You got Nancy
with you.”
She was just dumbfounded. She had been an emergency-room nurse. She saw people die all the time. She goes, “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

I said, “I’ve seen it numerous times with people we went to visit and their parents came. We would go with the parents because they had just found out their son was dying, and wait. They would leave, and they’d be gone.”

PINCHAK: That’s lovely.

LOVELL: It was probably 10 people I sat with. I think it’s incredible that you can choose your moment and go; that you can be at peace. My mom waited for me to come. I said to Nancy, “It must be some kind of gift or something that happens because you’ve had this terrible thing happen.” Since then, of course, I’ve seen it with others. So he died in April of 1988.

PINCHAK: That’s wonderful that he could do that.

LOVELL: We had a service here, and we cremated him, and then I had his ashes for a while, and then my sister wanted them, so we took him out to California. Then when my mother died, she was cremated. My grandmother, my dear grandmother, was buried in a plot at the Catholic cemetery, so we took my mother and my brother and put their ashes in her plot because he was the last to leave home, so when we’d all left, it was just Mom, Grandmom, and Bobby. When Bobby was little, I think actually until he moved away from home, he’d go crawl in bed with Gram, you know, so it was perfect that they would all be together, so they’re all there together.

PINCHAK: That’s wonderful. What was it like living through all the funerals, the whole period? People have described it different ways. I’ve heard everything from posttraumatic stress to a war zone. What was it like?
LOVELL: It was a little different for me because I sat in that room when we were shown the crystal ball. Truthfully, you saw it. You didn’t believe it. There was no way you could believe it. You knew it was going to happen. There was really no way you could ponder on it, really absorb it and believe it, because if we had, we couldn’t have helped anybody.

Then there was a certain sense of this is happening. It’s horrible. It’s terrible. It’s happened to other people. Look what happened in the Holocaust, and what’s happening to us is just sort of Mother Nature. What happened in the Holocaust were human beings that chose. So this is happening. You’ll survive. We will. But we’ll all survive as long as we know that we’re doing everything we can to help the people that are sick, and that at the end of this, we will leave something of which this won’t happen in such a catastrophic way. If it does, it will be because people chose to ignore, not because they didn’t know.

That really carried all of us, plus just that we were so busy all the time. You’re just busy, and you were tired. We were just all, we were. All of us that work in this, we all knew we just had to stay strong and we just couldn’t.

As AZT came along, it was really bad, and it kind of feathered its way to it wasn’t so bad, but then when you’re over here now and you look back, with all the things that we left: booklets, safe-sex campaign, first food pantry, the apartment complex. Look at the little STD clinic, which is now a regional health center. All the things that came out of that, and then all the way that this city of Houston, the people — not the elected, the people — rose and finally embraced when they understood, then all of us, we’d get together and we’d go, “There was some kind of grace that we came through that. We should have been scarred,
psycho, mad.”

Psychologically, how did we get through that and come to the other end? The truth really is, when we came to the other end, we were really different people. But then we were all people that stepped up in another way in Houston and went on to become leaders. When you look around this city, there are a lot of us that are running things and doing things.

[END OF AUDIO PART 4]

PINCHAK: Who are some of them?

LOVELL: Barry Mandel is running Discovery Green. Katy Caldwell, who is not gay but is much of this community, whatever, is running a Legacy Health Clinic. A lot of people that did stuff are retired. There is a lot that we did and the foundation that we left and the new coalitions that were formed.

PINCHAK: Did the City ever give money?

LOVELL: No. Actually, when Bob Lanier was elected, we had had a meeting with him. He was a developer guy. He was into housings. He was into numbers. When we showed him what we were doing with the amount of money that we were doing, he was impressed. He was like, “Oh, my God, I need some of you-all to come work for me.”

When we showed him what we were doing with such little resources, then he was happy to give. Some of those resources are people. There was then a bigger, a much greater conversation because he wasn’t threatened by this politically, whatever. There was in some policy things. There was as we expanded and if we wanted to buy more apartment complexes or stuff. But within the health budget, until I went on council, and one of my first budget amendments
was to raise it to $1 million. $1 million. San Francisco, L.A., they all got $1 million like three months in. And still nothing from the State.

PINCHAK: That’s amazing.

LOVELL: They have an AIDS program. They do a good job of outreach and whatever on it, but no, there was never any.

The real thing is, when you look at anything here, this city here really doesn’t, it isn’t, because we’re so philanthropic. And the big philanthropic community really did step up with the AIDS Foundation and stepped in with other groups and gave and helped build, just like they build our museums. The City doesn’t give money to the arts. All the other organizations, things here, it never comes out of government. It comes from the philanthropic. Truthfully, the philanthropic community did really step up and did help to grow and for services.

