

Don Kelly Oral History Interview
Kristen Ferrara

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Don Kelly (00:00:03)

I've always said I'm a gay man. I'm a homosexual. I didn't really find a sexual identity probably until early college because we didn't, I never heard the word homosexual or anything until college. And I was in a philosophy class and the ethics professor was talking about homosexuals. And bang. I said, that's, that's, that's who I am. I came from a very closed society where homosexuals weren't talked about, you know, they just, they weren't part of the conversation. It was a small Irish Catholic neighborhood. My dad was a Chicago policeman, and he would tell stories to his friend that I went overheard about gay bashing, going into gay bars in Chicago and beating everybody up in the bar.

DK (00:00:55)

In fact, my dad has difficulty as was with the homophobic issues. He had a stroke seven years before he died. They said he would be dead within a year, but he lived seven years after in Chicago, in a nursing home. And I took two weeks every year, one week for Father's Day, Father's Day week, and one week at Christmas time. And I actually stayed in the nursing home with him. Even though they've been, they may have been difficult to you or didn't really understand your sexuality, you'll never regret the time you spent with them. So I would say there was a touch of homophobia in both parents, although I love them very much. And I recognize from where they came from, they, they came a long way, but they weren't, they weren't supportive.

DK (00:01:43)

My maternal grandmother was a big influence on my life. She taught me to read on my knee, and she taught me about a loving God and that God is good and loves everybody that kind of a grandmother, very sweet. She was all, all this goodness and everything is good. People are good. Great hope. And I think that's where my liberal tendencies were ingrained in me because they didn't come from my mom and dad.

DK (00:02:19)

In high school, I worked at a theater for four years as an usher in the theater. That was how I started saving money for college. And I worked probably six nights a week in the theater and walk a good distance home. Well, I lived in Chicago for 17 years and went to school at the College of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, for four. I did come home at the summer and work in steel mills during the summer. I was a union member, and I paid my way through college. I followed the high school crowd up there. Didn't know what I was doing. And they all took business. So I took business on this thing, but it wasn't, they weren't challenging courses. I

got by doing minimal, minimal amount of work. But I did, I did get in ROTC. So I got in the officers thing. So I grew up in that, and that gave me great discipline in many respects.

DK (00:03:27)

But I wanted to keep doing it and go into the military. I was in the ROTC, Air Force officer for three years in Wichita Falls. I was 21 at the time. From the Air Force Times, they have the headlines in the paper, my name, the youngest squadron commander in the Air Force, in the whole Air Force. I was discharging people in the Air Force who were gay. And I felt like the biggest hypocrite standing. In fact, it was sort of a turnaround for me because they're bringing all this evidence. We're nothing more than beefcake magazines and maybe a little porn, and these poor people that were being discharged. And some of them were married or even bisexual or whatever it is. When they were discharged, they were discharged with great disdain, great humiliation. It was, it was just terrible, terrible, terrible. And so I said, I've got to get out of the Air Force.

DK (00:04:26)

And I happened to be in a bar, and someone had mentioned about a master's degree at the University of Kansas. And the degree was in city management. And I said, that sounds great because they also paid you a stipend while you were going to school. And I was intrigued by it: what a city manager did and what that was all about. So I was a year on campus there, and I was still drinking heavily, but I enjoyed the classes and wonderful teachers. I did my internship work at City of Victoria. I stayed in Texas for two years at Victoria. And then I got, there was, what they call Regional Council starting in Texas. So Governor Connally created 24 regions in the state of Texas. And the Dallas-Fort Worth one invited me up to be a key executive as a new organization for that. And I went up there for three years and enjoyed it because I was going to the Dallas gay bars and involved with gay society.

DK (00:05:43)

All these regions were forming in the three years, but there were two that were not being able to form. And the one fighting was Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange, who are all fighting with each other. So they were looking for someone, at least Beaumont was looking for someone that had experience. I was 29 at the time to come down and take a job because I was a professional person. I was building an, this is a very large organization now, 300 to 400 people. There was no one there at the time. I was the first employee. I encountered a little bit of people that knew I was gay and were holding it against me because, I beat the, the old timer there. And they went so far as I know a couple of times they would write a letter to the editor saying something nasty about a politician and sign my name to it.

DK (00:06:53)

And there were all sorts of other instances of some, some of a political figure saying we know about you. And it was a of saying, you better respond to what we want done. I was very apolitical. A lot of people...it's a big Republican area now, but at the time it was real Democrat and they were saying, you know, we should be hiring all Democrats. I said, no, I'm hiring the

best people for the job. I hired a lot of women, and I hired a lot of African Americans and people just finally respected me for that, but I got chewed up by congressmen and state legislators because I didn't hire the people that I, politically. So I delighted in training and helping in developing people's careers. I put a premium on that.

DK (00:07:50)

I've always sided with the marginalized. I was in Civil Rights marches. I was in anti-war marches. I had a lot of time on my hands. I didn't have a partner. I've always been one to be of service. So I involved myself...at one time I was on probably 25 or 30 board of nonprofit boards. There were four YMCAs in Southeast Texas, and I was on all four of the YMCA boards. I was very active with the Mental Health Association, as I said. I was very active at the state level, with the state level Mental Health Association. I was involved with the Arts Council. I would help establish the first Arts Council in Southeast Texas. I was president of the ACLU for about 16 years. I was president of the local Mental Health Association for about 12 years. I was a founding member of the Triangle AIDS Network.

