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An Interview With
Annise Parker

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNISE PARKER

ANN PINCHAK: This is Ann Pinchak interviewing Annise Parker on January 12th, 2017 in Houston, Texas about the early years of the AIDS crisis in Houston as it relates to politics, activism, and her personally.

Tell me where you were born.

ANNISE PARKER: I was born in Houston. Both of my parents were born in Houston, so I’m in the minority now.

ANN PINCHAK: And where did you grow up?

ANNISE PARKER: In the Spring Branch area of Houston, although when I was in middle school, my father bought a business in Biloxi, Mississippi, and we moved to Mississippi. The business failed, and he joined the Red Cross, and we began to move. We then moved to Charleston, South Carolina, back to Houston, then overseas to Germany, then back to Charleston, where I graduated high school.

ANN PINCHAK: When were you first aware that you were lesbian?

ANNISE PARKER: Where I put a name to it? I was about 12, and that’s actually the first time I ever heard the word “gay” or “homosexual.” I fell in love and had my first lover when I was 15.

ANN PINCHAK: Where were you?

ANNISE PARKER: I was living in Mannheim, Germany at the time. We were on a U.S. Army base. My family was stationed there for two years. I was a sophomore and junior in high school, and she was a junior and then a senior in high school.

ANN PINCHAK: And then going forward from there, where did you go?
PARKER: We came back to Charleston, South Carolina, and I finished my senior year in high school and graduated. Rice University was the only college to which I had applied. I was a National Merit scholar. I knew I could go anywhere I wanted, and I wanted to come back to Houston, and I wanted to go to Rice. I was imprinted on Rice University at a very young age.

Back in the day, you would take Sunday drives. Everybody would pile in the car and you’d go, and so we would drive through the campus a lot, or we would go through the campus on the way to the zoo, and I just fell in love with the campus. We’d drive through the campus and my parents or my grandparents would say something on the order of, “Well, if you’re really smart, when you grow up you can go to Rice,” and then they’d laugh, because my parents attended University of Houston.

I came to Houston right after I graduated, spent the summer with my grandparents. Well, came to East Texas, came to Texas, and spent the summer with my grandparents, and then started in the fall of 1974 at Rice.

PINCHAK: Tell me about your parents. Were they involved in volunteer work? Any activism?

PARKER: My parents and both sets of grandparents were active community volunteers, my grandparents primarily through their respective churches, but PTA, working if
there’s a neighborhood cleanup, that sort of thing.

My parents were also very active community volunteers. In fact, when I was away at college, my family became a host family for Vietnamese refugees. We had a Vietnamese family of five move into my bedroom while I was at college. Then later my parents were a host family for a Cambodian refugee couple. My mom and dad, because of his affiliation with the Red Cross, would do disaster relief, going into disaster areas and helping, in addition to just sort of the normal, “You should be part of your civic association. You should be active in church. You should volunteer.”

PINCHAK: That’s great. Tell me, when did your parents learn about your orientation?

PARKER: I don’t know how they could have missed it, because while we were living in Germany and I was involved in my first relationship, I was absolutely miserable, and it was very emotional and traumatic, but her parents walked in on us and we were kissing one day, and we were forbidden to see each other, and so we ended up sneaking around. I would sit in the dark and stare up at her apartment window, and at 2:00 in the morning I was sneaking out of the house, that sort of thing, but my parents had never indicated that they knew anything was going on.

To the best of my knowledge, they didn’t really know that I was lesbian until my senior year at Rice, and the mother of my then-girlfriend sent a letter to my parents. It was an eight-page letter, which I still have, and it starts off, the first sentence is, “Last year at Rice, your daughter and my daughter had a big love affair.” It goes on about how horrible it is and my parents needed to put a stop to it; that if her husband were still alive, he’d knock our heads together and put a stop to it, but it was terrible and we need to do something.
My mom took the letter, folded it up, put it inside an old letter she sent to me, and just said something about I ought to talk to my friend about her mother slandering me.

I’m thinking, “Okay. She didn’t really slander me, so what do I do with this?”

We never had a conversation until quite a few years later, after my dad died, and Mom and I started talking.

I was very active in the Houston Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus in the 1980s, and I did a national TV interview, which my parents saw, but we still never had a conversation about it. They just ignored it.

PINCHAK: Tell me about your early activism. What was the first organization that you got involved with, and where did it go from there?

PARKER: There’s a difference, activism or volunteering. Because my family valued volunteering so much, and I’ve heard the phrase, it’s “voluntold,” where you’re expected to volunteer, you’re told to do it, but the first volunteering I did was actually in Germany. I was a candy striper and helped start a candy stripe chapter in my high school. I also volunteered at the base library.

Activism started at Rice. That’s when I discovered the broader LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] community. I had been too young, really, up until that point, and somewhere in the early 1970s, the drinking laws changed in Texas so you could be 18 and drink, which you could do on the Rice campus in the creation of Willy’s Pub, but it also meant that I could get into gay bars.

I got into a relationship my freshman year at Rice, and we discovered the
gay bar scene in Houston. That was also as the gay movement in Houston was beginning to grow, so by 1975, my sophomore year, I was becoming immersed in the larger LGBT activism scene. In fact, it was all “Gay” back then. I say “LGBT” now, but the Texas Gay Conference was, I believe, in 1975, the first public gay organizing event I attended.

I had broken up with my freshman-year girlfriend, who actually didn’t make it back to Rice the sophomore year. She flunked out. She was a sophomore and I was a freshman, and she flunked out. I became involved with a much older woman, who was in her fifties and an activist, and she sort of led me into the movement and introduced me to a number of the other emerging activists in the mid-1970s.

PINCHAK: As you’re at Rice and graduating from Rice, what LGBT or gay organizations, then, were you involved with?

PARKER: Well, the Houston Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus was founded in 1975, and I wasn’t there right at the beginning, but I became peripherally involved in that organization because I was still so focused on the university and figuring out who I was and what was going on that I didn’t have a whole lot of energy for off-campus stuff. I would attend things and sort of be a fly on the wall, but I didn’t take on any real activities. In about I think it was 1976, Bonnie Huval, who was a fellow Rice student, gathered a group of us who knew each other to be lesbians and formed I think it was called Sisters United, but it was a lesbian support group, very, very private and closeted. That was the first, and it really was. It was a social and support network.

I participated in a few off-campus things. In 1977, when the Women’s
Conference was in Houston, I was a volunteer there, things like that, but the next
time I got really into gay activism was in 1979, I was one of the original members
of the Rice Gay and Lesbian Student Support Group. That was its formal name.

Someone, and I don’t know that anybody has ever taken credit for it, but
someone put an ad in *The Thresher* [the Rice University student newspaper]
saying show up at Willy’s Pub and have a conversation about forming an LGBT
group, and a couple of folks got together, and then we actually said, “We really
need to do this for real.” I think someone set us up for that, but, “We need to do
this for real,” and so we met in an apartment somewhere in the Rice Village in
1979 and officially formed the Student Support Group.

