Oral History # 024

An Interview With

Bob Hergenroeder

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AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB HERGENROEDER

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: This is Lynn Schwartzenburg interviewing Bob Hergenroeder for The oH Project. The interview is taking place January 5th, 2017 in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Bob to document his recollections concerning the AIDS/HIV epidemic in Houston.

Welcome, Bob.

BOB HERGENROEDER: Thank you.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Thank you for meeting with me today and telling your story. I look forward to this.

BOB HERGENROEDER: It’s my pleasure. It’s mostly good memories.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Yes. Tell me, when and where were you born?


LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me about your family. What did your parents do?

BOB HERGENROEDER: My dad was a carpenter. Mom was a homemaker. Pretty much, that defined things until much later, when the kids were grown and gone, Mom took a temporary job as a payroll clerk in a downtown department store, and of course that lasted for years and years, and then Dad retired. Carpentry, blue collar, average, good family.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you go to a public school?

BOB HERGENROEDER: Never, no. Probably some of the most frequent pictures in the history books are all of First Communions. I think kindergarten might have
been public. But no, private Catholic schools all the way through. We all did.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So you have siblings. Tell me about your siblings.

HERGENROEDER: My first sister, Pat, is two years behind me. She’s spent all of her career in special education in West Virginia; Parkersburg, West Virginia. She had two kids. One is a chemist at Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. One is an occupational therapist and now lives in Rensselaer, Indiana.

My second sister, Janet, was an interior decorator, artist. She passed about 10 or 12 years ago from brain cancer. She had also two kids, who are very much a part of our family.

And then my younger brother, who is probably seven years, I think, younger, seven or eight, is an oncologist in Cleveland, Ohio.

SCHWARTZENBURG: At the Clinic? Cleveland Clinic?

HERGENROEDER: Not “the” Cleveland Clinic, but “a” Cleveland clinic. Part of MetroHealth, which I think is their county public system.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What kind of child were you growing up? What was your childhood like?

HERGENROEDER: It is hard to remember. Between Catholic schools, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, between those two and being just a solid Catholic family in not-so-suburban but I mean not certainly downtown Pittsburgh, a good student, active student. My mother was, I think because of the scout thing, big in volunteer stuff. I was a paperboy for years. If I was a Boy Scout, I was a Boy Scout leader. If I was an altar boy, I was the altar boy teacher. I do have some memory of being a class clown, a little bit, but never to the point of — I don’t remember serious episodes of discipline or anything. I think I’ve been pretty wholesome, just good
family, everything.

SCHWARTZENBURG: And a leader from very young.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, in a more subtle — as I say, I don’t think I was ever the peacock or the one that pronounced the loudspeaker. I was more the program person or the make-it-happen, work-project leader kind of thing.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, a doer leader.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You had an unusual middle school and high school experience. Tell me about that.

HERGENROEDER: Sometimes I have to throw in the fact nowadays that I spent 20 years of my life as a religious monk, which is the easiest way for most people to understand what that is. I was a Priest of the Sacred Heart, which in this particular context, the word “priest” was defined by the founder as a servant rather than an ordained minister, so we were all considered priests even though I was never ordained as a clergy member. I was a Religious Brother, a lay person, similar to nuns or religious women.

The strange part of the story is, I think it was literally my seventh-grade nun who passed around a postcard that she had gotten in the mail, obviously, and the instructions were, if you want to be a priest, sign your name. For whatever reason, I signed the card. It turned out that particular card was sent to her by the Priests of the Sacred Heart, and so the rest just kind of fell into place. I think at the time, since early on, that was my little-boy career path. That was something that I was pretty clear at a very young age that that’s the direction I was going.

When it got to seventh or eighth grade and we started getting approached
by these high school seminary programs — when I think of it, the number of possible options would be overwhelming in terms of the various types of communities and types of religious orders and the types of work they do, but it really came down to in my head, I wanted to be a teacher, a priest who was a teacher, particularly a math teacher. Math was my thing. I wasn’t particularly interested in the bishop and his outfit, so the Priests of the Sacred Heart, when we went to visit there — and it was Lenox, Massachusetts, which was a long way from Pittsburgh — probably one of the first priests we met was Frank Hudson, who was the treasurer of the community and also the math teacher.

It was just all seemingly meant to be, and then when you think about it, at the age of 13, then, with full support of Mom and Dad and what money it took in those days, they made it happen. I went away — that’s 600 or 800 miles — to Lenox, Massachusetts, which part of the story, I’m sure, is that it was an incredibly beautiful place. It’s smack in the middle of The Berkshires, which is an incredible part of the country. A school of maybe 200 boys, all with grand intentions of priesthood.

I was there for four years, graduated successfully. We were a class of 13, I think. Maybe out of the 13, there might have been maybe five — I’d have to go back and check — that then stuck around and pursued the career, so to speak, for the next 15, 20 years. In fact, one of them just died. He was the pastor here at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church here in Houston.

Claim to fame now, the Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary in Lenox, Massachusetts is now the location of Canyon Ranch Spa. It was a grand, grand old building. Whoever was the billion-dollar owner/developer/builder thought he
was building himself a little model of the Palace of Versailles, so it was major marble stone columns, gardens, which somehow over the years got handed over to the Priests of the Sacred Heart, and they ran a high school there, and then when they sold it, eventually it became a baseball camp, and then eventually, I’ve noticed in their ads, Canyon Ranch now took it over. I would love to go back and just kind of —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Be there.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah. Of course, Canyon Ranch is very expensive, so it’s unlikely.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Well, look upon it from afar.

HERGENROEDER: In those days, once you finished high school, the assumption was that you were ready for vows, essentially. When I graduated from high school in 1970 was the first year that they allowed men, boys, to not take vows right away. At that time, it was considered a delayed vocation if you waited until you were after 18.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Delayed.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, it was delayed. We had special seminaries for that.

Anyway, I went to college for a year at Kilroe College near Scranton, Pennsylvania. They closed after a year. Then I did the novitiate in Ste. Marie, Illinois, which is where you prepared for first vows. Took my first vows in August of 1972. Once you’re in vows, in those days, everything was paid for, so everything was covered, so there was no issue in terms of college and so forth.

I went from there to Marquette. I wanted to go to the University of Wisconsin because they had an undergraduate school of social work. Couldn’t get my credits from the Catholic college accepted, so I went over to Marquette,
got in there, spent one semester, and then transferred back over to University of Wisconsin. Only stayed there for a few semesters because I was tired of Milwaukee and I wanted to get out of the monastery and we were opening houses in Chicago at Loyola’s campus on the Lake, so I went down there and ended up graduating from Loyola in Chicago.

Teaching was my primary occupation and goal. I was teaching elementary school. I was substitute teacher while I was going to school. I would spend summers in some of our mission projects, Memphis, Tennessee. My first trip to Texas was teaching math in a summer program in Raymondville, Texas, mostly in Spanish, but I only needed to know one through 10 and plus or minus, so we were good. That was my first introduction to The Valley in Texas. Ended up teaching math all the way through seminary. Taught at our seminary in Indiana.

