Oral History # Gel

An Interview With

Randall Jobe

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MICHELLE RAMSTACK: This is Michelle Ramstack interviewing Randall Jobe for The oH Project Oral History Program. This interview is taking place on July 3, 2019, at the Ryan White Planning Council offices in their conference room, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Jobe in order to obtain his recollections concerning the bar social life and theatre culture of Houston during the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Thank you so much for taking the time to come and talk with us.

RANDALL JOBE: You’re certainly welcome.

MICHELLE RAMSTACK: I’m probably going to end up repeating a lot of the questions that I asked you previously, so just bear with me. We’re now recording. Let’s just start off with where and when were you born?

RANDALL JOBE: I was born in Paducah, Texas, on May 17, 1955. Because I was adopted, my parents came to pick me up three days after I was born. My biological parents, I never knew. My parents who adopted me, which I consider my parents — I always make the distinction between biological and my parents — came to pick me up at three days old.

I have a sister who’s five years older, and when she was five, my mother was told she couldn’t have any more children. They decided they wanted another child, so they adopted me, and then 10 months later, my younger sister was born, so they did end up having one more child. I guess I was fortunate to come along when I did.
My life really was spent in the Texas Panhandle, in a city called Borger, Texas, and that’s where I grew up for the first 12 years of my life. That put me right to just before middle school. I was at the end of elementary school, and then we moved to a place called Clute, Texas, which is in the Brazosport area. I finished school there, including high school and two years of junior college all in Brazosport. When that was finished in 1975 is when I first came to Houston.

RAMSTACK: What were you studying in college?

JOBE: I studied liberal arts, pretty much. I have an associate’s degree, just an associate’s degree, and it really encompassed English. That was really the subject I liked the most, was English and that sort of thing. I was terrible in math and science both, so pretty much dramatics. I studied theatre and English.

RAMSTACK: What brought you to Houston?

JOBE: I really wanted to be an actor, and I had done a lot of stuff down in the Brazosport area. In fact, for about three years, I did about five shows a year between different community theatres and college theatre and that sort of thing. Then I decided I wanted to come to Houston to try my hand at it, and so that was really the reason I came here. Plus, the small city, I just never felt like the small-city life was for me. I felt very much like Green Acres. I needed out, so I did. I came out on my own.

RAMSTACK: When did you first get involved in theatre?

JOBE: Fresh out of the sixth grade, I guess it was right at 12 years old, I heard about some auditions for a musical called Oliver!, and it was the community theatre there. I told my parents I wanted to go audition. That show has a whole chorus of young boys that play little orphans, and then these characters called the
workhouse boys, who are all part of a troop that picks pockets and stuff on the
street for a guy who’s kind of in control of them. I was one of the workhouse
boys, they were called. I went to the audition and got cast, and so from then on I
was really just kind of hooked on the whole thing. I can remember going home
and going into my room, and I would sing every song, play every part. Later on, I
actually created a little one-man show that I did for a Pride event in Santa Fe,
New Mexico, that was all just about that, about the beginnings of the theatre and
the characters I played, and I used some of the songs from that musical and from
ones I did later on. That was the start.

RAMSTACK: Did you mainly stay in the musical theatre, or were you branching out?

JOBE: I did a little bit of it all. I did music theatre. I did what were considered straight
plays, which is no music. But a lot of comedy. Generally I was what was
considered the character actor, so a lot of the things I did, I played different
characters, which would serve me well, because there in that area, I was able to
play a lot of things and be cast in a lot of things that in any other venue, large
venue, I probably wouldn’t have been necessarily right for or thought about. But
because I had played so many multiple things, once I came to Houston, I kind of
had a little bit of a leg up in terms of some of the characters I had played. Mostly
musical theatre, that’s what I consider to be my forte and what I enjoy the most.
But comedy, always the comic.

RAMSTACK: You moved to Houston in —

JOBE: 1975. I actually had started coming to Houston with my friends, and we would
come out to the gay bars. I hadn’t come out to my family or anything, or even
really to myself. I didn’t know exactly what it was all about, but I knew that we
were coming out to the clubs and enjoying it and having a good time. Sometimes we would come in in the evening and stay up until the bars closed and then go eat something and go home, and I’d turn right around and head to school.

During that time, I met somebody here, and we decided to move in together. He was from a small town the opposite direction, and we decided to become boyfriends, and we moved in together in 1975. That was the first time when I came here, and all very much on the quiet, the QT. It would be later that my parents, once they had met him and knew him and liked him, that it kind of all came out that we were in a relationship. Then they pressed me about it, if I was gay, and told me, “I thought so.” Then we had the long discussion about — they tried every argument in the book, the religion and all that stuff.

I told them at that time, “You taught me to love, and now you’re going to tell me it has restrictions, and I don’t really buy that.”

It caused a rift in my family for about a little over a year with my father, more so my father than my mother. My mother kept in contact, but my father wouldn’t have anything to do with me. I was living in Houston that whole time, and I would go down to visit now and then, but not very often. At one point, my father just kind of did a turnaround. My mother said that he had said that he really missed me and that I would always be his son. We had a conversation, and from then on it got a lot easier.

I had a best friend who would — comes on later on in the story, because he had HIV and then developed full-blown AIDS, and they knew him well. I took care of him for a period of time, about three months, in my home, with financial assistance from his family. He survived one opportunistic infection during that
time, and when I would take him to visit with my parents, they were always very accepting of him and knew what he had been through and that sort of thing. I think that was in some ways kind of a turnaround for them, knowing that I had had to deal with it. Well, had chosen to, really. I didn’t have to. His family lived in a small town about two hours away, and they lived out on a farm, and it was just easier for me to keep him here and help. Of course, his sister was here in town too, and she assisted.

He lived with me. I took a break from my job, a three-month hiatus from Charles Armstrong Investments, to take care of him. Like I say, his family helped me financially, and then once he was well and back on his feet again, I went back to work.

I think that was a real turning point, when I look back on it. I didn’t really see it so much then, but now I can look back and see that that was kind of a turning point in the whole acceptance thing in lots of respects. From then on, it seemed like I never had any problem, especially with my mother and my sisters, because they were always treated so well by my gay friends. I had a good, strong circle of extended family, gay friends. Still do to this day. A lot of them are friends that I’ve had for 30 and 40 years.

RAMSTACK: Were your parents really religious?

JOBE: They were. They were very staunch Church of Christ. For the first about 12 years of my life, it was very much going to church three times a week: twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday nights. When I say staunch Church of Christ, there was no musical accompaniment in the church. It was a very small church, but there were just certain things that were very ingrained, and so I was raised
fairly strictly in terms of the church.

RAMSTACK: Did you have any difficulties reconciling your sexuality with your religion?

JOB: I’d say yes and no. When my parents tried to use the argument of religion, I didn’t really allow that, but actually my break with going to church on a regular basis stemmed from members of the church talking behind my back about my long hair. I had like shoulder-length hair. They would talk to my parents about it, but no one would address me. When it finally came up, my mother and father said something about it, and I said, “Well, I don’t need to be around people like that,” and I stopped going to church.

Then we moved, and we had difficulty finding a church that had all the same beliefs and different things, because like I say, when it was very staunch, no music accompaniment, no Sunday school. That was a no-no, which is kind of a weird one. So it took us a while to find another church, and we actually had church in our home for an extended period of time. We would have our own little service and sing hymns and have our communion. It seems odd now to me, but I’d actually invite my friends sometimes to come. I had little friends who would come and sit in on our little church service.

RAMSTACK: Your gay friends?

JOB: At that time, that was really before I really knew what the whole gay thing was about, and so I don’t think there was anyone at that time that I knew was gay, or even later on would. That really kind of started to develop more in high school, and even then, I went to high school with a couple of people that it would be years later when I would discover that they were gay as well. It was really kind of a
quiet — and I’d say I don’t know that I know that I had an official coming out, but if I did, it really was with that conversation with my parents, and I was already 19, almost 20 years old. Then that’s when I started living in the Montrose, and that changed everything, because it was such an open, openly gay area, and my circle of friends were all pretty much gay.

RAMSTACK: Is that really what attracted you to going to Montrose, was that it was —

JOBE: You know what? The thing about it is, is that I’m thinking that maybe yes, but it might have been that I was only familiar with the area because that’s where the bars were, and in any of my trips to Houston for any extended period of time, that would be the area we would be in. I don’t know that I necessarily thought the gay area and that’s what I was moving to, but it’s where I ended up. I lived in Montrose for years and years and years and would rarely venture out of that area, as far as a living situation. When I did, sometimes it was financial things that required me to maybe stay with somebody or go live out in an apartment that was less expensive or that sort of thing, but for the most part, from 1975 until probably 2000, I probably was in the Montrose area pretty much. I don’t know for a fact that it was the gay area that drew me there, but it kept me there for sure. For sure.

RAMSTACK: Your early theatre involvement in Houston, you mentioned the gay theatre?

JOBE: Right. My very first theatrical experience in Houston, remember, was Theatre Under The Stars, which was an established professional theatre, and they would do and still do shows out in Miller Outdoor Theatre. My very first show in Houston was in 1976, and it was Fiddler on the Roof. I had a tiny little speaking role, basically considered chorus. We performed it out in Miller Outdoor Theatre
in July, and it was supposed to be in wintertime, wearing big, heavy coats and stuff. That was before they had air-conditioned the stage like they have now, so it was miserable. But I was working professionally, you know, for next to nothing. They paid us hardly anything, but it was considered professional. I would always keep a job and do the theatre. I don’t think of really any instances where I supported myself strictly from the theatre. I always had something else going.