Our mission wasn’t to change the world. Our mission was really to make
life better on the Rice campus, to educate our fellow students, and to work to get
official recognition as a student organization. That was beginning to happen at
public universities and private universities all across the state. University of
Houston had an LGBT student group about that time.

I had graduated by this time. I graduated in 1978, and I was the phone
contact. The student group, the Rice Gay and Lesbian Student Support Group, at
the beginning of each semester would run a solicitation in *The Thresher*. “Come
join the organization, and if you’re interested in more information, call this
number,” and it was my home phone number. So I always had a real big flurry of
rude phone calls right at the beginning, when it first came out, but then it would
settle down.

As we formed this support group for ourselves and a social network and
we interacted with the University of Houston group, we also created a speakers
bureau and we spoke to classes on the Rice campus. I actually learned how to do public speaking by being on panels in front of my fellow students.

PINCHAK: At that time, what was the atmosphere on Rice campus like towards gays?

PARKER: It wasn’t actively hostile. Looking back, it wasn’t actively hostile. The students, most of us, were deeply closeted. It’s not an activist university. It’s not a place where people really engage, or at least not then, in trying to change the world, but at the same time, that means it’s not such a terrible place where frat boys will hunt you down and beat you up or anything. We were trying to find our voice and our place, but most of us were still very closeted. We wanted official recognition, so we had to go through the student senate.

There is a picture of the organization that I know is still available on the Rice campus. We were all standing in front of Willy’s statue, and I think there were two of us that didn’t have paper bags over our heads, literally grocery sacks so that you could see the bodies but you couldn’t see the faces. I’m one of the two people that didn’t have a bag over my head, but it was still very, very closeted.

There was a constant tension between those who wanted to get the official recognition and you had to come out and show up and advocate, and those who were just, “Well, it’s good enough that we support each other and provide that network; we didn’t have to get official university recognition.”

Our first faculty sponsor was Chandler Davidson, and he wrote an essay a few years back about me approaching him and I wouldn’t ask him. I was too shy, and that’s part of my problem. I was too shy back then to ask him if he would be our faculty sponsor, but I asked him if he would call a phone number and talk about it. “Call this phone number, and someone else will explain,” who was too closeted to let his face be seen, but was happy to talk to Chandler about would he be our faculty sponsor. I wasn’t afraid to have my face seen, but I was too shy to have the conversation. So yeah, Chandler was our first sponsor.

PINCHAK: Back then, so many people were afraid to have their face seen, and throughout your career you were very open about your orientation when other people weren’t. It took a lot of guts.

PARKER: This takes us into more of the personal realm, but I had extreme social anxiety. I’m reserved, introverted, and very, very shy. Of course, introversion and shyness are not the same thing, but I was both.
While we were living in Germany, in addition to all the emotional upheaval of not being able to be with the woman I loved, I started having health issues. I started developing an ulcer because I was internalizing all that anxiety. I was also realizing that I wasn’t functioning well because I was so shy, and I also became a cutter. I have talked about this, actually. There’s a movie of gay public officials who have contemplated suicide and things like that, that I have appeared in. I didn’t ever try to kill myself, but I have scars. They’re faded now, but I was a cutter.

One day I just realized that I needed to save myself, and so I laid out a plan, and almost that formally because I’m a little OCD, I’m a list-maker, of what I could do to become more socially adept, because I had to lower the anxiety level. I couldn’t go on the way I was.

That’s when I became a candy striper. It wasn’t just that I was a candy striper. It was that at about the same time, my dad wanted — again, that family tradition of volunteering. There wasn’t a youth volunteer program on the base, and that bothered him, so he wanted to start one, and he naturally turned to me because I was a sitting target and asked if I would help him organize it. He asked the school to pass around a sign-up sheet, but I did the scheduling, so I had to call each of the members.

People who don’t have social anxiety don’t understand how hard that is, calling each of the volunteers and scheduling for their candy stripe shift at the base infirmary. I did that, and I also joined one of the high school clubs that engaged on the German economy, where we would take trips to various concert halls around, so that I had to learn to navigate the bus system in a foreign
language in a strange city, and just made myself. It shot my anxiety level way up
to do these things, but as I did them, I realized that if you do it in small enough
chunks, like, “This is what I’m going to do,” like calling the candy stripers, “I
have to make five calls. That’s all I have to do,” I could lay out the parameters:
There’s a beginning, middle, and an end, and then I could reward myself.

I did it again between my freshman and sophomore years at Rice. This is
way far afield from AIDS activism, but my girlfriend from freshman year, I spent
the summer with her family in Fort Worth, and I put job applications in, and I got
an offer from the Fort Worth Library, shelving books. I actually did that at Rice
on Work-Study, so that would have been great.

I also got a job offer from Cox’s Department Store in Fort Worth, selling
toys and luggage. I really wanted the library job, but I took the toys and luggage
job, and I had nightmares every night. It was walking up to strangers and talking
to them. What I discovered by making myself do it is that if you have a script, it’s
possible. My script was, if it was the day I was working in toys, “Can I help you
find a toy today?” “Can I help you buy luggage?” Not anything complicated.
But I memorized every piece of luggage we had, where they were made. I mean,
I did the whole, “I’m a Rice student. I can do this,” knowing that if I was a
master of the material, I could master myself.

Long way of getting to: When we started the speakers bureau with the
Rice Gay and Lesbian Student Support Group, and I think actually at the time it
was the Rice Gay Student Support Group originally, I was talking about
something I knew. So mastery of the material, I was talking and telling my own
story of being at Rice and being gay and what it was like. So if you know the
material, you can do the public speaking.

Now I talk to people in elevators. I talk to everybody. You don’t become an extrovert if you’re an introvert, but you learn how to interact socially, which is a different skill set.

But when I first started campaigning — and remember, I lost my first two campaigns. I won nine after that, but I’ve had 11 political campaigns. I lost the first two. And I still do it when I’m making fundraising phone calls, and I’ve raised millions of dollars over the years over the phone, I have a script. The first thing I do is write down what I’m going to say and just read it and read it and read it and memorize it. And then if they say this, then I’m going to say that. If they say this over here, then I’m going to say that. I mean, I have to map it all out to get comfortable with it before I dive in.

PINCHAK: From there to the first lesbian mayor of a major city.

PARKER: It wasn’t easy. It wasn’t natural. I should put it maybe that way.

PINCHAK: After you graduated from Rice, you went to work in the oil industry?

