Oral History # 22

An Interview With
Marion E. Coleman

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Interviewer: Renee Tappe

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MARION E. COLEMAN

RENÉE TAPPE: This is Renée Tappe interviewing Marion Coleman for The oH Project, Oral Histories of HIV/AIDS in Houston, Harris County, and Southeast Texas. The interview is taking place on November 22nd, 2016 in Houston, Texas. The purpose of this interview is to document Ms. Coleman’s recollections concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Houston.

Hi, Marion.

MARION COLEMAN: Good morning, Renée.

RENÉE TAPPE: Thank you for being willing to join us.

MARION COLEMAN: Yes, you’re very welcome.

RENÉE TAPPE: Let’s get a little bit of your personal history first. Tell me your full name, where you’re from. Tell me a little bit about your parents.

MARION COLEMAN: My full name is Marion E. Coleman. I was named after both of my grandmothers, so I always claim that E is “everything,” but it’s really Edythe. I was born in Provincetown, Massachusetts in my great-grandparents’ home. I think if the Lord asked me to choose my parents and my family, I couldn’t have done better. I have been very blessed with my family.

My dad was a police officer and interior decorator, exterior/interior. My mother was a librarian. My great-grandmother’s livelihood was sewing American flags. I used to watch her when I was a little girl, making American flags. My grandparents were my favorite. I loved my grandmother. I would spend most of the summers in Provincetown.
When I was born, I was 12 1/2 pounds, and I was born in my great-grandmother’s home. My dad was out of town. In those days, doctors made house calls. They had to use forceps to pull me out, and she gave me to my grandmother and said, “The baby is dead. There’s a sack in the bag, and I don’t think I can save Jenny,” my mother.

My grandmother said, “She is not dead, and you will save my daughter.”

They went down to the — it’s not a basement; it’s just a little floor where they had a kitchen. This was an old captain’s home that they lived in. The basement consisted of the dining room, the kitchen. They had a wooden stove there, and my grandfather prepared some sort of a crate or something to put me in front, and for a whole week my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my grandfather kept talking to me around the clock. My grandmother went mouth-to-mouth, and then she kept whacking me one. This is what she told me. Finally there was a little sound coming, and so they kept rubbing me and talking to me, and my grandmother would sing to me.

Of course, I don’t remember any of that, Renée, but the thing is that my life is that warmth, that love. It surrounds me to this day. I was very fortunate to have the family that I’ve had.

My sister is a year younger than I am. I’m the oldest, and my brother was two years younger. My brother has made his transition due to diabetes. My brother was gay. My sister Amy was straight, and she has three children. I have a few great-aunts, and I have some nephews and nieces that I dearly love, but I very seldom get to see them anymore because I don’t travel back and forth as I used to.

I think that’s it.
TAPPE: Marion, tell me, did you have any particular interests or activities when you were in school?

COLEMAN: I went to the Orleans High School, and that’s part of Cape Cod. Orleans is about 27 miles from Provincetown if you’re coming up through the Cape toward Boston.

Not really, because I was so involved in the activities at school as far as sports and gymnastics. I was into gymnastics bigtime. I played every sport you could imagine: soccer, field hockey, basketball. Of course, we didn’t have softball back home. When I got here and found that out, I was just shocked. I didn’t know that there was such a game. And then bowling and things like that.

My mother was a librarian, and I took a period every day at school to be in charge of a class for the school librarian. In other words, I had to make sure the books got back in, and I’d go to classes and retrieve the books. I really enjoyed doing that.

TAPPE: But you were very sports oriented at that time.

COLEMAN: Very much so, yeah. I still am.

TAPPE: That’s right. When you graduated from high school, what did you do? Did you stay in Provincetown?

COLEMAN: No. My mother moved to Orleans when she married my father, so they moved to Orleans. I stayed with my mom, and I worked at Nauset Labs, where I did packaging and sort of a receptionist-type thing. One of the things that really impressed me with this certain company was that they were trying to get the hourglass in a smaller version to flow for a minute, exactly a minute, or three minutes, and that’s what they were working on. Jim, the gentleman I was
working with and had a platonic marriage with, did the hourglass and got the measurement correct for hour to hour. That’s one of the things that intrigued me with Nauset Labs. I couldn’t believe how they were working all that. It wasn’t something I was really excited about, but it was a job and I could kind of stay with my mother.

TAPPE: Let me interrupt. You were married?

COLEMAN: Yes.

TAPPE: I didn’t know that.

COLEMAN: Yes, I had a platonic marriage.

TAPPE: To Jim?