Because of the teaching, ended up at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, because I needed the teaching credentials, which I then ended up also securing at St. Mary’s College at Notre Dame. At that time — I don’t know if they since have any — but I was the only male registered student. St. Mary’s was a women’s college, but if you wanted teacher’s credentials, that’s where everybody went for their teaching courses, so I went there and then, yeah, ended up as a teacher and stayed with that.

Went from Chicago to San Antonio. Somewhere in the midst of the teaching, I ended up as a recruiter, which meant that my job was to go find other grade school boys or older who wanted to go to the seminary, and I did that for a few years, and then I went to San Antonio as part of that job, and then went back to Chicago, where I ended up at a girls’ school with the Felician Sisters on the
north side of Chicago. Taught there for a couple of years, math and theology.

I was asked to take a job at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in San Bernardino, California, because this is all part of being part of this Priests of the Sacred Heart. You had institutions and work projects and missions all over the place, so you could go in a lot of different directions. I was campus minister there. I was math teacher there. I was theology teacher there. I was very involved in adult education programs there, teaching theology in Adult Formation programs.

At that time decided to go ahead and get my master’s in theology at the University of San Diego. The woman who was kind of the mentor, school counselor — she was an ex-nun — seriously advised me, that professionally if I wanted long-term professional growth and stability, I should get the MA [master of arts] and not their — I forget which way it went, but one was more pastoral and one was more formal kind of educator/teacher/professor type, so I went that route. I think her inkling was, “Look, you never know what the future is going to bring, so protect yourself and go from there.”

I ended up with a degree in political theology, which was a program coming out of the 1960s liberation theology out of Belgium and Europe. When I came out of there, I moved into the Justice and Peace, Social Action circle. I was officially assigned as the National Director for the Justice and Peace, Social Action, and Social Justice Education programs for the Priests of the Sacred Heart, which would have been in Milwaukee, but at that time they decided they wanted to move it out of the official headquarters, and for whatever reason, Houston was the choice, so that’s essentially what brought me down here.
I packed up a very small Toyota Corona in San Diego, moved to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on the east side right here in Houston, and lived there back in the day. I think I was there for probably a couple of years.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What does it look like to be in charge of Peace and Justice?
HERGENROEDER: Well, when you think of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, we had high schools, we had churches, we had Indian missions, we had lots of schools, parishes. Within all of those environments, in line with the mission of the organization, was the idea that we wanted to promote the values of the Priests of the Sacred Heart among the people that we worked with and served.

Priests of the Sacred Heart in its own history was founded in the late 1800s in the Industrial Revolution by a group of worker priests in France who took it upon themselves to go live and work in the factories, and they were the union organizers and the promoters of equality. That was the roots of the organization, which of course was what attracted me to them from the beginning. There were Peace and Justice Centers in some of the major cities that we supported financially. One was NETWORK Justice Center in Chicago. They were the mother ship for a lot of them, but there were similar smaller organizations in Memphis, or The Valley, and in California, and so forth, but there wasn’t one in Houston at the time. After I moved to Houston and maintained the national role, but I was quickly working with — they also knew that there was this group kind of formulating itself here in Houston among religious groups, and I was given the ticket to just say, “Why don’t you go connect with these people and see if we can put something together?”

SCHWARTZENBURG: It seems unusual, with how conservative Texas is, that there
would be something so seemingly lefty and radical.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, and to understand Houston politics, for a lot of reasons, Houston was unusual. It was no surprise that Houston did not have such a thing because even to this day politically it is not an easy city to organize in. I would still say that the political activism within Houston is moderate to low, right? It’s small in number. I remember, if you held a rally in Chicago, there would automatically be a thousand people, no matter what the title or the cause or whatever. Here, if you pulled 10 or 12 people together, you were doing pretty good. It was a challenge.

Living on the east side of Houston at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, I was immediately involved with social services in that community. If you go there today, right behind Guadalupe Church is Guadalupe Social Services, which is now all owned and run by Catholic Charities, but that was all started with me and Sister Mary Jo May, who was a Dominican Sister. She was in charge of social services there at Guadalupe.

We started with a coffee pot outside the back window of the rectory, and then started serving breakfast, and then started serving breakfast and lunch. If you go there now, there is St. Martha’s Kitchen, which is a huge free-food lunch depot. It used to be supported by Catholics out of Kingwood, I think it was, and then Catholic Charities now. There’s an employment center, a social service center, right across the street from Talento Bilingue, right there with the old Mercado, all that neighborhood right there. It’s fun sometimes just to go back into that neck of the woods and say, “Wow.”

I used to live in a room that was kind of hanging over the cemetery. It was
like a patio off the second floor that was enclosed. It was odd, but a cool place to start. I mean, when I think of it, my view of Houston in those days was from that intersection, Jensen and Navigation. We took off from there.

Dominican Sisters, the ones that run St. Agnes and St. Pius — and they’re very involved all over the place — they were strong impetus for the Social Justice stuff, and a woman named Loyola Haggerty. She was an ex-Mother General for the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. They were the ones that owned St. Joseph’s, and they have the big Villa down on the southeast side, near Wayside/Lawndale.

I mean, they had money and they made it possible, and she liked me, and somehow it all just clicked, so we formed what became the Justice and Peace Action Forum. The name “Action Forum,” 501(c)(3), we were Catholic and we were a church group, so it wasn’t a lobbyist organization, but it was clearly an advocacy group. We weren’t great rabble-rousers, but we were educators. If there was an organized rally of some sort, we did our best to make it happen and that kind of thing. That stayed for years. Even after I eventually left the Priests of the Sacred Heart, I stayed with that group until eventually — I’m not sure where it went its way.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When did you, one, realize that you were gay; and two, when did you step into the AIDS activism realm?

HERGENROEDER: In counseling, we used to help people distinguish between when did you know something was up and when did you know that it was the word “gay”? I think nowadays it might all be somewhat simultaneous because there’s much more information.
SCHWARTZENBURG: It happens faster.

HERGENROEDER: Back then, I can remember little moments as early as grade school where there was just a notion that something just wasn’t — it wasn’t that it wasn’t normal. It was an acknowledgment that there was something going on hormonally and among classmates in terms of attractions and so forth that wasn’t fitting. I can remember looking at what was supposed to be the hot girl in the classroom and wondering what the fuss was, and I was more interested elsewhere.

High school, of course, boys’ seminary, I would say that was a severely sexually repressed period. It was not acknowledged. Sex orientation was not acknowledged. It wasn’t talked about. I remember some attempts at sex education in a very awkward sort of way. I have to say maybe the grace of it being so repressed as a whole cultural piece of it, I’d be surprised to find out that there was any hanky-panky going on at all. It was pretty clean, strict, straight and narrow. High school was the period where I knew and probably got to the point where I was able to put the words together but never, never out of my mouth.

I claim that the very first moment where the word “gay” came up — well, two moments. The very first one was probably with a psychiatrist, which was probably somewhere in the mid-1980s — I don’t remember exactly — where it became kind of obvious, but it was private. I think I remember him flipping a coin and just looking at me and saying, “Okay. If heads is gay, which one is this going to be?” So we went with it. But that was private, and that was kind of in a confidential setting.

It wasn’t until I was in Houston, it was 1988, I had decided to volunteer at the AIDS Foundation, I was still Brother Bob, Priest of the Sacred Heart, went
through the volunteer training. Among the programs that we could pick and choose from, for whatever reason, I thought the Buddy Program would be cool.