PARKER: I went to work for a company called Texas Gulf Oil and Gas. It was a company that hired a number of Rice students over the summers. They gave summer jobs to Rice students. I graduated in the spring of 1978 and went to work for Texas Gulf Oil and Gas, the intention that I might work a year or two. I wanted to go to graduate school. I took the GRE [Graduate Record Examination]. I was going to go to the graduate school in anthropology. Maybe I was going to be Margaret Mead or something. I’m not sure. I had gone to Rice on a full four-year scholarship. I had some student debt from room and board, but I had an academic scholarship and I had had Work-Study and so forth, but I had a little
debt. I wanted to earn as much money as I could to pay for graduate school, and I never went back. It’s hard to go back to graduate school.

I went to work for an oil company. I went to work for the only woman manager in a Fortune 500 company. Toby Turner was her name. Back then, you were either in information services or HR [human resources]. She was in information services. I did really exciting things like filing and plotting shot points on seismic maps.

This is another diversion. This was the beginning of the computer revolution. Every office at that time, you had an IBM Selectric typewriter. The hottest thing going was a Wang word processor. My statistics courses at Rice, I had had to learn how to program a COBOL [common business-oriented language] card deck to feed it into the big mainframe. The very first desktop computers were infiltrating the workforce, and oil companies were exploring them and software companies were beginning to develop software for petroleum exploration applications for desktop computers.

My boss, Toby Turner, wanted the company I worked for — it was a small division of a large company, but they wanted to see whether these computer things were going to really work out, and they wanted a volunteer to go and spend a week in class learning a particular software program for the oil and gas industry.

I volunteered. It gets me out of the office. It’s something new. I knew nothing about computers. I didn’t care one way or another, but they sent me off, and I came back, and we bought that software package. I rode the tech wave for the next 20 years, just from volunteering to learn something new.

Two years later, I was hired by another oil company at a big pay raise
specifically because I knew this particular software package. It was a really small, privately owned company, Mosbacher Energy Company, and being able to leverage technology made a big difference for them to play with the big guys.

There’s an old joke about the young woodsman and the old woodsman, the young, strong woodsman and the small, wiry older guy, and the wiry older guy beats the young guy on the amount of wood they cut every day.

“What’s your secret?”

“Every day I sharpen my ax.”

Every time there was a new upgrade to the software package, every time there was a new software package that came out for the oil and gas industry, I went off and learned it. By the time I left, I was doing complicated reservoir mapping and things that had nothing to do with anything I ever studied. It’s just that I learned to become a software jockey. I can legitimately say that I rode the tech wave through industry for 20 years, and it compensated me well, and I have enjoyed it.

PINCHAK: During that time, you were also engaged in gay activism.

PARKER: I was, since I started with the Rice Student Support Group, Gay Student Support Group, immediately or not long after I graduated. I was involved with them. I became involved in the Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus, which had begun to really gain in power. I attended things like the Town Meetings and other big organizing events in the community, so it was sort of oil company employee by day, activist by night, and I kept the two halves of my life completely separate, with one exception, and that is that that first oil company job, the two years that I was with Texas Gulf Oil and Gas working for Toby, I was involved in a very
volatile relationship with someone who actually also worked part-time at — I was working full-time; she worked part-time at Texas Gulf, or had, but was not at this time. We were breaking up. She was abusive.

She came to work and beat the crap out of me at work. Stalked me, pulled me into the stairwell, punched me. I got away from her, went running into my boss’s office, shut the door, burst into tears, confessed all, and she was amazing. Actually, she helped me go to the police department and swear out an assault complaint. She apparently told the company hierarchy who was ready to fire me that they shouldn’t and couldn’t do that, and she let me stay in her garage apartment for a week until I found a place to live and just was wonderful.

PINCHAK: Tell me about when you first became aware of AIDS and what you were doing and what stage you were at.

PARKER: This would have been about the same time we formed the support group.

AIDS came on the scene late 1979, 1980. I’m not exactly sure when in there. I was by that time fully plugged into the broader activist community, a member of the Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus, going to conferences, and not a leader, but more of a mascot because, again, still friends with the network of activists that my older woman friend had introduced me to in the mid-1970s, and started hearing from gay men, again, maybe 1980, and reading the TWT and the Voice and whatever the local publications were, that there was a new STD [sexually transmitted disease], perhaps. That’s what people thought of it as, the gay cancer. Everybody called it the gay cancer, Kaposi’s sarcoma.

While I wasn’t ever deeply involved, I was aware. The caucus began to get reports in the organization about this disease, and it began to rise in the
mainstream media, and people began to be fearful about it.

Specifically to HIV and AIDS, I remember going to community meetings at the McAdory House, which was in the Montrose area. In fact, years later Kathy and I owned a building that was next door to the old McAdory House. I helped participate in fund drives. Mostly what we would do, we’d do garage sales. I remember the caucus president at the time, Norman Guttman, who later died of AIDS, was the garage sale queen and he organized things. I was a worker bee, other people telling me what to do.

It first swept through the gay community, but then as it got into the larger community and — Houston has always had to do things its own way, but as San Francisco and L.A. and New York got more and more into, “This is a problem we want the government to do something,” Houston sort of followed along in its wake, and so as we got into the mid-1980s and later, as AIDS activism, ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] and Queer Nation and other groups began to get more active, the caucus got more active as well, and we had our own push against the City of Houston Health Department and against the mayor of Houston at that time, Kathy Whitmire, to get more attention, to get more response; that it shouldn’t be all about the gay community doing this all on its own. I grew from being on the sidelines early at the McAdory House to the Montrose Clinic, which became Legacy, which is actually still in existence. It is a powerhouse clinic, but it had very humble beginnings; just worked to keep people alive.

PINCHAK: McAdory House was —

PARKER: Mac McAdory is who it was named for. It was the headquarters for the groups that were originally organizing around trying to provide support for those
who had HIV and AIDS.

PINCHAK: What was the atmosphere in those early years like in Houston?

PARKER: There was a lot of fear, misinformation, uncertainty. People were dying, and no one in the earliest days really knew totally how it was spread. Because the first thing that people became aware of in my recollection was the KS, Kaposi’s sarcoma, and the lesions and a visible manifestation of the disease, it’s like if you had a bruise on your face, people were going to look you. Somebody was going to look at you to see if it was a cancer lesion. There was a lot of hysteria.

And then when we got into the ACT UP era, as AIDS spread through the community we began to figure out more and more how it was spread. It was labeled as the gay disease even though we — science quickly figured it out. I mean, a disease is a disease. The early spread through the gay community, gay male community, was because of certain sexual practices and a lot of social networks where everybody was having sex with each other, and so there was a lot of moving of the virus very quickly back and forth into the same guys and into a pool of carriers that it spread so rapidly.

With the era of ACT UP, they formed with the idea that groups like the Gay Political Caucus weren’t doing enough. We were staid and mainstream, and they were going to die, and they needed things to happen faster. They became much more confrontational, and while I think it had very positive effects, also there was a backlash.

Because they did public demonstrations, police departments around the country began to have to confront how do you deal with the disease? Again, you don’t 100 percent know how it’s transmitted, so they would respond to AIDS
demonstrations with — you know, they’d come out with the full-body shields and big rubber gloves and, “We’re not going to touch anybody.”