COLEMAN: To Jim, Jim Coleman, James Coleman, James D. Coleman. What happened, I lost my dad. My father made his transition at 52. The situation is that I had a paper route when I was a kid. My mother used to dress me up in Shirley Temple clothes, and I absolutely hated them, and I begged my mother, “Please let me pick my clothes out, Mama, please, please,” and she wouldn't hear of it.

She said, “When you earn enough money, you can choose your own clothes.”

I thought, “Oh, boy.” So I went to my dad. I said, “Daddy, can I come to work for you?”

He said, “No. What about a paper route?”

I said, “A paper route?”

He said, “Yeah, that would be a good job for you, a paper route.”

I thought, “Would I get a bike?”
He said, “Yes, I’ll get you a bike.”

I thought, “Oh, boy, I’m going to get a bike.”

He went to the Cape Cod Standard Times and came back with a yellow book that I still have, and it had 27 customers. He told me that I needed to at least get 100 customers to make enough money where I could buy some clothes but do a savings account at the Five and Dime. We used to have a bank that was Five and Dime Savings on the Cape. I thought okay.

So what does he do? He takes me to the dump. I’m out to get a bicycle, and I’m going to the dump, and I’m going, “I’m not believing this.”

He gets out of the truck, and he pulls this frame up, and then he finds another one. He pulls that up. He did that four times, and he finally found a frame that he wanted. There were no tires, no fenders, just the frame, and I’m going, “That’s my bike?” I was just stunned by that, and I said, “Daddy, it doesn’t have any tires. It doesn’t have any handlebars.”

He said, “I know that, but the frame is what I’m concerned with. You’re going to be delivering a lot of papers, Marion, and you need a sturdy bike. Now, we’re going to fix this bike. It will be like brand new, but it will be a safe bike, and you’ll know how to fix it if something breaks, like the chain.”

He took me to his shop, and there were many colors. My mother loved robin’s egg blue, but I always loved green. That was always my favorite color. The paint that he had, he had this robin’s egg blue, and I knew my mother loved that color, so I said, “Well, we’ll paint it that way.” I helped sand it down. I helped paint it.

Then we went to the hardware store, Smith’s Brothers, and we bought the
fenders. They had a lot of fenders up on the wall, and the ones I loved were the silver ones. My father said, “Yeah, I knew that you’d pick that, kiddo.” I guess it was the most expensive one.

We went around and we picked the parts for the bike, and then we built the bike together. It was a fantastic bike. It was the best-looking bike.

And then he went to Hyannis to purchase some baskets and had one especially made for the front, and then two on the sides and one in the back. It had to be balanced, and the papers had to be balanced. Of course, the papers were not as thick as they are today. A section of the paper would be what the Cape Cod Standard Times was at that time.

I went to all my mother’s friends, my dad’s friends. I ended up with 137 customers. What I didn’t realize that I was doing was that every day, I had 10 miles to go because I had it all over the Cape: Orleans, Brewster, and Eastham. Rain, snow, sleet, the papers were delivered. The only time I didn’t receive the papers was when my father made his transition and they didn’t deliver it to me. If they had, I would have done that, because my father stressed upon me the importance of the newspaper, how people felt about the newspaper, and not to miss, no matter what.

When I would have to deliver in the snow, they always cleared the highways and the roads, and I’d use my sled. I had a huge sled, and then I’d have to go back home, load up again, and come back out. When Dad was alive, when there was a bad snowstorm, he’d come find me and take me the rest of the way.

TAPPE: How did you meet your future husband through that?

COLEMAN: I told you I worked at Nauset Labs. He used to watch me. He was a friend
of my father’s. He used to watch me deliver papers. He watched me when I worked at Dorrie’s, which was sort of like a general store. In the morning hours, I would go to work at the Denise Ann Bakery Shop. Then I worked at the Harbor Way Restaurant on the weekends. I was constantly working to help my mother out, and he saw that. I didn’t know him that well, and then one day he walked into the Harbor Way Restaurant. He said, “I didn’t realize you worked here.”

I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Wow. Well, I’ll come back for dinner every night when you’re working. When do you work?”

I said, “I just work on the weekends: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.”

He said, “Okay.” So he came in Friday and Saturday, and he’d leave me a $5 tip. Well, in those days a $5 tip was unheard of. I liked him a lot. He was just a fantastic man, and very gentle, very kind. We used to have these conversations, and he’d say, “You can do better than what you’re doing.”

I said, “I know, but I don’t want to leave my mother.”

He said, “Well, I’m thinking about closing Nauset Labs and moving to New Jersey.” He wanted to take me, but I didn’t want to go. My mother was still in mourning, and I didn’t want to leave her.