There was a woman, Joy Hecht, who was, I would say, the grand Jewish mother matchmaker. Her job was literally to take the applications of the clients who said they would like a buddy, companion support person. It was kind of a care team idea before care teams became popular, but it was just one person, one-on-one kind of thing. She would take the volunteers and look at their résumés, so to speak, and she would make these matches.

Of course, when she’s trying to get to know you, she wants to interview you, and so the big, obvious question, “Well, are you gay?”

I remember just saying, “Yes.”

I remember telling her much later, I said, “Joy, you may not realize it, but you were the first person ever in my life to hear that actually verbalized.”

She said she matched me up with this guy Kevin, and she said, “Well, it was only because you both had master’s degrees, and I just thought it should work.”

Kevin was a pianist for the Houston Ballet Academy at the time and stayed that way until he became disabled.

That was my introduction to HIV.

Key players in those days, Connie Moore, who recently passed, she was on my team. In fact, I think she was team leader at the time. In those days, just the Buddy Program alone would have 60 to 100 volunteers or buddies, and we were divided up into teams of 15 or 20. Of course, big concerns for self-care and support, so we had support meetings for the volunteers. There was a lot of
camaraderie and support that way, and Connie was in charge of our group, I remember.

Bart Loeser, I still quote Bart Loeser to this day when I see pictures every once in a while on Facebook or something of him. I think he’s still in Austin, or maybe he moved beyond that. He was probably the most out-there kind of educator on safer sex and condom usage and all that stuff. That was late 1980s.

Prior to that point, all of my work focused on social services in the East End, Guadalupe Social Services. The AIDS Foundation Houston was the first encounter with HIV services. It was only the Buddy Program. There was no apparent organizational-type activism of any sort at that point. I remember gay men being incredibly concerned that there were too many straight people in our volunteer group and whether or not that was going to be good or whether or not straight people could possibly understand what people were going through. I remember the leaders at the time coming in to us when we finished our volunteer program and confessing to us that we were okay. They were very apprehensive, but they thought, “This might work,” kind of thing, which is just a story of those times, but of course I was still kind of closeted essentially at that point without being in strong denial. It just wasn’t on my tongue, you know, kind of thing, and I was Brother Bob. Being Brother Bob kind of overrode pretty much everything, even with family.

SCHWARTZENBURG: The AIDS Foundation was one of the few organizations where you did not need to be gay to be a volunteer; is that correct?

HERGENROEDER: Correct. I later found out People With AIDS Coalition, which had formed almost as a reaction, I think, to the AIDS Foundation, where they wanted
an organization that was totally focused not just on gay and not necessarily gay, but clients. People With AIDS Coalition was, my understanding, designed so that the people with HIV would be the ones running it, doing all the work, and it would be their organization. I wasn’t that familiar with all that at the time.

Kevin took me — he was part of a support group. There was a woman, she was a minister here at Bering Methodist. At the time, Bering had started their support groups, their Wednesday and Sunday groups. So you’re talking 1989 maybe, 1988, 1989, the Bering Support Group network had gotten so enormous that she decided to do a split, so she took 90 people to the Presbyterian Church which is right on the Beltway, United Presbyterian — I forget what the name of it is.

We went out there and formed a Sunday — same format. The potluck, support group, all of that. Kevin was part of that group, so I came in as part of that group. There were obviously facilitators, much like Bering is run. To be honest with you, to my understanding there is one guy, who became a social worker, who is still out there, who is still alive out of those 85, 90 people.

I remember those days, like the first married couple, heterosexual married couple, young couple, who were both positive. It was obviously mostly gay men, mostly white, but not totally, but there were some things happening already that were giving us signals that —

SCHWARTZENBURG: The demographics were changing.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, the demographics and all of that.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So you’re still Brother Bob.

HERGENROEDER: I’m still Brother Bob.
SCHWARTZENBURG: And you’re still going to your little room over the cemetery at night, or no?

HERGENROEDER: No. Eventually I moved. We opened a little house over by Thomas Street Clinic actually, which was meant to be a house for temporary volunteers, people who would commit to three-month stays, six-month stays. I lived over there for a while. That was when Thomas Street Clinic was just becoming a reality, and still I was not particularly clued in. Then I ended up in an apartment. I left the Guadalupe corner at some point in that so that by the time I actually left the Priests of the Sacred Heart, I was in my own apartment and pretty well established and on my own, so it wasn’t as dramatic.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What was your day job then?

HERGENROEDER: Justice and Peace Action Forum. Even though I had left the community, I was still Director of the Justice and Peace Action Forum, and just through sheer guts and persistence, I kept it. Eventually the Priests of the Sacred Heart decided I really should let it go or there should be at least a review of some sort, but I think at that point I had established the point where I decided to go to U of H [University of Houston] for a master’s in social work. I had already met Rob Falletti. I was already in the AIDS Equity League.

I was at the University of Houston School of Social Work. I think it was the first class period, maybe. I sat down next to a guy, young guy, had no idea gay or straight, didn’t matter. He was just a nice guy, Jeff Benjamin. We got to chatting, and he said to me that he was the partner of Jay Slemmer. For some reason at that time I already knew that Jay Slemmer was one of these shakers. Jay was probably one of the first Directors, Board Presidents, for the People With
AIDS Coalition. He was very loud and very strong, and I forget what his professional life at the time was, and he hired me. Eventually through that connection, he hired me as the first case manager for the People With AIDS Coalition, so that took care of my employment while I then proceeded to finish school and get the social work degree.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You mentioned meeting Rob Falletti, and the AIDS Equity League. Which came first?

HERGENROEDER: AIDS Equity League came first. I was already a volunteer at the AIDS Foundation but just that. Volunteer, social service-type orientation. Justice and Peace Action Forum, we ended up in an office in Montrose. We were looking around for various other resources. We’re looking for other outlets for our social action support. Catholic liberal women’s groups. We were inclined in that direction. I don’t think we were ready for a lot of gay activism, but we were clearly okay with the HIV stuff. I kind of just did it on my own. My assistant was also gay, Daniel Fishburn at the time. Jeff Godell was another one, were very supportive.

The Justice and Peace Action Forum at that point, we were spending as much time in Central America with refugee resettlements as we were at Charlie’s
at lunch with what was to be the AIDS Equity League. It was a pretty wild mixture of stuff. We were literally sending groups. We were going down to El Salvador and Honduras and accompanying groups of refugees from the Mesa Grande refugee camp back to their villages after the war. This was late 1980s. The positioning of all this is rather exciting actually.

Somewhere in there I show up at Charlie’s for lunch meetings with this thing called the AIDS Equity League. It seemed to be a perfect inroads to getting involved a little bit further than just volunteering. Our official mission, as I remember, we put a lot of effort into creating educational materials to provide on two fronts: One was to physicians, nurses, dentists, what have you, on how to work with somebody who shows up in your office with HIV; and giving clients as much support and education as they needed to be able to be proactive in the healthcare setting when they walked in to the doctor. We would help people find doctors. We would help people gear towards the right doctors. We would be appalled if we found out that somebody — hospitals at that time were still serving HIV patients on Styrofoam trays because you might get infected, so we were somewhat active in putting a lid on a lot of that stuff. There was a lot of education, but like I said, it became a forum and a platform for people to gather, and then things just kind of kept developing from there.

