Bob Briddick Oral History Interview

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**Q: Life as a gay person and the gay community in the early 1950s**

Bob Briddick: I first came aware of it when I was 11 but didn't really know how to act on it until I was a little bit older. In those days you did not have any kind of organizations like HATCH or anything like that. Anyway this dentist would mentor the young gay people. Of course, it was all illegal. He ultimately ended up going to jail because the authorities got on to him. But he enabled us to find our way and to understand what gay life as all about and introduced us to people that we would ultimately have relations with. By the time I was 15 I was in a serious relationship with a 30-year-old man who really taught me all the ropes of gay life. Of course all this was unknown to my family. This was all on the sly so to speak. It had to be.

When we were in basic training before we went to Korea, there was a whole nucleus of gay people who knew that they were gay, but I had made up my mind that if I had to do without sex for 2 years I was not going to take any chances because there was too much at stake. But while we were going through training, when we finally could get passes to go off base, this group would go into Columbus, Georgia and have wild orgies. I knew about them and I was always invited, but I never did go to any of them. What they didn't know was that the authorities were on to them and before we shipped out for Korea every one of those people got court-martialed and drummed out of the service, which I would have been if I'd been involved. It was horrible, but it was a real eye opener too.

I was teaching school making $400.00 a month, which was not much money then either and I had seen this piece in a warehouse grouping and they had been advertising at an auction. So I had $40.00 in my pocket. That was all I could scrape together, and the night of the auction was a rainy night and they did not start with a new reserve, they just opened the bidding. Somebody bid $5.00. At any rate, there was only 1 other person bidding on it. Me and this other guy and finally he bid $35.00 and I thought oh my goodness, so I bid $37.50 because I only had the $40.00 and no credit cards in those days. He didn't make another bid so I got it for $37.50. When I went to pay for it I thought the guy who was conducting the auction was going to have a stroke because it's a really fine piece. Well, I had kind of gone through different cycles of collecting. The major one was, I collected Mexican colonial art. Religious art through tableaus and carvings of saints and so I sort of put that on the back burner and morphed into collecting Asian art, but I also like contemporary art too. I have never regretted anything I bought. Ever. It's the things I didn't buy that I regret.

It was 11 years. The first 7 years were awesome. The last 4 were very bumpy. It was not an easy relationship because he was an Aries and I'm a Taurus and so we argued a lot. But we always got over it because we had a lot of mutual likes and dislikes. So the first 7 years were kind of wonderful. Then, in the late eighties, he got sick with this horrible, what turned out to be pneumocystis pneumonia is what it turned out to be. And I finally convinced him we needed to take him to the hospital. This was in '87. Anyway, he got into the hospital and this was when
the AIDS crisis was just beginning and as it turned out, he had picked that up, all his running around. He got sick on August 15 and he died on August 31. Just like that. But in those days it was considered a death sentence. In the early days they didn't call it that. That name came later. As I remember we referred to it as gay cancer, I think it's what it's called, but nobody knew anything about it. It hit, just kind of kaboom. It was almost like overnight and suddenly people were dropping all around us and there was a tremendous fear factor because nobody knew what was causing it. None of us knew anything about it. Well the doctors didn't know anything about it either. A frightening period, because you knew if you got it you might as well put your affairs in order, because they didn't know how to treat it. The insurance companies were using any pretext to cancel insurance policies because people were coming down with this disease and were making such tremendous demands on the insurance companies, that the insurance companies put the slightest infraction or the slightest late payment or anything would cancel insurance. A lot of these people during this period, that was their main lifeline was to go to the insurance money. So a group formed what's called, what was called then, was the Assistance Fund and the primary function of it was to pay insurance premiums to keep these insurance policies in effect, and many to the night we would race to the post office with payments so they'd be postmarked in time, to keep the insurance in place. It was very successful. I was on that board about 5 years I think. And that organization was in effect up until recently and they recently merged with Legacy, and I think they took like a million dollars cash into Legacy when they finally merged. So that was a very proud thing to realize, that I had been a part of that.