The AIDS activists would spit at them, and there was fear on both sides and a sense of urgency on the part of the AIDS activists that they didn’t have anything else to lose because AIDS was a death sentence and they needed attention and yelled louder and louder and louder.

PINCHAK: You mentioned that the community’s perception was early on that the government wasn’t doing enough. Talk about in Houston, with both the federal and the city and the county, was anyone giving money?

PARKER: The state of Texas, we’re a low-tax/low-service state. The city of Houston is that way as well. A lot of particularly Northeastern cities and states have strong social safety nets, and they put local dollars into these initiatives. Texas doesn’t do much of that. Houston doesn’t do much of that. The activists in Houston wanted local dollars spent on testing. We wanted Ryan White dollars, once that happened, to come down to Houston, but we wanted local dollars for testing, for confidential testing. That was one of the big fights because the public health sector — everybody was united on testing, but they wanted to do, then, contact tracing like they do with other STD’s, where you say, you know, “Who have you slept with? We want to go back and find them so we can treat them.”

The activists, because the stigma had become so great, felt that confidential testing was the only thing that anybody would accept, and so there was a constant tension over that. “Yes, we need to test. We need to test,” but the public sector didn’t want to put money in without contact tracing.

And the community said, “Don’t do it. Don’t be tested if they’re going to
make you reveal everybody you’ve slept with because you will be fired. There are no protections. You’ll be discriminated against. Your family will be discriminated against. You’ll destroy people’s lives.”

So the argument back and forth was, “We need more money. We need testing. We needed treatment.” The relatively small group of people who got AIDS first, before we actually called it AIDS, died fairly — in the early days, people once they were diagnosed, their life expectancy was pretty short. Partly it’s where in the process you got diagnosed, and there are different more- or less-virulent strains of HIV as well.

Then we got to a point where people weren’t dying right away, but they were being fired from their jobs, they were being thrown out from their families. So then it’s not just about testing and treatment, it’s about housing and case management, and then ultimately it became about hospice. So the need kept changing as the disease progressed through the community and different treatments came and people reacted to it differently.

PINCHAK: Did that local funding come?

PARKER: No, not really. The city has never particularly put any money into — part of it is that there’s an odd division of labor between the City of Houston and Harris County. We decided early on not to duplicate services, so the city provides preventive care and the county through the Harris County Hospital District provides the treatment side. A lot of the onus and the responsibility ended up going to the county because they had the hospitals and they actually had the treatment side. For the city, it was the testing and counseling side. Some of the fight with local public officials was as much symbolic as anything else.
When ACT UP is telling Ronald Reagan, “You need to say the word ‘AIDS.’ You’ve never said the word ‘AIDS,’” we were having some of that similar conversation here with Mayor Whitmire, and a particular fight with her then-health director, Dr. Haughton, African-American, I think personally a fairly conservative doctor, but a great source of frustration to the AIDS activist community in Houston. Not taking an advocacy role, treating it as if it’s just another STD.

And there were a lot of folks in the gay male community — because it wasn’t worthy of a separate discussion because it really didn’t impact the lesbian community. Obviously, it didn’t impact us in that same life-or-death, “If I have sex with this guy, am I going to get AIDS? How do I do safer sex?” I mean, it impacted us in a lot of ways. It was our friends and people we worked with, but it didn’t have that urgency.

The push to the City of Houston was, “We want you to talk about it. We want you to advocate. It’s not just some ‘a disease.’ It is something that is killing us.” The implications through it for society, the implications for how gay men are treated is much broader than whether or not they have the virus and whether or not they actually acquire AIDS.

PINCHAK: Did the community ever get Dr. Haughton to come around?

PARKER: Not to my knowledge.

PINCHAK: You mention Kathy Whitmire. What was the relationship between Kathy Whitmire and the gay community the first time she ran?

PARKER: Kathy Whitmire had support from the GLBT community when she became city controller. She absolutely had support from the GLBT community when she
beat Jack Heard to become mayor of Houston. I guess that would have been in 1981. I think she served 10 years. The election would have been in 1981; she would have taken office in 1982. A huge number of LGBT volunteers. She had open members of her staff who were LGBT.

I attended her inaugural gala, actually with my friend and fellow Rice student and fellow LGBT elected official, Judge Steven Kirkland. He was my date. We went to the Whitmire inauguration. She had been endorsed by what was the Gay Political Caucus and had huge support in the community.

She didn’t abandon the community. She didn’t run away from the community, but she certainly, after the whole — Houston became embroiled in the first effort to pass a nondiscrimination ordinance, and it went badly, which we can also talk about. Whitmire was stung politically and distanced herself publically in order to salvage her political viability. I don’t think that that would have had any impact one way or another on how the city necessarily responded to HIV and AIDS. It’s just putting local dollars into any kind of health issue wasn’t what we did. But because she had been a symbol for feminists and for the LGBT community and had so much support, when she began to distance herself there was a tremendous anger and backlash directed toward her.

PINCHAK: Tell me about that first nondiscrimination ordinance. How did it come about? What happened in the community? Did AIDS play a role in any of the politics?

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

PARKER: Yes, yes, yes, AIDS played a role. There was a division in the community about the election of an at-large city council member. Women’s advocate, Nikki
Van Hightower, women’s advocate and former executive director of the Houston Area Women’s Center, ran against Anthony Hall, long-time state rep, for city council, both of them good on LGBT issues, both of them with friends in the community, Nikki with tremendous support in the lesbian feminist community, Anthony with more support in the gay male community.

A very tightly, hotly contested vote, and within the Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus, very, very close, but finally Nikki Van Hightower received the LGBT endorsement. It was the Gay Political Caucus still. It became the Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus while I was president, so it was a few years later. So Nikki received the caucus endorsement, and a number of the gay men who had supported Anthony Hall were furious, and they formed their own political organization.

This is something that has been different in Houston than any other of the big cities. We have the caucus. The Houston Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus had been around since 1975, and there have been a couple of competing organizations, but they never lasted, and the caucus is the only one.

In most other cities, they’d hive off. There would be a fight over somebody’s endorsement, and somebody would hive off. Here’s the Stonewall Democratic Club, and here’s this political club, and then you’d have the two parallel organizations and they kept going.

It’s actually been good for us that there weren’t a bunch of different competing political organizations sniping at each other. In this instance, they hived off, and I think it was Citizens for Human Equality, CHE, and they endorsed Anthony Hall, and the fight was on and the community was divided.
Well, Anthony had pledged that he would introduce a nondiscrimination ordinance for City employment if he were to be elected, and he was, and he did, and to full credit that he followed on that campaign promise. He was very much an ally of Whitmire. Whitmire supported him. It truly was only about City employment; that if you’re working for the City, you couldn’t be fired because of your sexual orientation.