It opened the door for me, and then from that is when I got involved with Risky Business Cabaret. I was doing that, performing in the cabaret, I believe, when one of the first things came up about giving some of the gay theatre, I think, but again, my chronological is way off. No, no, the gay theatre was before that, because we performed at the Pink Elephant downtown, which was the first, they would say, the first gay bar in Houston, or at least one of them. I think there was one called the Bayou Landing or Bayou-something that was before that. That, and then the women’s bar, the Kindred Spirits, which would allow us to come in on Monday and Tuesday nights and perform the shows, and it got pretty good audiences. I did a lot of shows between those venues in the clubs.

Over the course of probably the last 30 or so years, there have been probably a half dozen theatre groups who set themselves up to do gay theatre who would struggle like any theatre group and have trouble with finances and all that sort of thing. They would come and go. Some would be in a building, and then another group would take it over, the same building but under a different name and that sort of thing. There was a lot of history of some of the same people whom I’d work with over and over, directors and actors and that sort of thing.

RAMSTACK: Could you tell me more about the Risky Business Cabaret? Like what
sort of performances? I understand cabaret performances, but what did you do special?

JOBE: What it was, it was a resident group of actors who would put together a lot of musical-type parody, like at one time we had a show that was called Surrender, Dorothy, and we would take the current and meld it into, and we would do things like take established songs — and I did a lot of lyric rewrite — and we would rewrite a lyric to have it go along with a storyline, like we had Dorothy and Toto land in Montrose rather than in Kansas, and then it would be “Hookers and drag queens and leather, oh, my,” that sort of thing. There was a lot of that parody-type stuff.
Initially our audience was predominantly gay, but it became a true mix of audience, and it was really kind of neat to see because the way the seating was, it was a small theatre. It would hold about 200 people at maximum. We would set up tables, and you’d see a table of four gay men or gay women sitting next to two straight couples, and before it was all over, they were all drinking and laughing together. I liked that part of it a lot.

We got to the point where even though a lot of the storyline would still have maybe kind of that gay twist on there, we really opened it up. We did lots of parody of well-known political figures in town and just people who had a name, like — did you ever hear the name Marvin Zindler? Do you know that name? Probably not, if you’re not from here. There was a guy who was involved in the news telling for like 40 years in this town. His name was Marvin Zindler. He was famous because he — there was a brothel in La Grange, Texas. There was a musical later made of that called *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, and it’s a true story of a brothel that everyone knew about, including politicians. The Texas Aggies, the A&M football boys, were always taking theirs there, kind of initiation by the uppers, who paid for it and all.

Well, it created a big scandal, and this Marvin Zindler got ahold of it, and he exposed it. It caused a big stir, but it ended up closing down the Chicken Ranch. They called it a Chicken Ranch. He was very famous in the circle of Texas folklore and that sort of thing. That’s the sort of thing.

We also did a parody of Ninfa Laurenzo, who for the Ninfa’s restaurants she was a woman who had started all the Ninfa’s restaurants. It was just a lot of topical-type things.
My involvement stemmed in everything from helping with the scripts, to performing, to costumes. I think I told you that before. I was the box office manager. I did a little bit of it all, but we all did. Everybody pitched in, and the people who had initially come and started it and put the money together just kept it running a long time. I think it ran for about four years, but probably three of that, there was never enough money.

You talk about some struggling, starving actors. There were probably easily 12 to 15, at any given time, people involved, maybe a few more now and then, and we would work day and night to put their shows together and stuff. It was nothing to work all day and then perform at night and all of us be so broke that our one big meal a day would be the $2.99 Chinese buffet. Then the rest of the time, we’d be eating bagged popcorn and drinking Coca-Colas. It was some rough times, but it was such an experience.

For me, once that ended, I was picked up by the Comedy Workshop to come in and start writing and directing little shows similar. They basically took that format, and I was able to take what I had learned and use some of the same actors and put it together, and it was very successful, but they already had an established crowd, the Comedy Workshop. It was there for lots of years.

RAMSTACK: You also mentioned The Group, which was both gay men and lesbians?

JOBE: The Group (Theatre Workshop), yes, it was. The guy’s name was Joe Watts, and he’s a name you’ll hear a lot about gay theatre in Houston. He just recently passed away about a year ago. Yes, he did do a couple of lesbian-based plays, but the core of the thing really were — probably for every four shows, there might be one lesbian show thrown in, but for the most part it was predominantly gay men
and gay men’s theatre, but yeah, there were some women’s shows. Also, the scripts for the women’s shows were so few and far between. Even to this day, there’s not a lot out there.

In fact, we have a Houston playwright, Gwen Flager, who recently wrote a play for women, and it got performed out at Queensbury Theatre, and I went to see it. I’ve gotten to know her a little bit, and she’s really trying to do that push to write some plays for women.

RAMSTACK: While you were working at the theatre, you also got involved in working at nightclubs and bars?

JOBE: When Risky Business closed its doors, all for financial reasons, I had a month off and needed to work, and got a call to come to Charles Armstrong Investments. He was looking for an MC for a talent show. He wanted someone to MC the talent show, and he had heard about me, and hired me.

RAMSTACK: What is MC?

JOBE: Master of ceremonies. I would introduce the acts and make some jokes with the audience and that sort of thing, keep it all moving along, which I made quite a career out of over the years I was with Charles, and even to this day do some of
that. I just recently did a big drag brunch for a straight bar. It was just amazing, and they love it.

I went to work for him doing this show, this talent show. I do a lot of what they call the put-down humor, which is kind of the Joan Rivers, Don Rickles type of humor, where you really pick somebody up out of the audience and you basically make fun of them, but they generally enjoy it, being picked on. Not everybody, but most people go along with it. It was lots of fun, and people seemed to really enjoy it.

That’s when Charles was just taking over those bars, and I went to him with the idea about a promotions director, because promotions had been my title at Risky Business. He’d been in the gay-bar business for quite a few years at that point, and he said he’d never heard of promotions directors in gay bars, but he’d give it a shot. He gave me a 90-day trial, and I stayed for 25 years. I kind of created that job for myself. It became really all-encompassing because it was keeping an eye on the way everything ran, how the managers ran things, the employees, the shows. I kind of had the overview, and I was expected to report back to him about exactly what I was seeing and how it should run. It was a nice, prestigious thing that I fought tooth and nail all the time for to make a decent salary at it. I did, and I think that’s part of the reason I stayed so long. Plus, it allowed me to go and do other things, because I worked that job in the daytime, and then at night I had my evenings free.

Probably 15 or so years in, he came to me once. He said, “I’ve got this crazy idea. What do you think about bartending?”

I said, “It’s crazy.”
He said, “I think if you’ll get in there, you understand the customer service enough that you’ll be a good example for the others.”

So then I gave it a shot, and that’s a hard one to walk away from because of the money. I don’t think I did anything for customer service, though, because I was a good bartender, but I gave people a hard time just like I did on the stage, but they enjoyed that too, so I got away with a lot.

I did that for a little over 10 years in that venue, and then when I left to go open the other bar, that was part of my thing. I was promotions and special events, and I was allowed to tend bar, but I only did it a few nights a week, which made it really nice.

RAMSTACK: That was the F Bar?

JOBE: F Bar, yeah.

RAMSTACK: Can you list what bars you worked at?

JOBE: Yes. To start out with, it was called Heaven at the time. This is all Charles Armstrong Investments. Heaven, JR’s Bar & Grill, the Montrose Mining Company, and then he built a fourth bar, called the Santa Fe Bar & Patio. Well, it was right next to JR’s, as it still is, but it was two different bars, and people wouldn’t commit to going out JR’s door and going around and going into the Santa Fe Bar, so he built the atriums that are currently there so that people could just circle, circle. It became a big hit, and it’s remained that way.

Then Heaven burned in the early 1990s [1997], and he spent three years rebuilding, and then it came back as South Beach [2001]. That one has just closed for remodeling recently. It’s being remodeled, supposedly. We’ll see if it happens. Then during that time, he also opened a bar called Meteor.
At one point, he had four bars: South Beach, JR’s with the Santa Fe Bar & Patio, Mining Company, and Meteor. But now he’s down to JR’s. The Mining Company is gone, Meteor is gone, and South Beach is closed.

RAMSTACK: What sort of acts would you book in these bars?

JOBE: Of course, lots of drag. Lots of drag shows. Actually, you know what? It didn’t really start as necessarily drag shows. It started as, just like I started, with MCs in drag doing like amateur strip contests, that sort of thing. I would occasionally do drag, but I did mine just as myself when I would MC the shows unless it was a special occasion like an employee turnabout show, which we would do to raise money. Then I’d get up in drag like everybody else. I also hosted the karaoke for lots of years, and I just did that as myself. The shows really started as amateur strip with drag queens.

That was Charles. Charles was like, “Nobody wants to look at drag queens. All they want to see are the guys dancing.” But as he saw people’s response to the drag — because what happened was that the MCs would do a number or two, and it became part of the — you needed it to elongate the evening because the goal was even though they started late, generally didn’t start until 11:00 o’clock, you wanted it to go until 2:00 o’clock so everybody would keep drinking, so you had to have something. The dancers didn’t always cover that void, so it became. So then later on there would actually be drag shows, which we still have to this day.