Then he came back, because he had a home in Orleans. He was gone about a year and a half or two years. We kept in correspondence. It wasn’t love, in love. It was just a father figure for me, really. I was like a daughter figure to him because he lost his daughter, so it was that kind of relationship.

He said, “I would like to take care of you. I have two cities that I think I’d like to move to, and I think where I could make money, and you could start your
own career, so you pick it.” Now, this is back in 1956, in 1957. “You decide. You have Atlanta, Georgia or Houston, Texas. You pick it.”

TAPPE: Is that how you ended up here?

COLEMAN: That’s how I ended up here.

I said, “Wow,” because I always loved history. I thought, “Well, that sounds exciting,” and so I picked Houston, Texas. We were married in the Houston House. Carl Patrick, he was a judge at that time, we married in his penthouse on top of the Houston House. I guess it’s still downtown. I lived a year in the Montagu Hotel, which at that time was “the” hotel. Today, of course, it’s not anywhere near that.

Then I moved to Pasadena because he purchased 24 apartments to manage and to learn how to operate a business. He’s responsible for that tall building in Pasadena. He was in diversified investments. Luckily at that time the apartments were rented, so the landlord showed me how to do things and what to do.

Once I kind of figured all of that out, I managed the property. It was pretty interesting. Those apartments had window units and they had a wall furnace. When they would come to fix it, I would learn how they did it and what they did. When they’d throw the packaging away, I’d pick up the packaging. I had a little binder where I would staple things so I’d know exactly where that part went to.

TAPPE: You’re still doing that.

COLEMAN: I’m still doing that, yes. You would have to say that.

I’d write down exactly, and I’d draw a diagram of the air-conditioning unit so that “1” was this and “2” was this, and I would number that, plus the part. The
same with the wall furnace. The same with the washing machine and dryer.

That’s to save money, you know.

TAPPE: This was the beginning of your business background, then.

COLEMAN: Yes.

TAPPE: How long were you together?

COLEMAN: We married in 1957, November of 1957, and he made his transition in 1963. He developed lung cancer. He served in World War II. He developed lung cancer, and for two years — I slowly watched him make his transition in the last year. He saw me in my childhood and he followed me because he was so interested in why a young girl would be out doing the things that I was doing. He just couldn’t get over that, and because he loved my dad, he wanted to make sure that I was going to be okay and support me. He left me quite a bit of money. It was a couple of million dollars.

When he was close to making his transition, I called his brother and sister, and they flew down from New Jersey. At that time I was playing softball, and I had run into a woman that had JBJ Litho Print, and I’ll get back to that later. I had to pay the bills and so forth, so I ran back out. I must have been gone a day, almost a full day, and Jim and Genny said, “Well, he’s really failing, so we’re just going to go home.”

I was kind of shocked. He said, “You can take care of the arrangements.”

I said, “Okay.” We had already set aside funds in my account for his burial and transport back to New Jersey.

What had happened while I was in Houston, they had Jim sign papers that he thought he was signing for me because there was property in New Jersey that
was his, and he thought he was deeding that over to me. The nurse told me that. I
would never have known that until she told me. It was shocking that they would
talk in front of the nurse, but she said, “You need to know what’s going on.” It
was too late. They had withdrawn all the funds. I had nothing but the car and my
belongings, and they took over the apartments. Luckily, I had some friends I had
made playing ball.

When I went back to work to pay bills, after visiting some friends, I found
counterfeit money everywhere.

TAPPE: Counterfeit money?

COLEMAN: Counterfeit money, counterfeit checks, like the Texas Commerce Bank.

That was an old bank that was downtown. I was like, “Oh, my God,” and I just
closed the door. I said, “I’m not paying any bills.” I just took off.

I came back, and I told Jim. Jim was still alive at that time. I said,
“You’re not going to believe this, Jim.”

He said, “You need to divorce yourself of that right away. Don’t be
surprised if the FBI wants to talk with you. Just do as you always do. Be honest
and upfront.”

I said, “Why would the FBI want to talk to me?” It scared me to death.

He said, “I’m just preparing you for it, Marion. That’s probably what’s
going to happen. You don’t get away with things like that, and they’re probably
on to you-all, but luckily you’ve been with me.”

TAPPE: These were his siblings?

COLEMAN: No. This was a friend of mine. She owned a printing company called JBJ
Litho Print. It was Jeanie, Bob, and Judy, and they used to work for Savage Labs,
and they decided that they’d get together and —

TAPPE: So it was their company that you joined?

COLEMAN: Yeah. I was sitting next to her. I played for the Houston Rebels, and I played in the outfield. I was sitting next to her. She was a scorekeeper, and she was doing this artwork.