Once AZT came along, it was different. It was at least something that could help. Of course, now there are people that have been living for a long time.

Truthfully, that safe-sex campaign really did work. It just became nobody. You had a condom. It wasn’t just in our community. All my sons growing up and all their friends, they all have condoms. Every parent made sure they had condoms.

PINCHAK: That’s good. What did we learn from the crisis, as a city, for the future? What should we take out of that experience? That we did well? That we could do
LOVELL: I don’t know that the whole city took — I think one thing, how very valuable it is to have one of the best medical centers in the world here, because truly it was the people there, and they had a lot of push from within. There were some hospitals that didn’t want. There was their own debate within that. But the fact that we were connected to the Medical Center and the people where they’re doing the research there not just connected us to them, but they were connected to all the other research centers around in big cities, so very, very good for us. We had a pipeline from all of that. That was really critical so that even though our own health department people didn’t know, we had access. I can’t even imagine, if we hadn’t had the Medical Center, the shape we would have been in.

And the doctors that came out of that and went out on their own because they were disgusted with the way that some of the things were going. I think for that, again, the value of the Medical Center.

PINCHAK: That’s great. Anything else that you’d like to add or say?

LOVELL: I don’t know that it came out of here. It’s just Houston. I mean, a crisis comes up, people step up. I don’t know that since then we’ve had any kind of crisis like that. It is kind of like the Holocaust or people who came back from World War II. It was horrific. They came back, they dealt with it, and then they put their heads down and they went to work and they lived their lives. Many people we had moved here. We have an incredible Jewish community who are one of our greatest allies during this because they weren’t that far removed from having lost their family members. You come, and you put your head down, and you move forward. You experience something that was horrific, but it’s not
what’s going to dictate, and out of it came some really, really good things.

I think with this, we came through something horrific. I don’t know that we’ll ever really know. Even now, it gets emotional to talk about it, and we really don’t talk about it because there’s no reason to go back and talk about it, because it’s like there’s no reason to revisit all that pain.

What we want to talk about is what we did so well and how we came through and how we became a better community and better leaders and better people and what we did. That’s what we want to talk about, and that’s what we move forward on, not that it’s ever forgotten, but it’s not something we’re going to linger about, but something that we’re very proud about.

The thing is, I’m so glad you’re writing this, because it really makes me mad that we’ve done so many things, Houston. I mean, the East Coast and West Coast, they all talk about us. They have done nothing like what we’ve done. So I think the thing that is, we need to tell our story first, before we’re all gone, about really what we did and the way we did it and how we did it and how we came through it as a better community, as better leaders, which made Houston better because we all then became involved in other things and took what we learned to the betterment of Houston, and I think that’s probably why Houston is better. But our story must be told. It really must be. Again, it’s like, “Well, I’ve done this, but I don’t talk about it.” But now it is time to talk about it, because it is really something incredible, all those things we did.

PINCHAK: It is, and you are a big part of it.

LOVELL: Well, thank you. As I tell my kids, you can’t stand on the bank. You’ve got to get in the river. You’ve got to get in the boat, or somebody shoves you in the
boat. Actually, the irony of it is that it was my brother that shoved me in that boat.

PINCHAK: Wow. Thank you.

LOVELL: God, you know, works in mysterious ways.

PINCHAK: That’s true.

LOVELL: It is. Not to get emotional about it, but there are so many things, when you think of. He’s the one that pushed me there because of this. But in the end, I ended up being such a big part of what was happening to him, making a difference.

PINCHAK: You did make a huge difference.

LOVELL: Yeah.

[END OF AUDIO PART 5]

PINCHAK: Tell me about the Jewish community and what role they played in the AIDS crisis.

LOVELL: Well, thank God, from a community that really understood, really, suffering, pain, loss of family members in a horrific experience. They were there. They were there involved. They were there emotionally. The rabbis in the city were with us.

I want to say there were a lot of churches that turned their backs. For example, in Montrose, St. Stephen’s Church, which Helen Havens was one of the first women rectors, stood up for what was happening in her community. You would see her in the hallways at the hospitals all the time with people. At that time, the Episcopal Church wasn’t so supportive, and probably Helen didn’t become the first woman bishop because of her involvement with her parishioners
in Montrose.

Ron Pogue, who was at Bering United Methodist Church, who stood up and said, “This is my community. I’m ministering to my community. Whatever they need and whatever support we can give, we’re going to.” the Methodist Church was not that.

Remember, when you said “AIDS,” you were saying “gay.” It was paired. It wasn’t ever separated. They then banished him to a very conservative church on in the northwest part of Houston, taking him away from us.