He didn’t create that, because there was that in other bars way before his bars. They were doing full-out drag shows with — I can remember in the late 1970s, early 1980s where there were clubs that had resident drag queens who
would perform a full show. There would be an opening number and a closing number and numbers in between, and they were all on a salary, and they’d rehearse. It was pretty well done. There were some that became pretty popular in that venue.

Little by little, I think the clubs just got to where they got kind of lazy about the whole thing, being able to find the talent who would spend the additional time, because they don’t want to pay them a lot. It’s about tips, and you can make a lot of money in tips doing drag, but the clubs don’t want to pay them a lot. Who wants to do additional work for no money? Not many people.

RAMSTACK: Getting into AIDS, when was the first time you heard about AIDS?

JOBE: I want to say in the very, very beginning of the 1980s, I believe, because my friend that I lost died in 1983, and he was the first person that it touched me personally. We had been friends for 13 years at the time.

RAMSTACK: Can I get his name?

JOBE: Yes. Fred Richardson. We had met at Brazoswood High School and then went to junior college together for a couple of years. He went on to school somewhere else, but I don’t remember now exactly where. He became a social worker. That was his profession. He remained here in Houston. We remained friends, and then he was ill, and I think it was right at that same time that we lost a few people from the clubs: bartenders and maybe even a drag queen or two. Mostly it started with the bartenders, the good-looking bartenders, and a few dancers, and then it just seemed we were losing managers and employees and all sorts of things, but he’s the first one I remember where I really came face-to-face with exactly what it was; that it was full-blown AIDS.
Then about that same time was when my friend was diagnosed first with just HIV, and then he got an opportunistic infection. This is all about the same time, 1983 to 1985, right in there. His sister and I finally talked him into going to the doctor, and the doctor called us in to say, “Call the family, because he won’t be coming out of the hospital.” He ended up living for about 15 years beyond that. He had a fungus of the bone marrow, which was a major, major thing, and that’s when I kind of stepped in there and helped take care of him and stuff. He bounced back from that one and two others in the course of that 15 years, two opportunistic infections that he beat.

The last time, he had gone off to San Francisco and had moved back with his parents and didn’t want me, his best friend, and another friend of ours that we all had all been friends for the same amount of time pretty much, he wouldn’t let the family let us know.

Then he was brought to Houston for hospice care. They said he won’t make it a week, and his sister told the family not going to make the call to tell Donia and Randall that Michael is dead, “So I’m calling him now,” so we got the call. She had just moved to Santa Fe and arrived there and had her first day of her new job there on a Monday, and it was the same Monday we found out he was in the hospital. She came right back, and he died on Wednesday.

I was close to the family then. In fact, I call his sister now my sister, and we just realized we have been friends now for 40 years, so we were friends 20 years while he was living, and now he’s been dead 20 years.

RAMSTACK: This is the friend that you mentioned earlier?

JOBE: Fred Richardson is the one that was the first one that I knew where AIDS became
right up in my face. He was my friend of 13 years. Then the next person who really was close to me that I dealt with it with was Michael Wilson. You can use his name. They’re pretty much open books about everything. His sister is a therapist herself, and she actually is the one I was telling you that had started that Open Heart support group in Katy at the Methodist church there.

RAMSTACK: At the bars, did you do a lot of fundraisers?

JOBE: A lot of fundraisers, not only with organizations like the AIDS Foundation and Pet Patrol. That was just the big focus, to raise money to assist people with HIV and AIDS, whether it be their rent or food or taking care of their pets or anything.

I never considered myself political, but you couldn’t avoid knowing that there was something happening. That was during the time that the government wasn’t funding. They weren’t acknowledging and making it, so the community really pitched in to assist in so many different ways.

In addition to the organizations which did it, we would just internally within the clubs raise money for different — we had what was called the employee emergency fund, which was set up initially with in mind that people with HIV and AIDS might be the ones who would have the problem where they couldn’t pay their bills or couldn’t pay their rent and that sort of thing, so we as employees would do big shows and raise money, and that would all go into a fund, and then as people needed it, then the corporation would give it out as they saw fit.

RAMSTACK: What did these fundraisers look like?

JOBE: They looked like big drag shows. You call it a turnabout show, was the biggest one. What that meant is that rather than all the drag queens get up and perform,
all the employees would get up in drag and perform. Sometimes, not so much in
our clubs but in other clubs, the drag queens sometimes would go behind the bar.
Our boss was pretty strict about not wanting strangers behind the bar, which
makes sense, or people who weren’t familiar with the bar thing, so we would split
it up. I can remember being in drag and going and doing my number and then
going back and tending my bar and going back, that sort of thing. The
organizations did a lot of different things, but there always was that element of the
entertainment being drag queens.

Even in the theatre stuff, we would set aside a box of tickets that
organizations could purchase at a lower rate and then sell for a bigger amount to
help them raise money. That’s something that even as two years ago, probably, I
was a part of. We approached a couple of organizations with that kind of
scenario. It’s just difficult. Things change. Groups change, and the initiative,
people willing to take the time and get the work done changes, so that didn’t
really happen, but we at least approach people still.

I’d say that drag was probably the motivating dollar maker. When I was
there — I’m also an artist, and there was another person there who was an artist,
and she and I got together, and we decided that — it kind of started small — is
we’d donate some art, and then we’d have like a silent auction or a live auction or
that sort of thing. Once we saw that happening, a lot of times we’d actually have
art shows with several artists. They had one just recently at JR’s. They called it a
popup, but I don’t know if it raised money for anything other than the artists.

I’m doing an event on August 3 with Krewe of Olympus, who raises
money for lots of different charities, and I did it for them last year, and it worked
out really well. I take all my art, and I sell it, and then I donate 50 percent back. Last year I sold $2,000 worth of art, so I’m hoping to do the same again.

It branches out. Everyone has their own. There are a lot of organizations out there that have those leaders who are finding casino nights, gumbo cook-offs. I think anything you could find in any other area where people are raising money, I think it’s there in the community as well and probably has been for a long, long time.

RAMSTACK: While you were working for Charles Armstrong, were you performing in bars that were not owned by him?

JOBE: No, no. I had one brief stint. During the Risky Business time, there was a bar next door that hired me to MC a wet jockey shorts contest. I think I made $50 and all I could drink, which was a big mistake, and they gave me a water hose.

After five of those shows on whatever night they were, the owner came to me and was like, “I just can’t use you anymore. You’re too outrageous.” I understood exactly what he meant, but oddly enough, Charles said he heard about me from that, is why he asked me to MC his show.

When I kept pressing, “Are you sure? Because I got fired from that job. Are you aware of what I do?” he finally admitted that someone had told him about me, and he had come.

He said, “I came and stood in the back. I thought you were hilarious. Yeah, so that’s fine.”
That kind of gave me what I needed, that carte blanche of okay. Not quite as crazy. I didn’t use a water hose on anybody. But I mean, I would literally, I would just spray [demonstrating]. You know, spray the audience and all sorts of craziness.

Other than performing in other clubs as part of the theatre groups, there was still that even when I worked for Charles. He was very open. I worked for Theatre Under The Stars and Stages and the different theatre groups and all that, and sometimes it would take us into the bars, but he never seemed to have a problem with that, even though he did initially have a problem with our drag queens that were resident drag queens. He didn’t want them working other places. Then as there became fewer of them and they had to spread themselves around, he relaxed on that.

Now the drag queens you see that we have here in Houston work everywhere, any and everywhere. It doesn’t matter who they initially are residents of, they will pretty much work, take the dollar anywhere they can find it, which is kind of what you have to do because there is no big steady dollar with drag. There is steady dollar, but no big steady dollar. For something like that, you’d need to — for many, many years, we have a few drag queens who were Houston-based who ended up going to Las Vegas and working in shows, doing different characters. We have one that she lives in San Diego now but she was here for lots of years, and she does Dolly Parton, and I mean, she does the spitting image of Dolly Parton, and she performs that to this day. She ended up in Vegas doing Madonna and Dolly Parton. Then there was one very Las Vegas-famous character named Hot Chocolate, who started here in Houston, who went there 30
years ago to do Tina Turner, and does her to this day, Tina Turner.

RAMSTACK: As you were losing people, did it get really difficult being able to run the bars with lesser staff?

JOBE: No. There was always a wealth of people who wanted to work in that venue, whether it be from the busboy, to the doorman, to the bartender. Some positions were harder to get than others. Becoming a bartender in the bars was kind of difficult because once somebody got in there and found the money, nobody wanted to leave. There were openings that happened whenever people started to pass away, but there were always plenty of people to fill that. It just doesn’t seem like there’s ever a lack of people to work in the clubs.

Now, a lot of people don’t stay very long. They look for other things. A lot of the people that really do the hard work, if they don’t get to move up into another position, then they might leave and stuff. There are some jobs in there that are very, very difficult. I wouldn't want to do them. I wouldn’t want to barback or that sort of thing. It’s hard work, hard work, much harder than the bartenders. That was kind of the prestige. The bartenders had the prestige, and then everybody else kind of trickled down and stuff. Even with the loss of a lot of people quickly, it didn’t seem like there was ever any problem with finding people to work.

RAMSTACK: You talked a little bit about the police harassment, when we met earlier. Could you talk more about that?