I said, “Gee, that’s pretty interesting.”

Then she explained to me her business and said that they really needed someone to do sales.

I thought, “Well, you know, I could do that.”

I said, “Well, I’ll help you. I don’t mind helping you. I probably can make some sales for you.”

She said, “Okay. Really? That would be great.”

Well, lucky for me, the first job I sold was the first City Charter of the City of Pasadena. That was my first job. I did an illustration of the industrial linescape, and I used, of course, a medium-green cover to print. When I went before the Council, which you had to do — I’d never done that before — they were looking at me, “What is a woman doing here?” because this was a man’s world. Men controlled the printing companies at that time.

Anyway, I walked in, and they were very impressed and they agreed with the design, and they said, “Well, how soon can you have the galleys for us?”

I had no idea what they were talking about, and I said, “Well, I don’t see why we can’t have it in maybe three to four weeks. If we can get it sooner, we’ll let you know. If it’s later, can I let you know that as well?”

They said, “Oh, yes, that’s fine.”
Getting back to the counterfeiting, I went back out, and I was sitting with Jim, and the day before he made his transition, the FBI showed up at the hospital. He was right. I was scared to death.

They asked if I could step outside, and I stepped outside, and they said, “We know your husband is ill, and we just want you to know that we are aware what’s going on at JBJ. We know that you’re not responsible for any of this. We’ve been watching that place for three months. We want you to get everything you have out of there, and when your husband dies, we’ll get back in touch with you. Don’t let on that you know anything. Continue to do what you’re doing, and then we will let you know, and we’ll come in and shut it down. But I would advise you” — and Jim advised me too — “to see a lawyer.” So, I learned how to print and I was really excited about that.

TAPPE: Is that how you ended up going into the printing business with the House of Coleman?

COLEMAN: Yes, that’s exactly how I started the House of Coleman. I worked for them, for Judy, and then I went to work for a firm that I cannot remember. I didn’t work there very long. It was controlled by a mother and son, and they had the oldest press I ever saw in my life. It was just like it was held together with paper clips and rubber bands. If I sped the press up, then the paper clips and the rubber bands would just go everywhere.

I just couldn’t print the quality that I was accustomed to printing, so she came in and said, “You’re not producing that much, and we’re going to have to let you go.”

I was so grateful, because I didn’t want to leave them in the lurch, but I
knew that I wasn’t there for long.

I went to Beasley Printing Company. I liked the word “Beasley” for some reason. The gentleman that used to handle my airfares with Eastern Air Lines, his name was Jerry Beasley, so I thought, “Well, that ‘Beasley’ word, I’ve always had good luck with Jerry, so I’ll try them.”

I walked in, and I met Raul Beasley, the son of the company, and I showed him my samples, and he said, “You did this on an A.B. Dick?”

I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Well, I’m really impressed. We do have a two-color A.B. Dick.”

I said, “Great.”

He took me around and showed it to me. When I looked at their press, it wasn’t much better, but it was running better than what I was accustomed to running.

He said, “Well, you’re going to have to talk to my dad. He’s going to have to make the final decision, but everyone that has seen you in the shop has given me the okay. You’re okay with me, but it’s my dad.”

Renée, I walk in. So help me, Lord, I walk in and it’s this huge roll top desk and this heavy typeset up and down the wall and all kinds of trays just stacked, volumes of books. I thought I was walking into history and there was Ben Franklin sitting at the desk. I mean, it was unbelievable.

I sat down, and the first question he asked me, “What is a woman doing in the printing business?”

TAPPE: Is that right?
COLEMAN: It was the very first question.

I thought, “That’s a stupid question,” to myself, and I said, “Well, why not? Why not? I love printing. I was taught how to print, and the ink is in my blood.”

He asked me a few more questions. He said, “You can go out and visit with my son, and once you do that, have my son come in, and we’ll make that decision.”

I thought that I didn’t cut it; this isn’t going to happen.

About 10 minutes later, Raul came out and said, “You have a job.”

Well, I wasn’t really what I thought what a quality printer was, because the men in the shop took me in hand and they taught me printing and how to print. The only problem I ever had and a job that I ran poorly — it was the only job — I was running onionskin, and it’s very difficult to run. You have to change the equipment on the machine because it’s a very lightweight paper. I don’t think they even make it anymore. I know they don’t make it anymore. And then the color was gray. Well, I’m used to running gray ink, but not on onionskin, and I had about 5,000 sheets. So when I took the stack out of the press, there was this gray line across the onionskin where the toning had happened.

So the men said, “Well, when you have onionskin from here on out, and we run a lot of onionskin, make it your last job of the night, and just put the ink in the ink fountain, as much ink as you think that the job will take, and let the gray sit overnight, and it will not tone as much.”