That’s where I met Rob Falletti. Literally my memory is we had arranged these little powwows with City Council members just for education and advocacy purposes. I can still picture it. Rob and I were assigned to three Council members. I forget who. We had these meetings, and we were sitting on a sofa out in the lobby out of somebody’s office and had a good conversation and
arranged our first date, and then the rest just went from there. He and I were
together for at least four years, I guess, until he died.

Rob was very involved with AIDS Equity League, but Rob at the time,
Rob Falletti, was part of the AIDS Education Training Center, which was working
out of UT [University of Texas] School of Public Health. The name of the guy
almost came to my brain. His wife was very highly instrumental in the nursing
field at UT, and he was in charge of AIDS Education Training Center. The
purpose of that center was exactly the same: to educate medical professionals on
how to deal with HIV. In those days, Education Training Center had a full staff
of eight or nine people. Debbie Brimlow was in charge of just dentists. Mark
Nichols was very instrumental in those days in educating professionals and clients
on how to get through the healthcare elements of HIV.

Then I remember vividly at some of those early meetings where people
were constantly talking about the Ryan White Council, and the Consortium and
the Alliance. I remember getting to the point where there was no way to
understand how these things interplayed with each other.

Brian Bradley, who was part of the group, he was the oncology nurse at
M.D. Anderson, who was fired when they found out he was HIV positive. That
was probably one of the early big public healthcare battles with HIV. I don’t
remember whether he won his case or whatever. He was by far the loudest, most
prominent AIDS activist at the time.

I remember asking Brian to sit down with me privately and explain to me
and draw pictures, an organizational kind of chart, how these things interplayed
with each other. I also remember Brian showing up at my Justice and Peace
Action Forum office with three of these mega binders and laying them out on the table and proceeded to do his best. I assume I got it, right? Because obviously our work from that point forward was very involved trying to work with those from a client-advocacy position.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What was your understanding of how it all worked?

HERGENROEDER: It’s my failure of memory at this point, but there was the Ryan White Planning Council, which was, it was my understanding, the official HRSA-dictated [Health Resource and Services Administration] body that had to be there to officially make the recommendations on how funding was to happen. If HRSA was going to fund, Houston was obviously one of the first Title I cities, so they were one of the early funding targets. My understanding, the Council had to be formed, so that body was created by Judge Lindsay, but the Greater Houston AIDS Alliance was a broader group and an administrative group for the Council. This is my guess at this point. They may have been actually designed as the administrative body with its own Board to officially recommend to the Council, which was then supposed to recommend to the Judge, because the Judge essentially was the one who would sign off on all the money. That was the broader group, but then there was the Consortium at the time, which already was responsible for State-funded monies.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Which is Title II.

HERGENROEDER: Well, I don’t know if it was called Title II at the time. It probably was. Yes, for some reason, because that was tied to the State Health Department, not to the Planning Council, so they had their own body. The State was much more serious at the time that the people on the Consortium were people directly
involved with services and/or infected. There was a much stronger sense of
grassroots lower-level folks taking care of things.

SCHWARTZENBURG: The voice of the people.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, and it’s not that the Alliance wasn’t. The Alliance tended, I
think, to be a little bit more professional. There were service providers on both,
and there was lots of overlap. If you were on the Consortium, you very well may
have been on the Alliance. I can’t remember how big the Alliance was. I
remember the Consortium being quite large, and some of the big actors in the
Alliance battles were Consortium people.

In those days, the battles were, you know, how is the funding being
allocated? The battles were, “Was the administrative team being authentic?”
Were they being accountable? Were they being clear with their mandates in their
meetings, and were they conniving? Were they back-rooming a lot of stuff?
There was just a lot of attention paid to how the funds were administered, and
then eventually battles over priorities. It always got accused of being funding
fights. Who would get the money?

There may have been some underlying parts of that, but I think my
memory says it had much more to do with people who represented communities
who were disenfranchised, whether it be gay leadership, whether it be Hispanic
leadership. There was more Hispanic leadership at the time, and screaming and
yelling, than there was black, African-American.

There was one woman, Audrey Gassama, she ran a day care center, and I
assume it was a day care center for kids of people with HIV so they could go to
work. She was by far the first and most prominent, as I recall, African-American
female loudmouth that just fought like hell. I know part of her thing was advocacy for that particular category, because then it became categories, and it became a fight over what services did we need, and where would the money be spent, and what would be the priorities?

In those days, the medical side of it was not nearly what it is today. Yes, it was a big portion, but we had lots of money for food pantries and housekeepers and home care and buddy programs. There was lots of money flowing through that body to a lot of different organizations, including AIDS Foundation Houston.

Case management was, early on, a big deal. I remember some of the earlier fights were with, bless her heart, Kate Sexton. She was with Sue Cooper, in that crew, and Kate was in charge of case management. I remember some of the earlier budget battles were why are we spending so much money on a case management program coordinator team?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was that after the County took back —

HERGENROEDER: No, that was before. That was before.

SCHWARTZENBURG: HIV Services wasn’t really created yet.

HERGENROEDER: No.

SCHWARTZENBURG: This was still being managed by —

HERGENROEDER: This was still when the Alliance and the Council — and the offices at the time were in the old Thomas Street Clinic, when the third floor, I think it was, was just empty space because the clinic was operating in the basement and on the first floor, so it’s long before all the remodeling took place, or before the first round of remodeling. It was the AIDS Alliance office. It wasn’t the Council office. It was the Alliance office. The Alliance was the administrative body for
the funds.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Were you part of the Alliance?

HERGENROEDER: No, but Rob Falletti was. I’m not sure if he was also on the
Council, so that part of it is a little foggy for me. Sue Cooper was the Director of
the Greater Houston AIDS Alliance, so the staffing was all —

SCHWARTZENBURG: She was appointed to that or —

HERGENROEDER: I assume. I don’t know. I assume she must have been hired. My
memory says her history had been M.D. Anderson; that she came up through
those ranks.

The battles of cancer not wanting to be affiliated with HIV and yet there
was the oncology team at Twelve Oaks Hospital, Adan Rios and Patricia Salvato,
who were the prime oncologists at the time, who tried desperately to make it
really clear that no, this is immunology, it’s all connected.

Then there was the agreement, which dates escape me, where Kathy
Whitmire agreed to — what was the deal? Kathy would take prevention, and Jon
Lindsay would take AIDS. That’s when they made the distinction: The City
would worry about health and education and prevention work and testing,
prevention essentially; and the County would take care of HIV services. So, the
Hospital District took care of the medical side, and so therefore that split to care
occurred.

There was lots of contention. I have some memories of that time. I have
more memories after that because at some point in there — you know, Rob
Falletti and I were together. I remember we were together at his house over here
in Montrose/River Oaks, and most of the community — healthcare workers,
whoever — were all in, I guess, Amsterdam. They were out of town because of either the National or the International AIDS Conference at the time, which would have been summer of 1992, and I don’t know who called us, but we got this call at 6:00 a.m. that overnight the Alliance had been yanked out of Thomas Street Clinic, and I guess essentially folded.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Defunded.