DK (00:08:56)

I was very active in all the professional associations, which would be the American Planning Association, the Texas Planning Association, the International City Management Association, the Texas City Management Association, I'm not a social worker, Social Workers Association, local chapter. I've always been active. There was an organization formed in Houston called Dignity which is a Catholic organization, and I was one of the founding members for that. I was also active in Amnesty International. One other one, just thinking of, it's fun to talk about, I started a chapter of the World Future Society. In fact, I did a radio show for many years on sports trivia in Beaumont. For about 20 years.

DK (00:09:53)

I just felt very reassured that the community knew me and didn't know me just as the Director of the South East Texas Regional Planning Commission. They know me in other kinds of things. In fact, most people remember me for some of these other things, you know, the trivia guy or something else on this. Postcard collection. I had a big postcard collection, a huge collection. I donated it.

DK (00:10:21)

I guess I'd been in college at that time, the bars had to be entered very through back alleys. And there would be someone stationed. So if, if a Chicago policeman came and knocked on the door, there would be a whistle blown. So anybody that was dancing with each other had to stop dancing and go to the bars and just drink. But I would go to the gay bars. And the police department, their philosophy was whoever goes into that gay bar and out of that gay bar, we're going to take a picture of, and these are the words of the police chief. We know they're always be queers. We want to know where the queers are at, and we want to keep the queers in one place. So it was the one gay bar in Beaumont. So I don't know how many times my picture was taken going in and out of there.

DK (00:11:14)

The liquor control board seemed to make more stops at the gay bar to pick up people that were drinking heavily. And I was amongst them several times. Then in Houston, certainly, I was in a big gay bar raid. Think it was at a bar called QT's, and we were all up against the wall and hands on the wall and we had to show some identification and they check to see whoever they thought was drinking the most. I never felt I fit in with the gay community as it was existed, but I felt I was very comfortable with the lesbian community, and they just befriended me to no end. I think I would've really had trouble coming into larger LGBT community if it weren't for lesbians. But I know I was in Beaumont during the AIDS crisis. And I know here in Houston, if it wasn't for the lesbians, it would have been really brutal for, for the gay men coming of age. Because the lesbians really came in and took care of their brothers so.

DK (00:12:18)

I fell in love with this guy not, not sexually. It was just, on this thing, but he was from Vidor, Texas, and he had AIDS. Advanced AIDS. And it was obvious he wasn't going to be around a long time. And what I did was, there was a number of showings of the AIDS quilts in Washington, DC. I said, I'm going to take you to see the quilt, and then we're going to take the train up to New York. And Randall was just magnificent in the way he handled an upcoming death, and to see him. Randall probably died when he was 22 or anything. But when we got up to the...I went back to see the quilt in a later year. I was walking up to the mall where the quilt was displayed. And it was a terrible rainy day. And actually, the sky opened up, and his name was said right at that time. I've got the picture of the sky. Excuse me.

DK (00:13:32)

When I was having anxiety attacks. And my job called for me doing a lot of speaking, and I just had a, I guess, sort of a nervous breakdown. Until I admitted it to myself, I couldn't get treatment for it. And then I went to a 12-step meeting for about six months, enjoyed it. Really didn't involve myself with it. And then for three years I had resumed the addiction, and the addiction progressed and made me sicker. And then three years later, I got a second DWI. I was working at the time with the Mothers Against Drunk Driving, MADD, who were working on legislation to toughen the laws against drunk driving. And I said to myself, am I not a hypocrite? Here I am with these mothers that are involved with this, and I'm working on something. And I said, I just got to stop. So I went back to the 12-step meeting house, and I've been going for 38 years on that. And I hope I'm some proof that it works, because I feel good at 80. I'm vigorous on this, and I would have been long dead the way I was drinking.

DK (00:15:09)

One was to be very apparent in the gay community and take leadership in some form or fashion and give to the LGBT community. Not that I hadn't before, but to do it in a significant way. Second goal was to, recovery has been so good to me, and I wanted to work in the recovery area and help people who were addicted and now, which is an expansion of my 12-step work. I found both at Lambda. Now since that time, it's been expanded throughout the city with 12-step work. I

love books. I'm a big collector, and I had a huge collection of books relating to Houston, from cookbooks to historical books to you name it, church directories and everything else. I guess I'm interested in, because in 80 years I have seen so much change in the LGBT community, that I'm just interested in the history. So these books were a part of history to me, and the men in the books expanded to newspapers. And so I continued on my efforts, and I said, well, if I want to sell this thing, I'm going to broaden it out. And then I started loading up with the lesbian material, transsexual material.

DK (00:16:24)

The collection doesn't have papers of any one single individual, but the Texas A&M collection has a broader swath of comic books, newspapers, magazines, programs, memorabilia than any other place. It was history. Rebecca Hankins at A&M saw it, and she was interested in it. They invited me to come to the university and give my pitch, and they had probably 30 of their faculty who were all LGBT people. One gentleman said, Mr. Kelly, this is an important collection. We want your collection. And it actually brought tears to my eyes because it validated it. And he also said, we don't know how we're going to pay for it.

DK (00:17:15)

And they said, well, we'll find the money for it. And they did. I think they paid for it out of contributions from every department in the university, paid for it. So it was a marriage made in heaven. I needed some compensation at that time. They needed the collection. And the people there were, I can't tell you how welcoming and kind and nice they were, all the faculty. It's a legacy I'm proud of. Remember one of my retirement objectives was to work, do something with the LGBT community and the recovery community. And I think I've got both bases covered. I had the bases covered at Lambda, but I doubled down by having it at A&M.