The wonderful thing is that within the Jewish community and the Jewish Community Center, and their community was so organized, they were very warm and our strongest allies. They were the ones actually that were involved in the United Way process; that rang the bell and said something is wrong here.

PINCHAK: Do you remember any particular congregations or temples?

LOVELL: There was Temple Emanu El.

PINCHAK: Was that Rabbi Walter or Rabbi Kahn?

LOVELL: Rabbi Kahn, I believe.

PINCHAK: Beth Yeshua? Beth Israel?

LOVELL: I’d have to look. A lot, yeah.

PINCHAK: Any other, that you remember, contributions?

LOVELL: Like I said, the Jewish Community Center, which was very organized, is wonderful. There were leaders that were there during that time. I believe Ellen Cohen was executive director, if she hadn’t already gone over to the Women’s Center. She might have already been at the Women’s Center. But they were there. They were there and helping with volunteers and then people that we
needed to come help. Just advice on, “How do you run this organization? Will you be on our board?” Just those sort of things. Advisory, they were there.

PINCHAK: That’s great.

LOVELL: There was no doubt that if you went to them, that you were going to be ignored. They were really there in a big way. Just to have people to kind of commiserate with about what you were going through. “How do you get through this?” You’d say, “How do you get through it?”

“You move forward. It was there. It’s done. You move forward.” You can’t let it bring you down to where you cannot do anything because as they say, you’re going to do some good work.

Having that shared experience was really invaluable to a lot of us.

PINCHAK: That’s great. Thank you.

LOVELL: You’re welcome.

[END OF AUDIO PART 6]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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MINUTES
BY-LAWS MEETING
KAPOSI'S SARCOMA COMMITTEE OF HOUSTON

DATE: MONDAY
JUNE 28, 1982
PLACE: 4803 MONTROSE
HOUSTON, TEXAS

A second meeting for the purpose of organizational functions was held on Monday, June 28, 1982, at the law office of Debra Danburg, 4803 Montrose, for the purpose of writing the By-Laws of the Kaposi's Sarcoma Committee of Houston. The meeting was called by acting chairman of the Board of Trustees, Michael McAdory. Present during parts or all of the meeting were:

Michael McAdory, chairman
Debra Danburg
Craig Rowland
Didier Piot, MD
David Short, MD
Michael Wilson
Steve Shiflett, guest
Rick Ewing, guest

The first matter of discussion was a review of the Statement of Funds prepared by the chairman. The chairman expressed the need for a person with accounting experience to join the committee to serve as treasurer or accountant. Ms. Danburg noted an error in the minutes of the June 1, 1982, meeting, specifically, that the minutes implied that the total of funds accumulated to date ($5670.00) was deposited in a trust account of herself. Actually, there was only $3474.00 in the Danburg trust account of which $3400.00 was since paid to Longpoint Printing (along with another $600.00 from the Liberty Bank account) to constitute the KSC's $4000.00 dollar donation towards printing of the booklet "Towards A Healthier Gay LifeStyle". (Another $3650.00 collected by one of the KSC Board of Trustees prior to the establishment of the KSC was held by the C.H.E. organization. This money which technically was due to the fund-raising efforts of KSC was also used to pay for printing and binding of the booklet, although it did not pass through any KSC account.)
The donor checks for this amount were made out to the Kaposi's Sarcoma Project and deposited to UT M. D. Anderson's special account, then transferred to C.H.E. who then paid expenses for the booklet directly. C.H.E. was responsible for paying for artwork done at TWT, typesetting done at Smith and Company, and the balance to Longpoint Printing.) Thus, the KSC's total monetary contribution to the printing of the booklet was $7650.00. The remaining $74.00 left in the Danburg trust account would be transferred to the Liberty Bank account.

The guests, Steve Shiflett and Rick Ewing, members of the Board of Directors of C.H.E. were present to discuss distribution of the newly printed booklet. A trial distribution at the Drum and Baja's Sam's (local bars), the Fitness Exchange and Jim's Gym (local health clubs), and the Union Jack (clothing stores in Houston and Dallas) were to be used initially. It was the consensus that this limited distribution would be tried and evaluated. The booklet would not be distributed in every bar, bookstore, bathhouse, etc. at this time.

The entire remainder of the meeting was spent with McAdory, Danburg, Rowland, Piot, and Wilson writing the By-Laws for presentation to the entire committee for approval at the next meeting.

In the interim between the June 28, 1982, meeting and the next meeting, a $50.00/plate fund-raiser was held at Swim Club on Monday, July 19, 1982. The affair was very successful and a cooperative effort of the KSC and Club Scene Magazine. Apparently, several thousand dollars was raised due to this activity.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael B. Wilson
August 5, 1982