HERGENROEDER: Defunded, deactivated, just destroyed essentially, and Sue Cooper was suddenly with HIV — with the Health Department, however — it’s still Health Department, right? Within the County.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, County.

HERGENROEDER: She was suddenly over there opening up a new office, the Executive Director of what became Ryan White Grant Administration. I’m not sure how the names played out in the meantime.

I was still Director of Justice and Peace Action Forum.

Rob went straight to his office at the AIDS Education Training Center and started making phone calls and raising hell and asking questions.

I went straight to my office at the Justice and Peace Action Forum, and I remember sitting there, and I remember actually having phone conversation with Radack. I had phone conversations with Eversole. With the guy that just passed away.

SCHWARTZENBURG: El Franco Lee?

HERGENROEDER: El Franco Lee.

None of them knew what had happened, and authentically, and I think they were being honest. They were almost grateful that somebody had called
them, and we were horrified, and we were just asking questions. “Did you know this happened?”

According to the transcripts you provided, we were at the County Commissioner’s meeting it must have been the next day, so all that happened very quickly. I remember vividly going with Rob Falletti up to Thomas Street and walking in there and looking at the shambles. It was just like, “Oh, my God,” you know.

SCHWARTZENBURG: This was when all the files were taken?

HERGENROEDER: Well, everything was taken, and somehow they knew — somebody had made a decision, probably Sue Cooper, who knows? They knew exactly which file drawer was legally the Alliance that they didn’t have power over, so there was still some legal maneuvering going on because the material that was left behind was clearly material that belonged to the Alliance, that they couldn’t take, whatever that was. But everything else, equipment, file cabinets were just gone. Then later, of course, the stories evolved, you know, the trucks in the middle of the night and however all that went down.

I remember going over to the County building and witnessing hallways of boxes and file cabinets and Sue and her crew, who at the time I’m not sure who all was there, reestablishing.

Then it had to be within a week’s time, the Consortium was meeting. The guy who was County Treasurer forever —

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

SCHWARTZENBURG: Raycraft?

HERGENROEDER: Raycraft. Was sent by Lindsay and showed up with Sue Cooper at
the Consortium meeting because they were legally separate and they were part of
the State Health Department, so the Judge didn’t have authority over them. All
right? I guess even then at the time, they probably — that’s probably what it was.
Because their administrative agent was Sue Cooper and the administrative was
run through the Alliance, so that’s probably the stuff that was left behind was the
stuff that the County knew belonged to the State and the Consortium.

The way it was set up, the Consortium would have had to vote to move
their administrative work over to the HIV Services, and we just raised hell. We
took the position that if you were a minority or gay, fat chance in hell you were
going to get any respect from what’s his name? The accounting guy.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Raycraft.

HERGENROEDER: Or Sue Cooper or the County Commissioner’s Court.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You’re out of luck.

HERGENROEDER: You are just out of luck. It ain’t going to happen.

The Consortium ended up taking the position, as I remember it, they didn’t
necessarily admit to buying into our argument. They simply refused to be rushed
and said we don’t personally feel the reason for us to be suddenly — you know,
make a vote that we’re going to change administrative agents just because you
decided we needed to. Of course, this body also had people on it that were pissed
that it was all done in the dark of night; that there was no preparation, there was
no understanding of why. There were plenty of Consortium members that were
very suspicious as to why this happened.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Because, you said, many people were on both.

HERGENROEDER: Right, yeah. It was a mess, but they voted no. They voted no.
And there birthed the Resource Group, and to this day, for good or bad, Title II is separately administered by an agent, the Resource Group; and Title I is done by Harris HIV Health. I guess they get along perfectly well. I think over time the Resource Group tends to be more rural. The Council and the County stuff tend to always be County, even though that was part of the contention with HRSA because Ryan White was not intended to be County. It was the County Judge, obviously, but there was always the battle of why was the Hospital District the only ones that got the medical funds when there were obviously nine or 10 other counties with HIV folks involved.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Going back to when Sue Cooper was over the Alliance, it sounds like, from what I’ve read, that there were serious problems with how everything was being administered and concerns from the community about that. Why would they take the same management that had been problematic with the Alliance and then move that same person over to HIV Services? How did the community react to that?

HERGENROEDER: When I reread my testimony that you provided from Commissioner’s Court that month or that week, that would seem to be the primary question: You have not explained to anyone adequately why you did this, and you’ve evidently chosen to not explain why you did this.

As an activist or advocacy or client-focused groups, we were already — and I use the word “hateful,” but it didn’t have to be that — towards Sue Cooper. She was seen as this kind of nasty, manipulating, backstabbing — I don’t even know if you’d call it a good politician. When she was in your presence, she was just this tall, distinguished, quiet, as we said, with a dagger in her little white
purse. I mean, you just knew that once she left the room, God knows what she did, or what she claimed, or what she claimed you said, or what she told the Judge. There was every indication that somehow, for some reason, she and Judge Lindsay were just in total cahoots. They had to be, because she was given full rein.

Charles Henley was in the picture already at that time. There were some strong people that were with her, and Charles was much less of a political figure. Charles was the worker bee. Charles was the social worker, which we were all kind of grateful for. He was a little bit more human, so sometimes he was the one that we more often would communicate with.

SCHWARTZENBURG: She was also a social worker.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, ironically.

I mean, we had people who told us, at the AIDS Equity League or whoever, that they wanted their ashes poured on her front porch. They held her personally responsible for some of the just crap that was standing in the way of people getting what they believed was the due service allocations, whatever. They felt that she manipulated all of it; that if you weren’t in her good blessing, you wouldn’t get any money; that she had both ears of Judge Lindsay.

All indication was that was true, and to her death I don’t think she ever — I could be wrong — I don’t think she ever took a microphone at a press conference or a public denunciation. She just stood there.

SCHWARTZENBURG: She never explained herself.

HERGENROEDER: No. She would bug the shit out of us when she would be friendly, because you just felt dirty or you just felt she was going for something or she was
digging for information or trying to get your defenses down, because she would just show up behind your back or sitting next to you at a lunch table and just pretend like we’re all just buddies serving the people kind of thing. She just drove us nuts.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did it just feel like, then, that she was just paying lip service to anything anyone else wanted and she was ultimately going to do what —

HERGENROEDER: Well, it got to the point where nobody believed anything. There was not even any lip service. She was just seen as the bureaucratic obstacle to any good communication with the HIV community, any good communication with the provider community. Obviously people that were in positions of Executive Director or whatever of various organizations had to maintain a positive administrative connection.

Who got allocated and who got funds, who got a seat at the table was more of a problem than if you were a funded agent, whether you got the money that you requested. That was probably a separate deal because technically there was always language about — like Commissioners Court, and they still — I mean, they are the funding, right?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right.

HERGENROEDER: The decision to fund is theirs, so everybody else, every Alliance, every Consortium, everybody is a consultant. Their job is to recommend. So nobody has —

SCHWARTZENBURG: No one else had the authority.