JOBE: Yeah, here’s the way I recall it. It seemed like we could almost always count on some sort of raid-type things, either through the Houston Police Department or the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, during Pride. It always was just kind
of a joke that here we’re coming up on Pride Month or Pride Week, and you can
count on it happening. Be prepared. I know there were different people in power
who it seemed to be worse than other times because we didn’t always have an ally
in the mayor or the police chief or that sort of thing, and I think that’s where it
would really rear its head, if there wasn’t the support.

It always seemed to be almost a show of muscle, a show of power that
they could do it. They might have come in and had the lights turned on and check
everybody’s ID [identification], and even times maybe take a few people to jail
for public intoxication and that sort of thing, but at least in my knowledge of it
and what I saw, it didn’t seem like just harassment of the level of they’re just
opening the doors and taking everybody willy-nilly, because they knew they
couldn’t. You’ve got to have some basis. I think sometimes it was a lot more
work to arrest people and take people than it was just to show your muscle in
terms of being able to stop the evening, because that would pretty much be the
end of any night if they came in and all the lights came up and they checked
people’s ID, and then people are going to flee. They’re going to go.

Again, I think there was a lot of political stuff. There was a lot more
pushback from the community.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

JOBE [continuing]: But again, I was just never that political person. It may be because I
was so entrenched in the business part of it, running it and trying to have a
theatrical career and things outside of the bar, that I didn’t really — I used to say I
really like the fact that I worked for the clubs because it allows me things like to
be involved in Pride from a standpoint of organizing our people when they
decided to go from floats to walking contingency. Then it would be my job to make sure we had all the people walking and they all had a T-shirt and they were all organized in it. That became part of how I could be involved.

The same with raising money. It wasn’t always our club that instigated the money raised, but our clubs would be part of the reason they could raise money, because we would offer the space at no cost and assist them in what ways we could. That’s something that I really took pride in, in my job, the whole time I worked there, and that’s that I told them, “Tell me what you’re trying to do, and I can assist you in a good way to do it. I know people. We can get you entertainment. We can get you items for an auction. We can help with food. We can do everything to make it a successful event.” That’s how I kept my foot in the door, to say, in a lot of the whole fundraising stuff.

Beyond that — we may not be there yet — was when I really got involved in terms of wanting to be involved with Omega House, with the hospice, because I felt like I can do more of a hands-on, something that really is about going out and helping on a volunteer basis, and that’s when I went to Omega House and started doing that, and I thrived. I loved it so much.

RAMSTACK: I have a few more questions before we go right to Omega House.

JOBE: Absolutely.
RAMSTACK: I saw that you were listed as a number to call for the Bar Owners Task Force. It was a newspaper clipping on one of the bars as I was researching. Can you tell me more about the task force?

JOBE: I have to tell you that probably what that — did you notice a year on it or anything?


JOBE: Oh, in 1987. What it was, actually it was called HOBO, the Houston Organization of Bar Owners. Charles was at some times the president, sometimes the vice president. What that meant was that I, as the underling under him, handled the meeting space and the food, so I’m sure I was there as a contact for people if they were looking for bar owners or spaces or things like that. I didn’t consider it so much as a task force as an organization of bar owners who would get together.

RAMSTACK: In this article, it said to report of harassment at a bar, to call a number, and then your name was listed.

JOBE: Wow, okay, because that doesn’t —

RAMSTACK: Okay.

JOBE: I don’t know why that would have been — I don’t think I ever got a call, that I’m aware of.

RAMSTACK: It said R. Jobe, so I was assuming it was you.

JOBE: Yeah, that’s me. That’s me. Yeah, who knows how my name got on that as part of that. That’s that sort of thing that again, with Charles being involved in the bar owners association — he was also big on the Black Tie Dinners, which was a big fundraising event, and stuff like that — a lot of stuff like that trickled down into
my lap, and so that could have been one where they were just looking for a name and a contact, and I was given that. I was never made aware, or it never fell into a heading for me, so that’s interesting that you found that.

RAMSTACK: I’m forgetting which bar it was, but it was one of the ones you listed earlier.

Then there were education sessions that the AIDS Foundation would come and give to bars. Could you talk about that?

JOBE: Right, they would come in, and they would talk about safe sex and give out condoms and different things like that. Yeah, we would actually do, for our employees, and I think it even opened up to where we allowed other bar employees to come when the Foundation — because we had a large facility, and we’d have them in there to give the safe-sex seminars. There were quite a few of those. It was on a pretty ongoing basis. We were pretty involved with AIDS Foundation to help them with education.

They served a food pantry that we were very involved in helping them to raise money and to just collect canned goods and things for them. In fact, sometimes it would be that if you brought a canned good, you wouldn’t have to pay a cover charge, you’d get in free, and that sort of thing. Yeah, we were very involved in different things with education and just different things with the AIDS Foundation.

I was involved for probably about three to four years, maybe even five years, with helping put together the AIDS Walk. I was on the committee that helped put it together. Mine was the entertainment. I was basically in charge of putting together entertainment. One year, I put together different groups along the
parade route. There was a little string quartet, and there was a little country and western band as you went around and walked the three miles or whatever it was — I can’t remember now — for the AIDS Walk. Then at the end of the thing, there would be a little show and stuff. I was involved in that for quite a few years.

When it went from one meeting a week for six months to one meeting a week for a full year, I was like, it’s hard for me to make it once a week as it is, but for it being a full year, they would start the week after the last one was over, and it didn’t really require that because we were doing it in six months before. Anyway, some new director came on board.

I was involved with that for lots of years and incorporated a lot of the clubs in that in terms of getting the word out about it and giving out literature and after-parties for the walk and things like that. That was that sort of thing I was able to incorporate, already in the position I was in, with assisting.

RAMSTACK: Were the education talks only for the employees, or was it open to the public as well?

JOBE: Employees, and as I recall, I think because of the bar owners association, I think sometimes we would invite other clubs, but no, I don’t recall any being where we put the word out to the public to come. I think it was strictly a bar employee thing like that, but there were times when there might be 75, 100 bodies there, so it was a pretty good turnout for them. They were doing education in so many other areas and with different venues, so that was just one.

I think we actually pursued them about that. I don’t know. Maybe initially they contacted us, but we would encourage that because again, it was just
that thing of we had lost or were losing so many people that you hope that education helps, but who knows if it really did? I mean, really, that’s a sad portion of it that I had to realize many, many years later, is I went to a seminar — this has probably been maybe eight years ago, when I was still at F Bar, and I went to represent F Bar at a seminar that was held by the health department, the City of Houston Health Department, and the talk was about the rise in syphilis and the rise in young people with HIV. I was stunned. I thought the education thing can’t end. It’s got to keep going. I was surprised that there was still so much need to really keep educating, but I guess you have a whole new group of people coming onboard, and it has to be put out there.

RAMSTACK: We have a lot of knowledge lost from everyone as well.

JOBEN: Right, and there even has been some pushback now and then from a younger generation who doesn’t want to hear about. That’s why I was kind of interested when Tori said this, and then after I talked to you, I was telling a few of my friends. I said I’m really glad I’m doing this because I know it’s important and I know that I’ve had a couple of those conversations with younger people who are horrified by the whole experience. They’re not aware because it was before they were old enough to be in the community.

RAMSTACK: Another thing I was wondering, was there any other community involvement that the bars really focused on that I haven’t asked about?

JOBEN: Yes, I think the whole thing about gay bashing, I know of an incident, which I’m sure you’ve heard about, about Paul Broussard. Paul Broussard was murdered by the 10 boys that came from The Woodlands with the specific idea to look for gay men and beat them, but he had wooden sticks with nails in them, and it wasn’t just
to come harass a little bit. It was to cause damage.

They found Paul and two of his friends leaving from — they used to say coming from Heaven, but they were two blocks away, and we didn’t know if they really had come from Heaven or not. Regardless, they were beat up, and Paul so badly that it killed him. He worked for a law office as like a paralegal. Our clubs became kind of a center point for the education. That’s probably where that task force thing came about, where they were saying to report it. You’ve got to report it. You can’t just get beat up and not saying anything, or it doesn’t do any good. You’ve got to be willing to give names or what you remember and that sort of thing.

I know from a personal standpoint that I had a situation where I had met this guy. He was a young guy, but he had this new, big, fancy car, and we had parked near the clubs. As we were leaving, we went to get in his car, and there were guns on either side, my side getting into the car and his side. For some reason, they hit him and he went to the ground. I came around that way, and they took off in the car. We, of course, reported that because of the stolen car, but I think if it had just been being knocked in the head and left there, we might have just gone on about our — just be glad we were still alive and that sort of thing. I know of a lot of instances where people would talk about being bashed and not report it for various reasons. I think that was probably that whole task force thing.

That’s one thing I will say. For all the things that I have said now and then again that maybe didn’t get done through the clubs for certain reasons, such as the big one I bring up is that Charles wouldn’t allow testing in the clubs, he was very involved in Paul Broussard’s mother. Nancy was her name; it wasn’t
Broussard. But Nancy whatever her name was, she was diligent about every time
the parole thing came up, writing letter after letter after letter and being there at
the parole thing to say not to let this guy out, and we would actually distribute the
letters for people to sign to keep those guys from getting out of prison early. She
considered Charles a real ally to her, and our clubs and stuff.

So there were other things where there was an involvement. Just like I
say, with the Stone Soup was what the food pantry was called, that sort of thing.
There are probably ones that I don’t remember. There were a lot, though. Yeah,
there was a lot of other involvement in addition to the education.

RAMSTACK: Yeah, like you mentioned Pet Patrol early on.