It was a huge fight to pass it on council, and barely passed on council, and immediately there was a petition drive led by the Hotze family, which is still virulently anti-gay and still active in Houston. There was a petition drive to force it to the ballot. Well, force a repeal, and then put it on the ballot.

There was a lot of consternation in the community. First of all, you had the Nikki Van Hightower folks, who were like, “WTF? Why did you let him do this? We’re not ready. We haven’t laid the groundwork.”

Once it became a matter of discussion at the council, then those of us in leadership all realized we have to support it. You can’t stand up and say, “Oh, well, somebody I didn’t vote for introduced it, so I’m not going to support a nondiscrimination ordinance.” So we all came together, but we were all very aware that the council and the broader community still didn’t really understand the needs of the community, and the public conversation was all about HIV and AIDS, or it was about gay men having sex in public places, which in its own way is related to the HIV and AIDS discussion.

We were afraid it was going to end up on the ballot. The City of Houston has a low bar for petition drives to generate referenda, and we were all concerned, but good soldiers, we all did the right thing and supported it.
It passed council again. They did the petition. It went to the ballot.

We hired a straight man. I think his name was Bill Oliver. Hired a straight man, an experienced operative, to run the campaign, and we de-gayed it, which in hindsight there are days I wake up and think that’s — I don’t think we could have won under any circumstances, but we squandered an opportunity to introduce ourselves to the broader community, and it really became about how, “We’re normal straight people, and we think nondiscrimination is a good thing, and we support it.”

The public face of the pro side of the referendum was nongay, and on the other side you had the Hotzes, you had City Council Member John Goodner, you had others who were — it was all about child molesters, and literally make comments about disease-ridden gay men molesting children in public restrooms. It was an ugly, divisive, horrible campaign which we lost 3-to-1. Strategically, it was really bad to have it on the ballot. There was a special election out in Spring Branch. We lost 10-to-1 out in the Spring Branch area, which didn’t help. I learned a lot about messaging and what our community needed from watching that campaign, and I worked my heart out for the campaign.

That was the kick in the teeth to Whitmire and Anthony, because immediately after that, the anti-referendum folks created the so-called Straight Slate. This was a January referendum, and that fall on the regular ballot, council members running every two years, council members were on the ballot, and the Straight Slate — so everybody who had voted for the ordinance had an anti-gay opponent, including Whitmire.

It was insult to injury, because we had already lost the nondiscrimination
ordinance with this devastating vote, and then to turn around and have to immediately start fighting again because you had the homophobes empowered and running against people who had tried to do the right thing. That’s when the real anger at Whitmire began to come out because she’s looking at, “I’ve got an election to run. I can’t do anything” — and I’m a politician now; I understand. “I can’t do anything for you if I’m not in office. You don’t want this other guy to win, because he’s Louie ‘Shoot the Queers’ Welch,” which I’ll mention in a minute. “You don’t want this other guy to win because that will be even worse for you. I have to do what I need to do to win if I’m going to continue any kind of advocacy, even if you don’t think I’m doing enough.”

There were a lot of folks in the community who didn’t think that was good enough. I see some of that in this Trump campaign year, with people like, “I don’t want a level playing field. I want a new game. I don’t care.”

The idea of you don’t let perfection be the enemy of the good, they wanted perfection, this is like, “I want 100 percent, or I’m not going to give you any support,” and there was a lot of turmoil in the community, and she’s running her campaign, and then the whole — the Louie Welch, he was a has-been recycled. You know, former mayor, former council member, and been out of the public eye for a long time. And he told a stupid joke on a live microphone while he was being interviewed, and the TV station realized that it was golden, and so they ran with it. He was testing the microphone, and he made a quip. So he told a joke. He was testing the microphone, and he said, “I know how to solve the AIDS crisis. You just shoot the queers,” and that went out on the news. It got picked up.
By the next day, the GLBT community had printed up “Louie, don’t shoot” T-shirts, and we were off to the races. That was great for the Whitmire campaign and for the pro-gay folks, the non Straight Slate candidates, because even people who had voted against us in the referendum thought that that was tacky and stupid and, “No, we don’t want to have that image of Houston going out to the world,” and that moved the public sentiment against them.

PINCHAK: Did he ever apologize for that statement?

PARKER: I do not know that he ever apologized. One of life’s little ironies, when he died, I was the city controller, and I went to his funeral because he had been a former mayor of Houston and I think he deserved the courtesies. When a former mayor dies, they get a full-honors funeral. The police, the riderless horse and the caisson, and you get the flag and so forth. I was there. Bill White was there because he was the mayor at the time. Bob Lanier came. Lee Brown came. We were all there.

Well, there’s the ceremony in the church, and then there’s the formal honors where they present the flag and everything else, and then they take the casket away outside with the honor guard masts, the police officers and the honor guard. Well, the former mayors and all the public officials who had been there for the inside-the-church ceremony left, and I was the only one left. And so there was a picture that was on the front page of the Houston Chronicle, and it’s the combined police and fire honor guard with their flags, and I’m standing there with them, and we’re saluting as his casket is carried away.

Just the mixed emotions, and I wrote an article. At that point I was the controller and I was doing a monthly column for OutSmart, and I wrote an
OutSmart column about Louie Welch and the sad — I mean, he did great things for Houston when he was mayor. He was a forward-thinking guy, but to let a stupid, ugly joke be the defining end to his career. And I wasn’t there because I loved him or liked him. I was there because he had committed himself to public service. Strange irony.

PINCHAK: That’s amazing. That is a strange irony.

Whitmire won the election.

PARKER: She did.

PINCHAK: And the community had felt abandoned when she ran.

PARKER: The community had felt abandoned, and the president, Sue Lovell, was —

Sue and I, Marion Coleman, there were just a handful of us that were public and visible, and arguably Sue Lovell and I were the two most visible lesbian activists in Houston in the mid-1980s. Sue was much more of an AIDS activist than I was. I was more of a gay activist and focused on the community, and she was much more working on the AIDS issue, although she too was a caucus president.

Sue and Whitmire were just going at it. Whitmire had done the kind of, “I can’t advocate for you while I’m running for reelection. I need to get reelected,” but she got so angry because the community never stopped picking at her that we never really completely healed the breach.

Again, I say that it’s not as if she abandoned us. The things that the city was doing already, the city continued to do, but I don’t think that we would ever have gotten what the advocates wanted, which was a massive infusion of dollars, public advocacy, the health director standing up and advocating and getting on the black-church circuit, and that sort of thing.
In that same period, I knew people who had contracted the HIV virus and developed into AIDS and died early on, but it was more like, “Oh, yeah, I know who that person is.” The first time I was asked to be a part of someone’s memorial service was in 1986. I was 30 years old, and the person who died was also 30 years old, and he had been born three days before I was. It didn’t hit me and I actually didn’t realize that we had almost the same birthday until I was standing in the front of the church. I had been asked to read some Bible verses. I was looking at the program, at his date of birth, and thinking, “He’s 30 years old. That’s way too young to die.” I had been an activist for a long time. By that point, I had been an activist for a decade, since my days at Rice; I knew that I needed to do more.