HERGENROEDER: No, which for good or for bad. The assumption was that when the doors got closed behind Commissioners Court and Sue Cooper was in the room,
that’s how it was decided. No matter how much Coalition, no matter how much 
Consortium, no matter how much HIV Caucus was there, it just never seemed to 
matter.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Is that why there was such a clamor for the audit to happen?
HERGENROEDER: I remember the woman who was the deputy from HRSA, Eda 
Valero-Figueira. HRSA was overwhelmingly supportive of client-infected 
participation in all decision levels, and so Valero-Figueira would come and show 
up at Ryan White Council meetings, where all hell was always breaking loose and 
people were furious and angry and people with HIV were screaming and meeting 
with her, and she was very receptive. She wasn’t there the entire time. You 
know, when there were audits and when there were meetings. I mean, I myself 
took a small group of HIV Caucus people to Washington because HRSA invited 
us and invited us to sit in a meeting with Sue Cooper and explain why and what 
our grievances were.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Why there was so much contention.
HERGENROEDER: Why there was so much contention.

At the time there was also on the table a big — HRSA was pretending to 
be naïve about the fact that all the money was stuck in Harris County even though 
that was not allowed. Part of the battle was the authority and the power structure 
within the County in terms of it seemed like the Council President — as much as 
everybody adored and loved Lois Moore, but come on, she was the CEO of the 
Hospital District. King Hillier was the — and I don’t know if he still is — the 
lobbyist for Harris County. There was just seemingly too much Harris County 
Hospital District/County power in key positions. Again, on the Lois Moore side,
that was always okay because she always came off as the more compassionate, trying her best to listen, so that was okay.

But those meetings, I mean, there were meetings where there were police, and people were taken out because of the disruption. Brian Bradley was one of the loudest ones. Lucy Reyna took it upon herself to represent the Hispanic world. I remember once where not only was it the police, but it was the ambulance because she got herself so worked up she passed out or fainted or something in the back. It was just chaos.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You don’t want to miss the meetings because it’s drama, high drama.

HERGENROEDER: Drama, and you got to speak. There was a process for speaking. I think Tori was already in the picture back then. I’m not sure in what capacity. Tori is always the quiet mouse over in the corner somewhere. Kate Sexton, I ended up working with her. I ended up as a supervisor of HIV services for Harris County Hospital District eventually. Worked hand in hand with Kate Sexton long after the —

SCHWARTZENBURG: You went to the dark side.

HERGENROEDER: Went to the dark side.

Became a case manager when Kate Sexton under Sue Cooper was running the case management program. They failed me. I was probably the first and only case manager to actually fail case management training. It was a little tough because I was still Brother Bob — no, I wasn’t Brother Bob anymore, but I was still Justice and Peace Action Forum, and I was still AIDS Equity League, and I had been part of all this rabble-rousing and trouble against Kate and Sue and
whatever, and here I was showing up for training by the same people, to be funded by the same people. Kate was a step removed from the training group, and they failed me, which of course I was — the People With AIDS Coalition, which was highly active and activist, just went for the jugular. I mean, they just went after the administrative team and said if this is not a political move, nothing is. “You prove to us why Bob Hergenroeder could possibly fail case management training.”

Case management training in those days, that was me; Josie Salazar, who was one of the early UT women’s HIV social workers. That was when Pete Rodriguez came to town. Ruben Cerrone was in that training. That was the beginning. I was the first People With AIDS Coalition case manager. I think Family Services might have had their first or second. At that point they had just created the concept of a medical case manager — Pete at Ben Taub, Ruben at LBJ — to just facilitate patients getting into case management and so forth.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Crazy times.

HERGENROEDER: Take a break?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Sure.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

[A BREAK WAS TAKEN]

SCHWARTZENBURG: After all that transition and there was all that turmoil, how did it resolve? What happened?

HERGENROEDER: My first answer is, I don’t know. For me personally, I think when I became less responsible for AIDS Equity League, you know, of course, people were dying. Gene was getting older although Gene was still in pretty good shape,
Gene Harrington, so he was still out there. All his efforts went in the direction — and it’s evident in the testimony at Commissioners Court — the one legal anchor that the AIDS Equity League took advantage of was that in those files were the names and private information of everybody with HIV who was in case management. That became a rallying cry for breach of protection. “How dare you steal property that involved private information,” healthcare protected, all that business. He actually went in the direction of class-action suit. I kind of lost contact with him.

AIDS Equity League, I think, became just less concentrated. I don’t remember whether it was soon towards the end of Charlie’s. I remember I was Director. We hired a Director at some point, and it didn’t work out. Then I just think it just broke up into other pieces.

By that point, Queer Nation had come into play, which I was very active with. Some of the same people became very active with that. Queer Nation never
specifically took on HIV, so there was a little break-off of folks’ overlap, whatever little AIDS ACT UP took place in Houston. Fowler was his name.

I mean, there was Houston stuff. There were Houston rallies, and there were things at City Hall, but the ones I remember the most — at that point, for some reason, if I was active in a public way, in an on-the-street kind of mode, I was more in line with Queer Nation activity than I was connected with any of the ACT UP stuff.

When I got hired as a case manager, things changed. Even though People With AIDS Coalition was still seriously an activist, advocacy, and very seriously client driven and modeled, and the Board of Directors had to be 75 percent HIV, whatever, that provided a forum where there were still lots of possibilities, but it was hard work. There weren’t a lot of case managers back then.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, that took up a lot of your time, just your “job” job.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, and some of the great outreach workers of our region were activists. Secret Henderson worked for Montrose Clinic at the time, and if Secret called you or showed up at your door with a client, you just knew she found them on some street pole, bush, homeless, just somewhere, and you just took it from there. People With AIDS Coalition also very early on got very active within the African-American community, and my recollection is it was because of the clientele. Even then, it was coming across as seriously black.

I actually became one of the first Ryan White African-American case managers because of course the County, you couldn’t say we can only hire a black person. You had to just say the predominance of their case load needed to be African-American. Well, ours already was, so I was one of the first committed
where 95 percent of my commitments were to African-American HIV positive folks. There were only a few of us in town, and we did great work.

SCHWARTZENBURG: At this point were people still dying from AIDS as much, or had there been —

HERGENROEDER: This was still early 1990s. I’d have to check my pharmacology history, but when Rob Falletti died in 1994, they were just on the cusp, they were just beginning to take that first generation of medications, but the pills were so big, and it was like you had to dilute them in water and drink it like fiber stuff, and it was just —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was this like the every two hours, people would be taking —

HERGENROEDER: Yeah. I remember some of the early ones that were just — I remember that you just got the explosive diarrhea problems. Of course AZT was the only thing there, so there was already a divide between those that were just not going to take anything, didn’t trust anything, and those that just said of course, if the doctor said so, I’m going to do it. So then, you get to the mid-1990s and what happens? The people who had taken nothing were better off because they were drug-naïve patients. So it was just at the beginning. The death rate at that point was just — you kind of became immune to it. Of course, when Rob died, that was a little bit too close to home.

For me and I think for several of us, we just stopped. We stopped going to memorial services because it was just too much. Spend your weekends kind of thing. I don’t remember spending a lot of time — probably in case management, I was losing clients far more frequently. Unfortunately, it still happens at a small level, but in those days if Pete Rodriguez called you — you would get a referral
for somebody in ICU at Ben Taub who already had zero T cells, full case of PCP pneumonia, and there was nothing.

SCHWARTZENBURG: “How could I manage this?”

HERGENROEDER: Yeah, so it was like you were facilitating was there any chance of discharge? Is there any chance this person has a family?