JOBE: Yeah, the Pet Patrol, which was Tori’s thing. They realized that people either
who had passed away, their animals needed a home, or people who were ill and
couldn’t care for them needed someone to walk and feed and that sort of thing,
and that’s how that one all came about. I don’t know what she would say about it,
but I felt like she had lots of support because that’s something people could really
relate to.

RAMSTACK: And that wasn’t something you were really involved in?

JOBE: I was involved in it only through the clubs, but no, not in any other fashion other
than assisting them when they'd want to do fundraisers, we’d definitely make the
space available and help them in what ways we could to raise those monies.

RAMSTACK: You mentioned Charles wouldn’t allow testing in the clubs. Why was
that?

JOBE: They’d want to bring mobile units around and put out in front of the clubs and do
it, and he said that people were there for entertainment and they didn’t want to
have the reminders of that in their face. Of course, I understand now that he does allow that, but I know I spent 25 years championing for it, and he wouldn’t allow it. Then like I had told you before, when I went to F Bar, I told the owner there, I said we’ve got to be community-minded, and that’s part of it, and so we were involved quite a few times with Bruce Turner arranging that mobile unit and things like that.

RAMSTACK: What was the community response to him not allowing?

JOBE: I’d say overall, the response to that and other elements are going to be like any business that has the monopoly that Charles had, and he did have a huge monopoly. At one point, one in every third cocktail sold in the gay community was sold in his clubs. That’s a lot. A third is a lot. I think people from organizations, to politics, to everything, expected for him to be front and center for everything, and he just wasn’t. I think part of that, it requires someone almost blowing the whistle for it to come to light to a large majority of people. I think for the most part, because it wasn’t prevalent, people just didn’t know or maybe didn’t even really care. The people that it was important to were the people who were trying to orchestrate it. Like I say, I think now he allows it to happen, so that’s a good thing. It was change.

RAMSTACK: You mentioned before that there was a mixing of clubs; that they started off as mainly gay men, and then —

JOBE: That was my take on it; that it seemed like that when I first started going to the — I think the first gay bar I was in was in 1975, and that’s what I remember. I remember gay men and drag queens, but drag queens were performing a show. It wasn’t just like they were milling around with everybody, which later was kind of
It was I’d say the mid-1990s or maybe even early 1990s that there would be women’s bars, and as long as there was a lesbian bar, you’d see that real separation, but as those bars would close or change hands or be gone for a while and then one would come back, that sort of thing, the women would start to come out and mingle with the men. Like I say, sometimes it seemed to go well, and then — I told you about the instances where it seemed like the women were causing the fights a lot, and we looked for ways.

RAMSTACK: Could you tell me about that again?

JOBE: Part of it had to do with the alcohol, in my opinion, that we had 99-cent vodka drinks on Sundays, and so everyone started at noon, and by 4:00 or 5:00 o’clock, everyone was belligerent and mean and throwing things. For some reason, the women just seemed to fight. You might see a fight among men now and then, and granted, there were some of those that were pretty bad. I can remember an instance where a guy took his lover’s eye out with a broken beer bottle, so it did happen, but for the most part, the women were like [demonstrating], you know, and would beat each other up. I think that might be part of what for some men that would curl their nose up at women in the bar. I know that affected me, and I worked there.

I told you before, we had long meetings about, “What can we do? You can’t just tell the women they can’t come.” That’s when we came up with no jeans, and that took care of the fighting, oddly enough, because they were wearing khakis, but what it was, we realized, is that there was a whole element of professional lesbian women, as there are to this day, who were coming and
attracting a group that was looking for other women, who didn’t have that same socioeconomic background and didn’t know how to behave. At least, that was my take on it. Once we started saying no jeans, some of them just turned up their nose to, “Well, if we can’t wear jeans, we’re not coming,” but the professional women put on khakis and a button-down and kept coming, and that changed, kind of, things.

By the time I left those bars, which would have been in 2005, about 2005, the ratio was probably still 4-to-1 gay men to a woman in the bar, but there were a lot more, and there seemed to be a lot more acceptance. We even had lesbian bartenders who were very popular. Still to this day, one of them there, Crystal Murley, has been there as long as I can remember. She’s very, very popular. I have a dear friend who’s no longer in the bar business, but who was one of the most popular bartenders there, lesbian, and all the guys flock to them.

RAMSTACK: Why is that?

JOBE: I don’t know. I don’t know the reason. They’re good bartenders, personable. We used to always say, “If you’re fast, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what you look like. It doesn’t matter. If you’re fast, that’s what they’re looking for. Nobody wants to wait in line a long time for a drink.” So that was a lot of it, speed. I also think that sometimes, at least in my experience, it seems like that sometimes, there’s less intimidation. If you don’t feel completely comfortable going to some gorgeous bartender, then you might choose somebody else. I did very well, and I knew mine wasn’t because they were flocking to me because of my looks, but I was fast, and I’d give it that, and I’d joke with them and that sort of thing. I think everybody had their own strong suits and all that.
That was a change that happened in the bar in terms of when I first started working for the clubs, I think that 10 or so years or 15 years that I worked before it ever came up about me being a bartender was because the whole element of bartending, it was like the dancers. Who’s the cutest with the body? That’s who’s going to be bartending. Now you only have to go into a bar to see that it’s wide open now, which is the way it should be. It should have always been that way, but it wasn’t always.

I think part of that change came from the AIDS epidemic. This has kind of sparked for me thinking about some of those people who are no longer with us. A lot of those were people that I just knew as employees and bartenders and didn’t really have a real personal relationship with, but I knew who they were and was, of course, sad when they died. The numbers were so many.

I feel like I’m the same way to this day. It got to the point where you almost had to pick and choose the memorial services and the funerals and that sort of thing that you went to. It’s not so much that now. Even now, I hear a name sometimes. Recently the guy who had the dancers for many years passed away, and I went to his celebration of life. It was held in the bar. I didn’t go to a funeral, but I did go to the celebration of life because I had known him for so many years and it felt like the right thing to do. I don’t feel everybody’s name who comes up that I know and have known for years in the community, I don’t go to everything like that.

RAMSTACK: Were there a lot of celebrations of life in bars?

JOBE: Lots, yeah, because a lot of times, there weren’t accepting family members, or I’ve been to several where the family would give a funeral, but if you went as a
friend of the gay person, you didn’t know who they were talking about because they would just kind of try to sweep all that under the rug.

I remember going to one where the preacher giving the service said to the congregation that the guy had denounced his homosexuality so that he would be able to go to heaven. I sat in the back, and I just shook like that [demonstrating] because he and I had been good friends, and his brother, who was straight, whom I’m still friends with all these years later, I knew that within weeks of his death, what our conversations were, and he had not denounced anything. In fact, we kind of joked that he would joke about the fact that he was ill and nobody would have him and wouldn’t that be nice. I knew it was all a lie.

Years later, his brother would come back to me and apologize. He said, “I should have never allowed that to happen. It was my parents. I knew it was happening, but I didn’t stop it, and I should have,” and he apologized. That’s how I could remain friends with him, because we had lots of years where we weren’t really in contact, where we had been before. Of course, he lived in New York and was married. Now he’s married and has children. We connected again on Facebook, as lots of people do, and now we comment back and forth and send little notes and all that.

I experienced quite a bit of that. I remember going to one where this dear friend of mine, who was, I thought, openly gay — he worked at Omega House when I did. He was part of a volunteer recruitment that I was. He was a dear friend of mine. He was a great person. When I went to his funeral, they didn’t even call him by the name we knew him as. They called him by his middle name or whatever, which is understandable, but they didn’t acknowledge any of his
history of the gay organizations he worked for or that he was gay or anything. I was stunned by that.

I know there were instances where I thought, “Man, wait until that family sees the group of us showing up.”

There have been drag queens that family didn’t acknowledge any of that history. I know there were some instances where a couple of people talked about going to funerals of drag queens and there being drag queens there, and the family — but you know what? Why hide it in death? That was always very tough, and I think that was part of the reason too why for me, at least, I would pick and choose and why there were so many things.

I can remember being kind of the go-to whenever there would be an employee and there wouldn't be somebody to give a talk. The eulogy, it would be called in a funeral, but in a celebration of life, somebody just gets up and says a few things, and that would fall in my lap. I was always pretty much okay with it if I knew the person well enough. There were a couple that I’ve given over the years that were people who were very, very close to me, and I welcomed the chance to do it. That, for me, might be part of the reason that I began to pick and choose, because that’s just devastating — at least, it was to me — to go to someone’s funeral and feel like you don’t know who the person is.

In one instance we went, we had a black friend of ours who passed away, and he was so openly gay that his students at school called him Miss Powell. His name was Gary Powell, and they referred to him as Miss Powell, and he taught the cheerleaders, and he was as gay as any human being could be. It was kind of comical, because he was like 6’3” and 250 pounds and just a delightful person,
had a beautiful singing voice and stuff.

RAMSTACK: Was he a drag queen?

JOBE: He was not. He would get up in drag now and then, as we all did, but he was not a drag queen.

He had a lover at the time. We went to his funeral. The lover was not allowed to participate, and easily 15 — I’m saying 15 minutes; it could have been less, could have been more — but somewhere in the course of the preacher talking, he stops and says, “I just realized I don’t know who I’m referring to.”

The family had arranged for this preacher to do it, and he had somebody else in mind that he thought he was giving the eulogy for. Man, that was one where we all just were like [demonstrating looking around in shock]. We could not believe it. We were stunned.