So what I did, my active activity of choice was The NAMES Project, which is the AIDS Memorial Quilt. I’m not a quilter. I never made anybody a quilt. But I did what I do well, which is I became part of the organizing committee to bring The NAMES Quilt to Houston, and we brought it to Houston for the first time in 1988 and displayed it in the George R. Brown Convention Center. The campaign Chair was Jackson Hicks. He’s another person you-all probably ought to interview. I was the treasurer. Jim Owens, who is deceased now, was the Chair. We worked with the national NAMES Project out of San Francisco to bring the Quilt and to display it in Houston.

That was the first time, in that church, seeing that, 30 years old.

And then the second time, being out — so we worked for two years — well, at least a year, but two years later, but at least a year’s worth of work to bring The NAMES Project Quilt to Houston. Being in the George R. Brown, it
was important that we be in the George R. Brown because that was a City facility and we were making a statement, and that it was the only place big enough in Houston to hold it. We didn’t want it to be outside. We wanted it to be there for a while. To be in the George R. Brown is what — there’s a ceremony as you unfold the Quilt. I don’t know if you’re familiar. I don’t remember how many people it takes, but you’re all dressed in white, and each individual panel, the 3-by-6 panels, are sewn together into larger quilts, and you unfold them like you’re unfolding a flag that was draped over someone’s coffin. There’s a very formal — and then you spread it out and you carefully lay it. There are teams all over the floor of the George R. Brown unfolding these quilts and laying them.

When you see them spread out like that — I mean, we have a large piece, but it kept growing. I did not ever see it on the Mall in Washington, but I can imagine, because when you just stop, you look at all of those individual panels, and you realize how many lives those represent and people who made those panels out of love for those who died, and it just becomes overwhelming.

PINCHAK: That’s amazing. That’s great.

PARKER: I have a souvenir. I was the treasurer, so I was collecting all the money that was coming in to the AIDS Quilt, The NAMES Project, and we had collection boxes so people would come in and just — I mean, we were soliciting checks and so forth, but people would come and they would drop money in on their way out, and so it always ended up a lot of cash went through my hands. That was funny too, because I ended up with a box of, like, $10,000 of small bills, and so I had to break it into — because I didn’t want to trigger the bank regulations and having to explain it, so I had to hold onto it and take it in batches to put it into the bank.
But someone dropped a fluorite crystal, a lavender cube, crystal, into one of the collection boxes that I still have from that as a reminder.

PINCHAK: You talk about the Political Caucus, and I know that there were strong emotions on both sides. I remember Kathy, your wife, saying one time to me that she was just amazed at how virulent the arguments and the discussions were, and she felt like she wanted to take off her coat like Sir Walter Raleigh and put it down on the mud for you so you could just walk over and make things easier for you. How did you handle the activists screaming and the —

PARKER: That was actually before Kathy and I got together. The NAMES Project was before we got together. We got together in 1991. I was still an activist. My election was in 1997. I was very engaged in the community for all of that time.

PINCHAK: Did you feel like the ACT UP and Queer Nation served a role?

PARKER: They did serve a role, and partly it was personality. Being the shy, introverted, rule-follower good child, firstborn good child, I had a hard time breaking rules. I mean, I’m persistent. I wouldn’t be where I am if I weren’t persistent, and sometimes the word is stubborn, but I’m not particularly confrontational. I’m just persistent. I couldn’t do the get in your face and scream, and I wasn’t ever interested in that, but I learned the good cop/bad cop routine, and that — because the Gay Political Caucus, and then when it became the Gay & Lesbian Political Caucus, it — because it had been around. It had a history. It had stability. It had recognition.

ACT UP and then Queer Nation, those were the Young Turks, and they’d be out in the street, and the powers that be realized they had to deal with somebody, so they would often turn to — you couldn’t negotiate with somebody
screaming at you, and a lot of the folks — and it’s not a bad thing, but like a lot of
the ACT UP folks, it was the purists, the same ones that wouldn’t let Whitmire off
the hook because she tried to make compromises to move things forward. They
wanted all or nothing. So then they turned to the caucus, and it was an
opportunity to go in and actually negotiate. That meant that those activists then
were mad at those of us who accepted the compromises in the sense of, “Well, we
get this, and we’ll move forward, and we’ll come back. Live to fight another
day.”

And their response was that they weren’t going to live to fight another
day, and I understood it, but it was a way to move things forward, and we just
kept coming back.

PINCHAK: What was the discussion within the caucus about the bathhouses and closing
bathhouses, and the opinion of the caucus and the argument both ways? Because
a lot of cities were closing them.

PARKER: There was a great deal of discussion. We had bathhouses. We didn’t have
the number that some of the other cities had. We actually still have one in
Houston. Folks like the health director — and this was one of the big fights —
wanted shut the bathhouses down.

The community’s feeling was that it would cause two problems: One, if
you shut the bathhouses down — one of the things that split the lesbian
community and the gay male community was the issue of public sex, of gay men
trolling for sex in public places.

I don’t want to walk into some place and see somebody having sex.
That’s never going to be something I’m going to like, and I’m not going to defend
The feeling was that we didn’t want to do anything that would make that more likely, because that was a constant source of tension. It was problematic because it caused interactions with the police department and always complaints about that and that it would drive the sex underground. Conversely, it would drive it out into public places, but it would also drive it underground and that we would lose an opportunity for intervention, and that if you allowed the bathhouses to stay open and you recognized that these were grown men making adult decisions but that you could put condoms out, you could put AIDS information out, you could use them as a venue to educate; that weighing the positives and negatives, it was better to allow them to stay open.

But a lot of public health professionals absolutely did not agree with that, and it was a pitched battle to keep them open. It’s just human nature. It’s why the 18th Amendment, the prohibition, it didn’t work. We have plenty of evidence that saying, “Oh, you can’t do that,” does not make it stop. It shifts it, and it creates a different set of problems. We thought those problems were much scarier.

PINCHAK: Good point. You talked some about the police and the early days of how in Houston they treated people with the virus.

PARKER: One of my roles in the caucus in the 1980s and into the 1990s was liaising with the Houston Police Department. Tom Coleman was the first guy who did it, and I supported him, and then I gradually became the — we never had a title from the police department side, but I was the unofficial liaison for the police department. Tom Coleman, and then I. We were always the good cop, to use the
expression, and Ray Hill was the bad cop. He was always out there. It was either Ray Hill or ACT UP.

A lot of what we did in terms of interacting with the police department early on was — at first, it was police raids on public places, bar raids on our nightclubs and bars. But when the AIDS epidemic really came into public view and AIDS activists began to take to the streets, it was working with the police department. Houston is not a place where you have a lot of protests. Other cities do it a whole lot more. I don’t know; maybe it’s the heat or something.