One of my earliest clients was a woman who was 70, black female, HIV positive. She had run a brothel down in the Port and had HIV, contracted HIV, showed up at the People With AIDS Coalition. It just floored us, right? She was one of my earlier experiences of interacting with Harris County Hospital District because she was at their mercy for all things, and I used to escort her to all her appointments, and she had numerous of them, so it wasn’t just Thomas Street. At that time it was all on the second floor at Ben Taub. She was a great source of information and understanding and all that kind of stuff.

At the time, I was on the City’s Planning Committee, Prevention Committee. So even my own work had moved a little bit more towards an institutional kind of where can I fit in and where can I actually do some good? My primary thing was still client input, which had always been the priority in
terms of the advocacy. We were still very, very concerned.

My final act with Ryan White stuff was my work with the HIV Caucus, which was our last attempt to have a group of HIV positive folks who were willing to put their names out there and their faces and do things as far as go to Washington and open their mouth kind of thing.

It’s hard today to form that kind of group. It was really hard back then. Somebody like me, who was willing to be the spokesperson and claim to speak for — and I still do it on occasion, and I’ll do it from a client perspective and say it’s not particularly my issue at the time, but here’s what this body of people seem to be saying. I did it as recently as this past summer. It was over the way the County handles the bus pass system. It’s still on the table, but the power of even my doing that had nothing — it was me and my guts to do it and feeling like I was in a position to do it and be heard, and I was smart enough to know how to put it out there. The fact that the primary message was, “Here’s what the people with HIV are saying” — of course, nowadays when you do that in front of the Council, you’ve got this big body of HIV positive folks, which was not the case back then, certainly not as vocal as folks are today. All of that changed.

Then there was a period where I didn’t care anymore. I just wasn’t involved specifically with the Ryan White Council stuff until much later when I was either here as a therapist or I had finished my master’s degree. I was a social worker at Twelve Oaks Hospital. I had become much more institutional in my own work and ever so gradually let go of it.

I think the advocacy stuff is still there, but it just took a whole different tone, and then there was a point at which I went back to my first Ryan White
committee meeting or something. It was just kind of like, “Wow, is this
different.” My take on it is that the bureaucracy finally won and they figured out
a way to just make it all work and people would just leave it alone. And the
funding is so much more specific. You don’t have 20 categories. It’s meds and
doctors. That’s it. Case management.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It got a lot more simple.

HERGENROEDER: The battles are not culturally defined. It’s the Montrose Center and
it’s Legacy Clinic and it’s Harris Health. It’s not the black group and the
Hispanic group and the gay group and the AIDS Foundation. All that has
changed so much. I don’t particularly have any reason to think it’s a great deal.
Charles Henley was livable. I’m happy for his retirement.

They are what they are. Tori is great. Karen does her work and I guess is
surviving. When it comes to funding, when it comes to case management, when
it comes to I’ve been very involved in CD [chemical dependency] treatment, so
when it comes to standards of care and that kind of stuff, I’m still there and I still
kind of feel the energy and keep the focus on what the experience is telling us, the
client-service end of it. I am usually there with Ann Robison, who certainly
covers the more administrative, although she’s pretty good still at the “hit them
hard with the reality” kind of stuff.

I was just going to say even in — Thelma, I think was her name, the
African-American older woman. I remember sitting at the HIV Prevention
committee meeting at the City, and somebody from CDC [Centers for Disease
Control] had come in to give a report, and they were indicating a surprise in the
trends and that the surprise was women over the age of 50, African-American,
showing up with HIV. I remembered having Thelma in my mind, like, “Okay. This is not a big surprise. All right? It is kind of curious.”

Their big question was, “Where is this coming from?”

Well, the recognition was it was sexually active women. Who were they meeting up with? A lot of times, it was either an ex-convict, people coming out of incarceration units with HIV, or down-low black males who were sexually active.

So it was like, “Wow, here we go, a whole other realm of stuff.”

Even to this day, I still look at it. If I’m asked to work with somebody who’s maybe in their forties or fifties and they’ve been HIV positive for 20 years, I understand it, I know it, I’m intrigued sometimes by the stories when I meet somebody who goes that far back, who never knew me and I never knew them, or they didn’t pay any attention to what was going on, but just kind of getting a different feel for the stories. Then at the same time, I coordinate and help supervise the case management at Legacy Clinic, where we’re seeing 2,100 clients a year in case management, and we’re talking 20-year-olds. I feel sorry and compassionate towards the 20-year-olds. Sometimes when I meet a 40-year-old who’s just walked in the door infected last week, I just wonder, “Where the hell have you been?” “Why aren’t you awake?” It’s just amazing that we’re still kind of a mess trying to figure all this kind of thing out.

Yeah. Where do you want me to go from there?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Let’s talk a little more about Queer Nation and how you got involved with that. What attracted you to Queer Nation?

HERGENROEDER: Like when an addict talks about sexually acting out, it was
probably the repressed Catholic Brother Bob just taking a giant leap.

It was pure activism. It was pure, in-your-face activism. There was no disguise of education. There was no interest in promotion. We didn’t care about political bodies or proper protocols. This was meant to be an in-your-face kind of operation. It started as a dozen people, grew to probably 30 or 40, and we met — there was a small building. It’s still there, but I don’t know what it is now, right here on Commonwealth.

I remember two of the early activities that we did. The first one I remember vividly is, it was Coming Out Day in October of 1996, 1995. We had a kiss-in in front of City Hall. No, we didn’t even choose City Hall. We chose to be over in Tranquility Park. It would have been nothing. There were maybe 20 people, and we just decided we would stand out in public and kiss each other, right?

Unbeknownst to us, on the steps of City Hall, there had been some kind of prayer rally that morning for something, right? One of the women from the prayer rally spotted us and just freaked.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Oh, perfect.

HERGENROEDER: Perfect. Brought cameras, TV stations, the works, right? I think I might have just — probably most of the people that knew me still knew me as Brother Bob. You talk about a coming out. I mean, evening news, there we were,
total innocents, so to speak. That was not our intention. We did not plan to be
out there in public. That was pretty exciting.

And then somebody came up with the bright idea of making these stickers
that just said, “Queer Nation. We’re queer. Get over it,” or, “Queer Nation. Get
over it,” or something like that. We just plastered them everywhere, all over
town. We’d put them in bus stops and put them in store windows.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Like street taggers.

HERGENROEDER: Yeah. Somehow we got on to The Greensheet. Is there still a
Greensheet?

SCHWARTZENBURG: I think there is, yeah.

HERGENROEDER: They refused to include gay ads for meet-ups, so that became a
target and we had a crew that would run around town and steal all the
Greensheets. We would go and empty all their stations until they actually
stationed police at their boxes, and one of our guys actually got picked up or
arrested because he got caught doing it. We literally once took truckloads — we
had trucks that went around and picked up all the Greensheets — and we dumped
them at the front door of The Greensheet offices downtown. It was a big deal.

The other kind of fun project I remember is, we were out to disclose — we
did an underground hidden operation. It was Suzanne Anderson, who was one of
the big realtors here in town. She and I posed as a mom and dad, and one of the
guys in Queer Nation was young enough that he was acceptable as our son, and
we would make appointments with admission directors at local psych hospitals,
and we would present ourselves as just at our wits’ end what to do with this gay
kid and wanting him straightened out, just to see if we could get him admitted.
SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you?