So then his lover put together a celebration of life that we all went to at the Unity Church. There was beautiful singing and stories and laughter, so he got the proper sendoff.

But man, talk about just devastating, and on top of a death, then you have that. It made me think to myself. That’s one thing about it. My family will acknowledge the person I was, I believe, when I’m gone. They’ll at least acknowledge, and my friends will, and that sort of thing.

My friend that I had helped take care of who passed away that his sister and I are still friends, his was at Bering United Methodist, and so it was very open. I did the eulogy at that, and we were able to interject a little about this, that, and the other. If people came there not knowing he was gay, they left knowing that he was and that he had lived a full, happy life and was not held back by it or
felt persecuted or anything like that by it, so that was nice. That’s part of the reason why I really like going there to that church. Now I’m a member. It’s all good.

I hope other people can experience that, that acceptance, because that’s what it’s about, and about finding the acceptance. Like I say, that’s a hard one for me. Not to harp on it, but not to have acceptance in death is — of course, you don’t know it.

RAMSTACK: So you often felt like you were alienated from the families?

JOB: Alienated from the families, but kind of in hindsight, because a lot of the times, they were already either estranged from, or we had such a circle of extended family that I was fortunate that my parents — like I told you, they knew some of my gay friends, and there was that interaction. My mother and both of my sisters would say, “Oh, we love being around your gay friends because they’re so good to us.”

I can remember my mother being the life of the party. She was comical and she was fun. She liked the good-looking men and that sort of thing. I would give parties, and I’d notice people — I’d say to people later. “Oh, my mother, did she just trap you?”

They said, “No, we had a great time. We love talking to her and stuff.”

That was good. Both of my sisters are that way, and a lot of my friends — gay friends and lesbian friends — have become friends with both my sisters and myself and my family members and that sort of thing. I really believe in that extended family, and that helped a lot.

A lot of times, I guess that even though I still put a little fault to the family
for the way things were handled, they might have felt like they were doing the
best they could. I’ve always said the funerals certainly aren’t for the dead.
They’re for the living. So that’s what they needed for themselves to make it
palatable to them. It’s hard to fault it, but like I say, I wouldn’t want that to
happen to me, and I don’t want it to happen to anyone else, actually.

RAMSTACK: You mentioned volunteering at the Omega House. Could you tell me
more about your experience at Omega House?

JOBE: Yes, you know what? I don’t even know how I heard about it. I think it came
from just that thing of helping raise money for it and then heard that there was this
little house in Montrose that had two bedrooms and three beds, and they would
take people in who were given less than six months to live, and they needed
people to help take care of them.

I went there not knowing what to expect. Eleanor Munger was the
woman’s name who started it. They had a good system going. I mean, they had
shifts. You’d work only a four-hour shift and once a week. I think you could do
two if you wanted to, but they encouraged you to keep it to one so you didn’t get
burned out and stuff.

When I first went, you did everything. Like I’d go in in the morning and
put the laundry in and start breakfast and get breakfast done and feed and bathe
and start lunch and then get lunch going before I left at noon. I’d go from 8:00 to
noon. I thrived during that because I just felt like I had a real purpose, and I loved
my Wednesday mornings. I worked my schedule all around that. My job knew.
Charles. I’d come in to work a little after noon on those days. The rest of the
time, I’d be there at 10:00, but on those days, I’d come at noon because I’d been
to Omega House.

Then they expanded, and they went to eight beds in that new house, a new house that they have to this day. Like I say, I left to take care of a lover, and he passed away, and then my father passed away, and when I went back it was too difficult to do the hands-on.

Probably two to three years ago, I decided to try to go back, and I went, and I would never tell them this, but maybe I should. Maybe it would help them. I went online to try to, and the process of getting onboard as a volunteer had become so complicated, page after page, and so I was like, “Wow,” so I ended up going to the Montrose Center and volunteering and starting to do some work there, and then their volunteer coordinator fell to the wayside. Then they had another one, and that fell to the wayside, so that hasn’t worked out the way I wanted to, because I would have to contact them to find out if there was something I could do rather than being — because what they said would happen is that they’d send out emails, and it would say, “We need this, this, and this,” and you can volunteer for whatever you want. After a couple of times of that, it just didn’t happen anymore. Then I would get in contact with somebody else and find out somebody had left, and so it’s been harder to volunteer than it should be, in my opinion.

So what I’d do is, like Omega House, there’s a guy that works there that I know that puts out calls on Facebook a lot. They’ll say, “We’re doing Thanksgiving dinner, and we could use some side dishes,” and so I’ll make some food and I’ll take it. He’ll put a call out now and then for — they were looking for garbage bags the other day and plastic bags they can use as garbage bags, and
things like that. I try to help out that way when I can.

I still do go to the Montrose Center when I can and help with their holiday boxes they put together and stuff like that. I really would like to find something that I can do on a weekly basis again, but the difficulty for me now has been health-related, for the same reason when I was going to go back to Omega House, I knew I couldn't do the hands-on anymore because it's very physical. I mean, it's physical. It's lifting up somebody to get them in the shower and things like that. After my health, my kidney failure and heart surgery and different things, I know I don't have the ability to do that anymore, but I thought, “Well, I can at least maybe get back on recruiting volunteers and doing the seminars and that sort of thing.” I may still, at some point.

That’s changed a lot too because Omega House went in with Bering and became Bering Omega, and now it’s kind of a whole different scenario, which might have been the reason for the whole process of it being more difficult. I think they do like background check-type stuff now, which was something in those days you took volunteers for a warm body. Now they probably have to be more selective.

RAMSTACK: How long were you volunteering at Omega House?

JOBÉ: I want to say probably for about at least seven, eight years, maybe, and then I was gone for probably about a year, and then I came back and did the — I forget what they call them. It’s when they teach all the — they give the volunteers a two-day seminar on everything, and I would do those. I did those probably for about two more years, so probably for a total of about 10 years, I was involved in that. It was a really good experience just from the standpoint of you kind of get outside
of yourself and your own — I used to tell a friend of mine, “There’s no such thing as a bad hair day anymore. That’s just silliness to worry about some things, because people are dealing with a whole lot worse.”

I had some really positive experiences in terms of things that happened to me there that really I feel like shaped me as a compassionate person. I can remember at one point thinking, “I just can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard watching.” You go in knowing people are going to die.

I think I told you this before. They had a book where if you wanted to be notified if a person died before your next shift, they would call you and tell you. I didn’t understand that until the first time I went in to an empty bed, and it was someone that I had felt like I had gotten kind of close to, and it struck me hard, hard, hard. So then I understood it. I didn’t for everybody, but some people, I would, and others, I wouldn’t.

One day I had just decided I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard. It’s too depressing. There was a woman there whose son was I want to say 18, maybe 19, and the husband dropped her off every day on his way to work. She stayed all day, and at dinnertime he came and picked her up. She was there every day feeding, bathing, sitting. I thought, “Oh, my God, if the mother can do it, then I can do it.”

I actually had a conversation with her where I told her, “I was getting ready to throw in the towel, but if you can do it, I can do it,” so I stayed on.

They said I might not come back after caring for a loved one who died of AIDS, that a lot of people didn’t come back, and they were right. The hands-on was just impossible because you walk in the room and you see your loved one
instead of somebody.

It was some valuable lessons just about empathy and caring for others over
yourself, so it was good. I hope I’ve imparted some of that now and then to
people. In the bar business, I would run across a lot of people many, many, many
years younger than me. In fact, it used to be a joke. I said, “Oh, I’m leaving the
bars when the people start being half my age.” Well, then I was like, “Okay,
when they’re a third of my age, I’m going to quit working in the bars.” I mean,
there are literally people now that I’m 40 years older than some of the people who
work in the bars. I’m 40-plus years older. But I’ve also made some good
friendships with some younger people whom I’ve watched over a period of five,
10 years mature a little bit, and I’ve had some of them come back to me and say,
“I remember you told me.”

There was a guy one time who was heading off to Southern Decadence. I
said, “Have you ever been to that?”

He said, “No.”

I took him by the shoulders and said, “Be safe. Play all you want, but play
safe.”

I didn’t remember it, but he said, “I got there, and there were instances
where I thought to myself, ‘Okay, this is what he’s talking about.’ Be careful and
all that.”

I said, “Well, I’m glad you heeded my advice.”

That’s why I think this history is so important, because if somebody,
whether they’re researching for a paper or whether they decide to go through and
look at it or it just comes about in some fashion, it’s stories that need to be told, I
feel like.

I do some writing, I think I told you, for the Montrose Star. In fact, just today at lunch my publisher said, “We’ve got to get going on this My Life Behind Bars.” She’s ready to publish it, so I think that’s going to happen.

I have felt it in the past, and I have written some of it down, but at one point I had this idea I wanted to write a series of short stories that just had to do with the people I had lost, to chronicle that. I’ve written a couple, but that was for me. It was really to remember and to have the richness of those friendships remembered and chronicled. A lot of it was for me. It was my grieving process. I think there’s an element of that that could be useful to other people to read. Hopefully at some point I’ll do that, but I’ve got a dozen different ideas for things I want to write about. It’s one of those things that it’s hard to find the time amidst everything else and to commit to it, to commit to the writing.

RAMSTACK: You mentioned holidays earlier, and I wanted to ask. I had come across some Christmas ads with pictures of I think it was staff members.

JOBE: Yeah.

RAMSTACK: Can you tell me more about those?