Q: The Diana Foundation
BB: I had a lot of friends who were in to Dianas. They recruited me. Recruited me. This was I think in 1998 somewhere around 1998. Because of my background in advertising and whatever, I had done a lot of writing and they were interested in me because of my skill at writing and of course the Dianas is a take off on the Academy Awards, and they read the funny award it's a roast, so they recruited me primarily for that and I was on the writing committee, which was a secret committee all those years. In 2005, I was president only for 1 year. We had a lot of angst during that year and at that point about 20 percent of the members were lesbians. The Dianas had always had a strong lesbian contingency, but due to some circumstances that year, all the lesbians quit the organization. Resigned al mass and that took a lot of my skills to smooth the water and keep it all together. That's still a painful experience.

Q: Changes in the relationship between the LGBT community and politics
BB: Well, I think that there has been a tremendous upsurge and interest in politics and in human rights, that wasn't here when I first came. I think that they had seen what we had a gay mayor and we have a number of, we have a gay district attorney now. And we have a number of openly gay people running for office. That's better said. It's all very exciting because that means that gay people are willing to come out to the forefront and not hide their sexuality and that's a good thing, because in the past before I had used this as a hammer to get at them. Also I think that by exercising the flow that we have been able to get the attention of a lot of candidates who would not have otherwise have gotten the attention. All that has happened since I've been here.

Q: Changes in LGBT-related terminology
BB: Well I don't understand all of it. I'll be the first to say I've talked to a transgender friend of mine and asked lots of questions about it, and she has been very helpful, very helpful. I think
even though I don't understand it, it's really not necessary for me to understand it. As long as the individuals are honest to themselves, they have to follow their own path and what's right for them might not be right for me, but I will be the first to say that a lot of it is an enigma to me, but that doesn't mean that it's wrong. It's just we're living in a very changing times and I see this a part of the changing times. I think the bottom line is that we all respect each other and help each other as much as we can, I think that's really the bottom line. Because all the gay people really are different from the straight community. All the LGBT community is different and we should pull together as a unit and not have differences among ourselves. I know that's idealistic, but that's the way I see it.

Q: How technology is changing the way the gay community socializes
BB: Well, it's kind of alien to me. I don't use it, but it's kind of like a cell phone, I think it's the wave of the future. Our social interactions changing and that's just sort of a contemporary way people do things. To me it's kind of impersonal, but I think it's here to stay. I know a lot of people who do this. There's a couple of aspects that worry me, like for example, I was with a group at a bar for a happy hour and there was a guy by me on his phone talking to somebody and I said why don't you get off the phone and circulate. He said because I'm talking to that guy over there across the room. I said what? He said no, he and I are texting back and forth. I said well why don't you just go talk to him. I just got this blank look. Well, from my age, that's strange you know. If you're both in the same room and you're interested in talking, why not talk to each other. But, like I said, I'm too old I don't use that, but I think it's here to stay.

Q: Queer vs. Gay
BB: I think gay is a more, I think it's a broader term and has less negative connotation to me anyway. That's my take on it. A queer to me, it's always been a negative. That may just be me personally, but I think gay is a much more all-encompassing general term.

Q: The meaning of awards and other honors
BB: It's like recognition of a lifetime of work. I've been at this community service work in one capacity or another since '88, '87. That's over 30-years. I don't think about it, when I'm doing it particularly until someone presents me with an award for whatever, and that always makes you very happy. But it's like the crowning achievement of a lifetime of work. I don't need recognition, per se, because actually I'm one of those people who prefers to work behind the scenes, but it was an incredible honor and it meant the world to me.

Q: Passing the torch
BB: Hopefully what little work I have done can inspire the people to step up to the plate and do something similar in the future. If I can do that, I would be very happy.