The police department really didn’t know how to handle big public protests, and they overreacted. Again, it was the gowns and gloves and full-body shields for a peaceful public protest, and that immediately — if the police showed up like they were ready for Molotov cocktails to be thrown at them, that raised the anxiety on the other side, and it just escalated. So we worked on protocol around that, and we also worked on protocol about what to do when someone is actually arrested and may or may not have HIV or AIDS.

I continued to liaise with the police department. Years later, I had some of those very similar conversations on how do you arrest somebody who is transgender and how do you search somebody who is transgender? Because of the rules within the police department that you had to have someone of the same gender do a search. But at that time, it was, let’s have common sense. If you’re going to put hands on somebody, yeah, you probably want to have gloves on. But if you’re not going to put hands on somebody, just getting out of the car because you’re going to talk to somebody who’s gay, and putting on your rubber gloves, really? Those rubber gloves, not even latex gloves. These were these big, heavy
things.

If you’re going to search somebody’s pockets — public safety, you need to search their pockets if you’re going to arrest them — yeah, you ought to put gloves on, sticking your hands in somebody’s pockets.

Let’s figure out what’s science and what’s common sense and what’s just fear.

PINCHAK: You were working in the oil industry, and you were active with the Gay Political Caucus. For those people who were in the caucus in leadership roles, did people feel there was some kind of risk with their work, and what kind of work did most of them do?

PARKER: Good question. I don’t know why different people moved into leadership positions within LGBT organizations, but you had to do the calculus: What is this going to do? Am I going to be fired? Is it going to have repercussions?

If you took the leadership position like being president of the Gay Political Caucus, part of that responsibility was to be a public spokesperson and to be willing to be identified on the evening news.

Most of the folks who led the organization up until my time were self-employed in some way. Lee Harrington was a travel agent. Sue Lovell had a printing business. Larry Bagneris sold insurance. It was hard. There were no protections. There weren’t any nondiscrimination ordinances. You can still to this day be fired with or without cause by your employer, and certainly being fired because you were openly gay is still something to worry about, although not as great a fear as it was at the time.

When I decided that I wanted to, I had been in leadership in the
organization, but I had been Chair of the board, I had been a board member, been Chair of the board for a long time. That was back-office stuff. It wasn’t being the public spokesperson. So when I decided to run, I had to go through the mental exercise of what’s the worst thing that can happen? The worst thing that can happen is I’d get fired. Am I willing to risk getting fired? Yes, I’m willing to risk getting fired. I’ve been an activist for a long time. I’ve gotten as far out of the closet as I can get, and that hasn’t happened yet. I’ve done everything I can to make myself indispensable to my employer. Let’s go for it.

PINCHAK: Tell me about the Paul Broussard murder and what that did within the community and what it did with the AIDS activists, the effect to the community.

PARKER: It’s been 25 years since the Paul Broussard murder. Actually, it would have been in 1991. 2016 was the 25th anniversary of Paul Broussard being murdered. AIDS is still with us, but in terms of that public anxiety and the stigma, still very strong in 1991.

I ran for city council for the first time, a losing race, in 1991. I had been recruited by the community, the LGBT community, to run as part of a redistricting fight. We were allied with a number of minority communities trying to create all single-member districts in Houston, under the theory that if we had single-member districts, it would make it easier to elect someone who’s LGBT to city council.

Ironically, as the first LGBT person elected, I was elected at large. Sue Lovell was elected at large. And so the theory was wrong, but that was the theory at the time, and I was actually running against an incumbent, Vince Ryan, that summer when Paul Broussard was murdered.
I actually found out about it from a University of Houston professor, I think his name was Karl Reinhardt, who called me the morning after to tell me about the murder. Paul Broussard was a young banker. He and a friend had been walking home from Heaven, which is a nightclub in the Montrose area, and he was murdered on the street where I lived, a few blocks down the street.

It was shocking for a number of reasons. First, to those of us who lived in Montrose, it was on the street where I live. The second was that he was young and clean-cut, and he wasn’t somebody — I mean, all through Montrose, we had problems with solicitation and hookers picking up tricks in the neighborhood or folks picking up somebody in the bars and having sex in your front lawn and that sort of thing. This was a guy who was just walking back to his car with his friend at the end of an evening.

The next thing that was shocking was that it was a pack. He was attacked by a number of young men, and so then you had that fear of okay, there would be roving packs of homophobes. It wasn’t a secret that Montrose was where the gay bars were.

At that time we had a phenomenon going on in Montrose of the same thing that happens in small towns, where everybody goes to the town square and teenagers cruise around the town square and eye each other. They’ve been doing it since the 1950s. They were doing it in Montrose, and on Friday and Saturday nights it was bumper-to-bumper traffic down Westheimer as kids from the suburbs, teenagers from the suburbs, cruised each other and made fun of the locals. There were young people in the Montrose area on a regular basis anyway. We were already dealing with that, and then this happened.
Then we found out that the way they identified Paul Broussard, the teenagers — it turns out later that it was a group of young men from The Woodlands — that they had identified him as they asked him how to get to Heaven, this particular nightclub.

Anybody who lived anywhere in the vicinity would have known. You know, you’d be out walking your dog. “Oh, yeah, it’s over there.”

“If that’s how you determine that I’m gay” raised the anxiety of lots of different folks who were nongay who lived in the community. And Paul Broussard was a very sympathetic figure, so that brought a lot of sympathy and support.

Then when we found out — the police quickly solved it and made the arrests, and it turned out that it was like a sort of — this is not what it was, but what it kind of felt like, it’s like a hazing, fraternity. “Oh, we’re going to bond with each other by going out and finding somebody to beat the crap out of.” That just awakened a lot of folks to the problems of gay bashing and that yes, we really are and have been targets of discrimination and that these attitudes were being embedded really young too, and it caused some changes.

We created street patrols, neighborhood patrols to spot folks who didn’t belong in the neighborhood and try to be eyes-on and work with the police department. The police department launched a particular undercover operation to quantify the real problem of gay bashing. I think it was called Operation Vice Versa. They were absolutely shocked, because they would send police officers out undercover near gay bars, and the number of assaults, it opened the eyes of the police department. They realized that this was a huge problem and they
weren’t protecting all the community and that they needed to do a better job with it.

We had a protest after the Paul Broussard murder, and this was one of the few times — there have been more times since then about other things, particularly Black Lives Matter, but at that time, there was supposed to be a peaceful rally at the corner of Montrose and Westheimer, and the community gathered there, and we were marching the square, crossing the street, and more and more people came, and more and more people came, and it became a continuous walk, and people stopped stopping at the lights and shut the intersection down.

The police department, with some restraint, gave orders for people to disperse, and some people deliberately, “No. You’ve going to have to arrest me,” and the police department moved their horses in, the mounted patrols there, they moved their horses in to clear the intersection.