JOBE: Yeah, it was one of those things that we would — I don’t even know how that started or necessarily why. I think it started with Charles as a carry-on from when he worked for somebody else who owned the bars in Dallas and then owned Houston bars, and then he took over, and I think that was a carry-over, because that organization, which was called Caven Enterprises, in Dallas, to this day has a much stronger community support base. In fact, their employees are shareholders in the business, and so they were known for their community outreach long before
we were and in a larger fashion than we ever were in the Houston bars, in my opinion. You would hear about them and about how that was part of their whole — when you went to work there, you kind of knew you needed to be involved like, you know, jobs do that. Certain jobs do that, and I think that’s a great thing to say, because you know you’ve got a good employee if they’re spending some time doing a little something, outside the job, that has to do with helping other people. I think it can take all sorts of forms. I think that was kind of a leftover from those days for him, and it just became the norm.

Even now, there’s a bar, Tony’s Corner Pocket, that I do some ad work for, who still does it. They take a picture at Christmas, and then they run an ad that’s a thank-you to the community, with all the employees so people can kind of see the group. I’d say it stemmed out of a thank-you to the community. “Happy holidays” and “from,” because we always said “Charles Armstrong and the staff and management of,” and it would list all the bars. That’s how we would do ours.

When Tony’s Corner Pocket does theirs, he does his “Tony Vacarro and the staff and management of Tony’s Corner Pocket.” It really is just kind of a way to acknowledge the community; that you’re saying thank you for their support. Support and patronage, those were my words that I would use a lot of times in those ads.

RAMSTACK: And then Halloween. I’ve heard you had really big Halloween shows.

JOBE: Huge to a fault. Because according to how it would fall — in the gay community, New Year’s Eve and Halloween and Gay Pride, but Halloween above New Year’s Eve and above Gay Pride even, are just big, big reasons to blow it all out. According to where it would fall on the calendar, there were many times
when there would be two full weekends of Halloween events. A lot of times, I would MC the costume contest, and I would go from outside, on the street, to one, to inside JR’s, and then over to South Beach to do that one, and while somebody else was doing one at the Mining Company. There are always cash prizes.

Halloween is just a big deal. Everybody wants to dress up, and the streets are full. With Charles’ bars, we’d close off the street at the beginning of the evening. Dinners until about 10:30, and people would come out, and we’d do it, like I say, a costume thing with prizes, cash prizes and trophies.

RAMSTACK: What sort of costumes would people wear?

JOBE: Oh, my gosh, everything you can imagine. There’s a big joke in the gay community, especially among gay men, about — and they do this in the straight community too — about sexy whatever, sexy cowboy, sexy nurse, sexy whatever, because there’s a lot of that feeling of people who would no more think about running around in skimpy attire the rest of the year, on Halloween allow themselves that freedom.

It’s like someone who talked about Pride the other day, about someone had written on Facebook about, “Oh, here we are. It’s Gay Pride again, and I guess you-all are going to get out there in your skimpy outfits.”

And I thought “in drag.” I thought, “Okay, that’s an element. That’s an element of the community, and that’s always going to be an element. If you can’t express that in the Pride Parade, then when can you express it?”

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

JOBE [continuing]: Even in our community, I can remember 1983 or 1984, when I was working for Risky Business Cabaret, I did a lot of female characters. I did
Carmen Miranda, and a club had invited Risky Business to be part of their thing, so they chose me, and I’m in this full Carmen Miranda outfit. The organizer of the thing came and told me they had decided no drag and no leather and no dancer skimpy things. They had decided that it was not an image that they wanted to project, and yet that was the — you know what I mean? It was supposed to be for the community, for the gay community.

The guy and I would laugh about this later, but I said to him, “I’m not technically in drag. I’m a character from a theatrical production. If you want me off of this float, you’re going to have to drag me down off of this float,” and I rode the whole thing.

Later we would laugh about that. He said, “Yeah, what were we thinking?” There’s always been that, though, that core. I wish more things were put to a vote and that more people were interested in voting for, because that’s part of the reason the parade got moved downtown when the bar owners were saying no and certain people were saying no, but the organizers of the parade who were putting it together and doing the work moved it downtown, and it’s not going anywhere. It won’t ever come back, and I know that. I knew when it was happening the year before, when there was a big meeting and they had the bar owners there, and they were trying to set it up. I wrote an article for the paper saying, “Doesn’t anybody see? I promise you that next year, that parade will be downtown.”

But they would not say it in that meeting. They were saying, “Oh, we’re
looking at this,” and, “We’re looking at that,” and, “It’s outgrown the Montrose,”
and blah, blah.

I said, “People, put two and two together. They’re moving the parade with
or without you.”

They didn’t put it to a popular vote. They just did it. The committee did
it, the Pride Committee.

RAMSTACK: How would the costume contest work at Halloween?

JOBE: Generally it was most outrageous, just a best costume that would encompass
everything, and then a best couple or group. That left the door wide open for
everything. Occasionally we would do some thematic-type things, but that
generally was the staff of the thing.

One year, oh, my God, in all of the clubs, Charles got this brilliant idea
stolen from something, and we called Halloween “A Night of a Thousand
Britneys,” and everybody dressed like Britney Spears. There were three nights of
it. I can remember putting together three specific outfits. I did a young Britney,
an old Britney, and Britney’s mother were my costumes.

There were some people who came in the Britney stuff. I think for that
one, we considered best costume to be if they were thematic. There was
everything from — I can remember one time there was a guy running from one
costume contest to another across the street, and he had taken a single mattress,
and he had cut where it went like this, and his arms stuck out here and his head
stuck out here [indicating], and he had these great big ears to be like Mattress
Mac.

I can remember Charles saying to me — I said, “Did you see that?”
He said, “Yeah. Here’s the thing about it. Everybody thinks they’re the winner.”

I thought, “That’s absolutely right. Regardless of how ridiculous or thrown together or what, everybody considers they’re the winner.”

We would have just lines and lines of people. We’d parade them across as quickly as we could and stuff. Usually it was people who really did take some time and effort and probably some money too, but sometimes it would be something just so horribly offensive that it would make everybody scream and yell, and they’d vote for them.

I can remember one time, there was someone who was fixed up like they were pregnant, but when they walked on stage, then the baby dropped out and was on a big umbilical cord, and they drug it off the stage with the baby on that. Of course, that, people screamed.

I can remember this one guy who had this beautiful costume. It almost looked like a Liberace-type costume, but it had like a big cape thing. He walked on the stage and he opened it up, and this huge gold lamé penis fell out like that [indicating arm falling down]. Of course, he won.

The group stuff would be funny. They would do Golden Girls. This is way before your time, but there was an actress called Zsa Zsa Gabor, and she got some notoriety because she had slapped a policeman when he had stopped her. So this guy came — it was actually my hairdresser at the time — and he came and he was dressed as Zsa Zsa Gabor, and he had this guy in full policeman’s uniform with a red print on him like that [indicating on his face], and he had made a little cardboard card that actually had little lights that worked and all that. I mean,
there were some people who really went out.

I can remember there was a guy every year that did a lot of costume work who would come like as Queen Victoria in these beautiful gowns and headdresses, and stuff like that. For the most part, it was sexy cowboy and sexy sailor and that sort of thing.

RAMSTACK: Would that be another big fundraiser?

JOBE: No, no, Halloween, no. I don’t remember it ever being connected with raising any money. It raised money for the bars. It sure did, lots of it. That was one of the times when, like I say, we gave out pretty good — I can remember giving $500 to the three categories one year several times in the clubs. You could really make some money if you’d go from one to the other. And then everybody got great big trophies. That was the thing we prided ourselves on in our clubs is that you get a trophy that tall [indicating], and people love —

RAMSTACK: Like 4 feet or 5 feet?

JOBE: Yeah, 4 feet, yeah, for you to be carrying it around. I think people wanted a trophy more than they cared anything about the money. Some people would come out and put it together to try to win the money, but those trophies were so popular. They started out small, and they’d get bigger and bigger, so that was kind of fun. Halloween is a big one. It’s big, big, big.

RAMSTACK: You said New Year’s was big as well?

JOBE: New Year’s Eve is big because everybody who doesn’t go out on a regular basis comes out, and the same is true of Halloween. There are people who said, “We never go to the bars.” Well, they’re going to come out on Halloween and New Year’s Eve, and a lot of times on Gay Pride. It’s a lot of fun for everyone except
the employees, who are having to deal with these people who don’t come out on a regular basis and drink to excess and don’t know how to behave.

In fact, I went out Gay Pride Night with my friends. We went into JR’s. There’s this guy that I worked with for years, and from a distance I saw him, and his face was just like he was hating, I mean hating it. It’s busy, and people are yelling, and they want a drink now, and all this. I could tell he was just miserable, and I shouted his name out, and he looked up, and he saw me, and he smiled a big smile.

My friends said, “That was a change.”

I said, “Yeah, I understand it completely.”

We call it being in the weeds, when you’re working so fast that all you can do is barely glance up, and people are, “I was next,” and that sort of thing. It’s hard. It’s hard work, but then at the end of the night, you count that money.

That’s something, too, that what we call the amateurs, they’re not necessarily the biggest tippers either, but still. They make money. That’s why they keep doing it over and over.

RAMSTACK: I was wondering. For the Halloween costumes, it was primarily gay men who would do the costumes?

JOBE: No. I think that was one of the times when it really, really — the door is wide open. I think a lot of little straight girls want to come down there and bring their boyfriends.