HERGENROEDER: No.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Nobody would?

HERGENROEDER: Nobody would take him.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was this pre or post DSM-III [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] changing?

HERGENROEDER: Well, 1993, 1994, so I’m not sure. It was certainly pre-exodus on some these de-gaying outfits. I don’t even know why we were so interested in that at the time. It must have been in the news, or there must have been some concern for it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Something that tipped you off.

HERGENROEDER: Just a bunch of other little odds and ends.

And then I guess it was the Houston Post at the time was a foldout, and I think they always had a color front page. I wish I could find that picture, but they had featured Suzanne, myself, and there were two other guys, and we were — it was a formal photo of the founders of Queer Nation kind of thing.

Some of the same people, but there was a group within that, but then maybe half of their time was just as equally in your face, that became the ACT UP group. But for whatever reason, either I didn’t have the time — there had also been a point in my life where if a young enough younger contingent of folks are there and rolling, you know, it’s like, “That’s great. Let them do it. Let me get out of the way,” kind of thing. I was always willing to provide maybe a supportive — if I was just Action Forum and they needed flyers, I was more than happy to come up with the 25 bucks that somebody needed to print something. I
mean, that kind of support. Even the HIV Caucus, I think it got to that point where it was kind of like, “This needs to be yours,” kind of thing.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, “You own it.”

HERGENROEDER: I left the People With AIDS Coalition. I mean, I was just graduated from the School of Social Work with my master’s degree. As soon as I got that, probably no surprise to the Coalition, I decided enough with them, so I took my first job as a licensed social worker at Twelve Oaks, which in those days they had an HIV social worker, so it was kind of like a prime position for me, having done all the work that I had been doing. In those days, the seventh floor was the HIV floor and it was full, and that was my thing. I stayed there for — I don’t know. It’s in my résumé.

When I came there, it was Twelve Oaks Hospital, and there were 14 social workers in all of the different capacities. By the time I left and it was taken over by Tenet Healthcare for profit, I was the last one out the door. The good news of that was that I went from being an HIV social worker to emergency medical social worker, to an ICU social worker, to a rehab social worker, and literally went from there to Thomas Street. It made a great résumé.

SCHWARTZENBURG: I know, great résumé padding.

HERGENROEDER: Then I got the job as Supervisor for HIV Social Services for Harris Hospital District and worked at Thomas Street for three or four years. There too, talk about the belly of the beast, at that point there was clearly no — they were okay with a certain amount of advocacy or that kind of thing, but I was — yeah.
SCHWARTZENBURG: When did you go from Brother Bob to “Just Bob”?

HERGENROEDER: Officially, 1991, so right before Queer Nation, right before Rob Falletti. It had to be 1991, 1992. That was kind of a whole sideline that just kind of happened. It was no surprise to anybody, but it was time to just make it official. My vows had to be dissolved. Because I wasn’t ordained, it wasn’t a papal issue. I didn’t have to be removed from my authorities as a priest. I was just a monk, a brother, so you just had to get the vows dissolved. I guess that was the word. You still had to have a papal document that said you are now absolved from your obligations to celibacy, obedience, and poverty.

I knew at the time for some reason that — because if you said it’s because I’m gay, they would push for you to do an annulment as though it had been a mistake to take the vows in the first place. For whatever reason, I was just determined they weren’t going to get away with that, so that was never the issue. It was just no, I’m done. 22 years, 20 years.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Looking back at everything, to close up, what would you say is your legacy and what are you most proud of?

HERGENROEDER: I’m glad you put that on the outline because it forced me to at least think about it.

Primary thought is I like the fact just by nature of who I am and my own skills, I was always the support person, which means you’re a little less prominent, even
though I tended to always end up as Chair and President or Director, but it was never that grand, for whatever reason. Maybe others would disagree. In most of my roles, particularly here at the Montrose Center, I’m at my best in a supportive role of the general administrative programming and running it and all that stuff.

Even People With AIDS Coalition, I had applied to be Executive Director, and they chose Lynn Pannill at the time, and I was offended, of course, but it just kept in that same vein of, “No, you’re at your best. Let somebody else take care of all that kind of crap. You stay right where you’re at.”

That’s a big part of it, and the reality that at this point in my life, we’re talking about 27 years between entering seminary and absolved from vows and another 27 years from that point until today. They’re very different places. The
legacy in the first period is, I don’t mind every once in a while when I get the chance of bragging or dragging a friend over to the corner of Navigation and Jensen and telling the story of how all that got started and that I was in the middle of it. I wasn’t the only one, but I was in the middle of it, or that period time was when I was anybody that was in Catholic Adult Formation for Ministry had me as a professor. Brother Bob, right? I am absolutely sure that somebody in that population has some memory. I ended up being kicked out of that realm by Bishop Fiorenza here in Houston because I was too liberal and I was seen as having a certain disdain for the official teachings. By that point, I was on the verge of Queer Nation and so forth, so it was all just as well.

For 18 years, I was one of the key orientation trainers for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which was this swarm of college graduates from Jesuit universities who would come to the South and be assigned for a year in social services. Every once in a while to this day, I’ll get an email or something. It’s kind of like having taught somebody’s kid. You know, “You taught my grandmother.” It’s that kind of thing. It’s the education and the theology, all of which I’m still very proud of from that angle of life.

Probably from the second half is probably much more the client focus, the down and dirty. Even here, when I have my biggest battles with management, it’s on the same notion. There’s a grand principle in Catholic theology, and it’s not unique to them. It’s subsidiarity; that decisions and/or power should always originate and almost stay at the lowest level possible. That’s the smartest thing anybody ever came up with as opposed to the autocrats and the control freaks that just have to manage everything from on top with some semblance of what do they
think or what do they want kind of thing, yeah. I forgot where recently that came up as a principle that I was still fighting for.

Being willing still, using whatever authority or whatever guts I have to still, when something needs to be said or done. I’m doing it differently nowadays than I did before. Dealing with Legacy administration and coordinating their case management program is sometimes a challenge because of their size and bureaucracy. Still dealing with Ryan White Grant Administration when it comes to standards of care and how things should be run and what makes it easy and what makes it complicated and still putting myself out there for that.

I keep getting invited back to the Ryan White Planning Council’s orientation. Tori keeps telling me it’s always the favorite piece, and it’s just Confidentiality. Again, it’s kind of fun because it’s going back into a little circle where I’ve played a variety of roles over the last 20 years, some of which obviously look very different than anybody looks today.

I don’t know if that answers the question.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Absolutely.

HERGENROEDER: My final phase, so to speak, career-wise, at this point is to go back, to leave this management stuff, and just almost go hide on the second floor, is our joke. Just give me that small office with one other chair and get back into client services. I love supporting and supervising the people who do all the work, and I’m sure they cherish the fact that they’re dealing with a supervisor or person who’s been there. For me to say yeah, I started case management in 1992, it’s like, “Wow, and you’re still here;” that kind of thing.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Thank you.
HERGENROEDER: You’re welcome.

SCHWARTZENBURG: I very much enjoyed talking with you today.

HERGENROEDER: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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