If you did it again today, they’d probably allow it to go on a little bit longer. They’re more sanguine about these kind of protests, as long as you’re not hurting anybody. “If you’re blocking an intersection, we can figure it out.” And they did have some restraint then, but we do it better now. They brought the horses in to clear the intersection.

Kathy and I were there. We were marching. We had no intention of being arrested. Kathy was actually trampled by — one of the horses broke one of her toes. It stepped on her foot. She’s still angry about it to this day. She will say, if you ask her that the police charged into the crowd, “No. They walked forward slowly on their horses,” but horses are big and they’re intimidating, and if they
step on you it’s not pleasant.

PINCHAK: I’ve often thought there are parallels between you and Obama, with Obama the first black President, you the first gay mayor of a large U.S. city. Obama got a lot of criticism from the black community, and he recently said he felt expectations were a little too high. You were always openly out at city council, controller, mayor.

PARKER: And I was out when I was at Rice too, so I had been out my entire adult life.

PINCHAK: And at Rice, yeah.

Did you feel, when you were in a position of power, that specifically from the community with AIDS, that there was unreal expectation because you were lesbian?

PARKER: I appreciate the comparison with Obama, and I’m flattered, but I think with Obama, he had a hard time really — he’s biracial. He chose to be the first black President, but he had to claim his identity as a black man, and there was that tension. There were very few times when I, you know, like, “Do I represent the” — I represented the city of Houston. There were very few times when I had to ask, “What community am I representing?” I represented the city. I didn’t have the deep identity issue that he had, and he had it partly because of who voted him into office.

Yes, I had a lot of support from the LGBT community in all of my races, but I never felt that there were extreme expectations on me to act or be in a certain
way just because I was a lesbian. And because I had been an activist since my college days, when I walk out of the house every day, it’s sort of like I put the persona on.

Back in the 1980s as the Chair of the GLBT Caucus or as the liaison with the police department or as the president of the caucus or later, when I was teaching out at the Police Academy and I’m a representative of the community, I was always a role model, but I’m a role model for women, I’m a role model for lesbians, I’m a role model for the LGBT community, and that’s just part of what — I mean, there are certain expectations I have of myself in public.

I think that’s one of the reasons that Obama — I mean, I have to say that he was a classy President, never less than presidential. That’s something that I aspired to because I didn’t want to be the gay or the lesbian mayor of Houston, but I always wanted to be a credit to the communities that I represented.

I was the first openly LGBT mayor of Houston, but by the time I became mayor I had been elected already. I had been in office 12 years, and so people both inside and outside the community knew who I was. All of my constituents had voted for me and knew who I was. For most of America, Obama was still a cipher.

PINCHAK: That’s true.

What do you think we in Houston and as a society can learn from the AIDS crisis for future epidemics?

PARKER: The closest thing we have probably seen since then, we may have seen a little bit of it with West Nile, but the Ebola crisis, where it’s actually so much easier to catch Ebola than it ever was to catch the HIV virus, but the hysteria around HIV
was very similar to the hysteria that erupted around the Ebola crisis here in the United States and that terror of this disease; that you don’t really know how the virus is being conveyed to you and it could be coming from anywhere. Do you ingest it? Is it coming in the air? And the safest thing to do is just to keep away from somebody who might even possibly have it, that hysteria, you saw it erupt. What is better, though, is that now we understand so much more about various kinds of viruses, and the silent science kicked in quickly.

Now, unfortunately, for Ebola it is very easy to transmit Ebola and it became such a huge public health epidemic. But the difference is, and what we learned over time, is that the science has to lead, and the faster you can get the real information out and that you can err on the side of caution without demonizing classes of people or people from different countries or — a disease is a disease. You happen to be the one who has that disease. You’re not a bad person. It’s not God’s punishment that you have a particular disease. You have a disease. We as a compassionate society have to figure out a way to keep ourselves safe but also to do the best we can for you. I do think we have progressed in that.

PINCHAK: Is there anything else you’d like to add?

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

PARKER: I didn’t talk about the impact in the LGBT movement of — you know, being a baby activist, the LGBT movement didn’t start in 1975 and it didn’t start in 1969 when Stonewall happened, but there were Frank Kameny and Barbara Gittings and others and Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and a lot of activists over the years, but in Houston the movement really took off in the mid-1970s. Again,
although I wasn’t a leader, I was there and I was present and just sort of watching and absorbing.

A couple of things that happened in the height of the AIDS epidemic: One is that a lot of activists, leaders, former presidents of the caucus who died — Don Hrachovy died of AIDS, Steve Shiflett died of AIDS, Dennis Spencer died of AIDS, Norman Guttman died of AIDS. They were already activists, and they threw themselves into AIDS advocacy as well, but a lot of privileged white gay men who were in the party circuit and living large, suddenly they contract the virus and it brought a whole new group of folks into advocacy. Now, they were focused on AIDS advocacy, but it brought them into the broader advocacy and activism community that they had disdained until that point. I mean, you look at the A-list gays looking down on Harvey Milk scraping a living in the Castro with his camera store. They had good jobs and they lived in their closets and they vacationed in nice places, and suddenly they came into activism.

AIDS in the height of the AIDS organizing brought new people into the movement, but it also killed off a bunch of folks who had been in the movement, and those of us lesbians who were in the movement ascended to power in LGBT organizations in a new way. We filled a void, but we also stepped in in a caretaker role in a lot of communities. We’re socialized to that as women, but you have your friends dying and they’ve lost their jobs; their families don’t want to have anything to do with them. A lot of gay men filled those caretaker roles too, but for women it was natural and it bridged a lot of divides.

I’m thinking of my experience in the early days, there were the lesbians over here and the gay men over here and there were some of us who worked in
both spaces, but the lesbians, it was all about being safe to nest and raise children. And not kidding, for a lot of gay men, it was, “We want to be able to go to the bathhouses. We want to be able to go cruise somebody in Memorial Park and not be arrested.”

And there were fights about, “No, I’m not going to go advocate for you to be able to cruise in Memorial Park and not be arrested.”

There were a lot of different tensions.

Town Meeting I in 1978, which Ray Hill organized, was videotaped, which is great for archival purposes, but there was a lesbian-led raid that broke into the place where the videotape was stored to steal it because there were women who, you know, “I showed up at this thing. No one told me I was going to be videotaped. I will lose my kids if this is ever revealed.”

I mean, there were huge tensions, and AIDS wiped a lot of that out. You know, life-or-death took precedence over a lot of things, and when those privileged white A-list gay men realized that they could die, and they started flooding into the movement and they became ACT UP and Queer Nation and other things, it brought change faster than we could have ever hoped to achieve the slow political-organizing way, and I think it bridged some of those divides too.

PINCHAK: That’s great. Anything else?
PARKER: I’m sure there’s lots more, but I can’t think of anything.

PINCHAK: Thank you very much.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]