I remember giving a party one year, and this girl I worked with decided to put her gorgeous boyfriend in a black slip and red lipstick. By the end of the night, he had decided, “Okay, I’m loving this. I don’t know if I like girls as much
as I thought I did.”

She and I were talking about that later. I said, “You started that ball rolling. You know what I mean? You have no one to blame.”

I know that even in that neighborhood when we close off the street, there would be a lot of people, straight people, coming down and bringing their children to look and stuff. I don’t think I would bring mine. Who wants to see a big gold lamé penis that you’re going to have to explain to your eight-year-old what that is?

But too, it was that kind of thing where it was kind of, “Maybe I’m okay with it. Maybe I’m okay with the entertainment value of them getting out,” just like people coming to the parade. I said, “I don’t care who comes to the parade or if they bring their kids or whatever, but be prepared for what you see, and be prepared to explain to Billy why there are so many ugly girls, or pretty ones, for that matter.”

RAMSTACK: Another thing I was wondering about is that I know that in Houston, the bathhouses remained open. Do you know anything about that scene?

JOBE: Remained? Remain.

RAMSTACK: Remain open.

JOBE: They still are open.

Yes, stunned beyond belief, that, because I had a friend, a good friend, who still does live in San Francisco and who was there during the time when they closed all the San Francisco bathhouses. I was one of the ones who said, “We’re next. This is not going to survive. There is no way.”

To this day, they’re there, and they still have the same reputation and the
same things going on there. I know it would waffle back and forth, and I think it’s very interesting, because I think I told you I was doing some work with Rich’s, and they just got, the owner of Rich’s said — Club Houston is what it’s called here. There used to be two, one called the Midtowne Spa, and then Club Houston. Club Houston is the only remaining one. It’s big. It’s a huge facility, and it’s got a great big swimming pool and saunas and workout area and all the back darkrooms and stuff, so I hear. I hear that’s what goes on there.

They contacted him, and he said, “I have a meeting with them. I can’t imagine what it’s about.”

I said, “It’s probably the historical thing. I dealt with it many times when they would contact us, and they’d want to do this and that or the other. They’d want to give out free passes for us to give out in the clubs. It’s all promotion. It’s all promotion.”

Then the club has to decide, “Am I going to promote this, knowing what it is?” A lot of times, we would decline because I think it opened that door for people who were looking for something to bring it up.

I notice Rich’s just has announced a joint-venture party with Club Houston. It’s got Rich’s name on it, but it happening at Club Houston. I was very surprised, very surprised. I’m not involved anymore. The owner can do what he wants to do, but I was kind of surprised.

Yeah, that they still have survived and exist to this day was one of those things that — because I’m telling you, I think the San Francisco ones closed in the early 1980s. I’m surprised that it has survived.

Every once in a while, there will be a flare-up. There will be a flare-up if
someone involved in city council or something and all, you know, there will be some [smacks table]. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Everybody is like, “Yeah, sure do.”

The thing that kind of is interesting about that is what you don’t hear about, or it’s about police harassment of that, which they easily could. They could easily go. That is something, though.

There used to be a place here called the French Quarter, which was adult male films — this was long before you could see it on your computer — where you’d actually go to the movie theatre and you’d sit in a movie theatre. There was the same kind of backroom area, just like the Club Houston, where guys would go. They actually would raid that, and it became being known that if you hear whistles or see the lights flashing and all that, get your pants up. As long as your pants are up, you’re okay. Otherwise, you’d get hauled out on public indecency.

That closed that one, which again was kind of surprising that the bathhouses remained while the adult cinema like that couldn’t survive it. That’s one that I can’t fathom how that’s remained.

RAMSTACK: We’re sort of wrapping up here. I wanted to ask about if you did any sort of like theatre tributes in remembrance of AIDS or anything like that in Houston?

JOBE: Not really, that I can really recall. I think there were shows, plays that touched on the theme at times. I think sometimes that was just all allowed to just kind of speak for itself.

Do me a favor. Ask me that question again. I’m not sure I completely —

RAMSTACK: I’ve heard of a lot of plays using like the theme of AIDS or anything.
JOBE: Yes, that, *Angels in America* and *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*. Yeah, there were, and there were productions mounted here in Houston, both by the gay theatres and by the Alley Theatre and stuff like that. In fact, I saw *Angels in America* at the Alley Theatre, and I saw — God, there’s the big one. What’s it? They just recently had a reunion of it, remounting of it, that is by Larry Kramer. *The Normal Heart*, which was one of the first ones that really dealt with a couple and one of them had AIDS. I mean, there’s this horrible scene where he collapses with groceries, and there’s food all over the floor, and he drags himself through it, he’s so weak. I mean, it was tough, tough to watch. Yeah, it’s been addressed in the theatrical community.

RAMSTACK: Have you been involved with any of those?

JOBE: I did a play called *Love! Valour! Compassion!* that was made into a movie. Nathan Lane played the role that I played, and I played a character whose lover had passed away from AIDS. They all meet on Fire Island every summer, and that summer, the guy who puts the party together is dying of AIDS, and they all have to address it. I was involved in that one, and I think that’s the only one where the exact theme of AIDS was present.

Twice I’ve done productions of *Boys in the Band*, which was one of the first ones that dealt with the whole homosexuality in terms of all the issues of openly gay and quietly gay and coming out and all that sort of thing. I’ve done two different productions of that. I think those are the only ones I can think of.

There’s a play I did called *Judy at the Stonewall Inn*. I think it was more about the riots of Stonewall, but I think one of the characters in it may have had AIDS or HIV, but I don’t remember. I don’t remember specifically if that was the
theme of it.

Then, of course, there’s Rent, which has been done, brought here as a touring show, which is about to come back again. It’s coming back to Houston on its 20th anniversary. There was a production of it about five years ago by a local group here, Masquerade Theatre that’s no longer around. They did very mainstream stuff, so for them to do Rent, it was major.

That’s what I remember.

RAMSTACK: Is there anything that you would like to mention or talk about that I haven’t asked you about?

JOBE: Not really. Other than since our last conversation, about having several conversations with friends of mine, to say that sparked some of the same history. You know, we share some of the same history, or they know my history, is the importance of chronicling in whatever fashion we can, because I’m not going to be here forever.

No, I can’t really think. I think it’s been pretty thorough in terms of my memories and stuff. Of course, I’ll go away and think of something, but I did this same thing when I told you I wrote that series. I wrote 13 segments when I first came to Houston, on through working in the clubs and that sort of thing, to right up to the time I worked for the clubs, chronicling it, and then, man, I’d no sooner finish than think, “Oh, I left out so-and-so and this and that and all that.”

For another time, but for now, I think we’ve covered a lot of territory, it seems like.

RAMSTACK: I did want to ask you about, did you go and get testing somewhere yourself?
JOBE: When I lost my friend, we did. I went with two of my friends to be tested because in the one time that I had an STD [sexually transmitted disease], I had these two friends, and we all went to the clinic together because one of them was showing symptoms of something, and so we all went. My one friend went in, he came out, and he said, “I have gonorrhea.”

The other one went in and came out and said, “I have syphilis.”

I went in, and the doctor said, “Are you friends with these two guys who were just in here?”

I said, “Why do you ask?”

He said, “Because you have syphilis and gonorrhea.”

I’m like, “Really?” At that time, they went ahead and tested me for HIV. Then my pattern after that became that because of my health issues of diabetes and other things, I would be having all this blood work done, and that just became a norm. Even times when they didn’t, I could tell from the questioning, the questions, I know what they were asking, and I said, “No, HIV negative.”

Then something would happen, and I’d have more blood work done and that sort of thing, so I ended up having a test more often than even I think I would have gone and had it done, and so it remained negative to date. It’s a lot easier now than in those days.

That is one thing I said about the whole AIDS epidemic and having survived it or being a survivor of it, is that it didn’t have anything to do with who you were or what your behavior. Some of the very same things I lost friends, I’m sure I was guilty of.

Like I say, I had my wakeup call early, early on with the death of my
friend and the illness of my friends. I think some of it was subliminal, and I
didn’t always completely practice the safest sex, but I practice it very closely and
I attempted to, but I think I was like anyone else. I ran into problems with not so
much drugs because I didn’t really do drugs, but alcohol and doing things you
wouldn’t ordinarily do if you weren’t impaired. I don’t remember other than that
initial testing of just going specifically for that test.

RAMSTACK: Do you remember where you went?

JOBE: Yes, at that time, it wasn’t like a Montrose Center or something that was gay-
related. It was the city health clinic where we had difficult — we all went in, the
three of us together, because you felt like everybody was looking at you and knew
why you were there. At least, that’s how we felt. We were young. We were in
our early 20s. It’s convoluted, but we were all three together, and that’s how it all
ended up. At least the one came forward when he realized that something was not
quite right. It was gamma globulin and pills, and you took it, and I was fortunate
that I never had any other issues with that in a long history.

Other than all the other health issues I’ve had, but I’m still here. Still here
kicking, and just got told yesterday — I had one last test to be signed off on to get
on the transplant list. Then yesterday I got a call that three years have passed
since my last colonoscopy, so now I have to have that test, so that’s on the 26th.
They said hopefully by the 1st of August, I’m on the list, so we’ll see.

RAMSTACK: Thank you so much for taking the time to come and talk with me and
letting us record this and everything.

JOBE: Absolutely. I hope you get everything you need.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]
[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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