So it was those little things that I learned from them.

TAPPE: Was that your job before you went to opening up on your own?
COLEMAN: I thought I could have run my own business then, so I went to my banker out at First State Bank on Bellaire, Mr. Witte. He was president of the bank. I met him through JBJ Litho Print. I went out there. In those days, you could meet with the president of a bank. That was no big deal, but he was my banker.

I sat down and said, “Mr. Witte, I want to open up my own business.”

He said, “You do?”

I said, “Yes, I do.”

He said, “Well, how are you going to manage that?”

I said, “I need a loan for operating capital, but I’m going to A.B. Dick to buy the equipment and get a loan from them.” So I told him my plan.

He said, “You know, Marion, I love you to death, but I think you’re going too fast here. Do me a favor. Go work for a small printing company for a year. Learn all that you can learn. If you feel like you can run your own business after working for a smaller shop, try to find one that you imagine that that’s the kind of shop you want, and go ahead and work for a year, and if you come back to me in a year, I’ll loan you the money.”

A year from that day, Renée, I walked into that bank, he knew exactly what I wanted. In those days, it was an 8 1/2-by-14 sheet of paper. It’s not like that today; it’s 50 sheets. All I had to do was sign my name, and I borrowed the money.

Then I went to A.B. Dick to purchase an A.B. Dick with a T-head to make two colors; a plate maker; a camera; and a folder for bindery. They came out with the bill, and I looked at it. I had a pretty good idea of what it was going to cost. And I said, “Well, can I make a loan? Can you just finance it for me?”
“Oh, A.B. Dick doesn’t do that.”

And I went [sigh].

Jay, my press repairman, said, “Let me go get Mr. Crawford for you, Marion.” He was from Scotland and the general manager.

So Mr. Crawford came in. The men at A.B. Dick loved me because I did quality printing on their presses. They used to take my samples and take them to other places so they could sell their presses. When people couldn’t print like I printed, they couldn’t use them anymore, but Mr. Crawford came in and he said, “Well, what’s going on? What’s going on here, Marion?”

I told him.

He said, “Well, no, we don’t, but just wait a minute. I’ll be back.”

So he called Chicago, the big boys. Because he guaranteed it — I didn’t know at the time he guaranteed it — I got the loan.

TAPPE: Good. So that was the beginning?

COLEMAN: That was the beginning.

TAPPE: How long were you in business with House of Coleman?

COLEMAN: From 1970 to 2006, a long time.

TAPPE: It certainly is.

COLEMAN: And the difficulty was that it was difficult for a woman in printing. I didn’t realize it was going to really be that rough, because when I started calling on ad agencies — because that’s what I wanted. That’s where the money was, and I knew I could print for them — because they always had smaller pieces like letterheads and brochures and newsletters. But they asked me to leave. One man kicked me out.
The next ad agency I went to was Ruder Finn, and I met with a gentleman that recently made his transition, Sam Keeper. He liked me right away, and I got their business for small presswork.

Then a gentleman stopped by one day. He saw my sign out front, and he walked in, and he said, “I’d like to see what you do. Do you ever need a big printer?”

I said, “Well, I’ve turned away a couple of jobs because I don’t know of a good printer. I haven’t had the time to really think about that.”

He said, “Well, we can give you all the small printing stuff. I’ve seen your samples and your work. We’ll give you all the small printing that we have that we don’t want to deal with, and you’ll make it.”

That’s how I kept going.

TAPPE: Good. Now, you became involved with the gay community here in Houston and did a lot of printing for different organizations; is that correct?

COLEMAN: That’s right. A woman came into my office. Her name was Judy Newson, and she was on the board of a nonprofit and I was on the board of the same nonprofit too. She came in and she said, “Marion, there are two gentlemen and myself that are thinking about opening up a counseling center.”

I said, “Okay. Well, I’ll be more than happy” — like I did with everybody, I always gave everybody a discount, and sometimes if they were just a startup, I would just do it at cost. So I said, “Well, I don’t mind helping you with that.”

She said, “No. We want you to serve on the board.”

I said, “I don’t really have that much board experience.”
“Yes, but you have a business, Marion, you’re gay, and we need you. I want you to come talk to Bill Scott, who is the founding member, and John O’Donald.”

I went over and talked with them. In fact, the first meetings were at the House of Coleman, with the Counseling Center, and I joined that board.

Then I went on to — I think it was the Montrose Clinic, and I was a token board member. That happened to me quite a bit because I was the only woman that was out and that was gay and had a business. They figured business sense, mostly. It was run by the O’Briens, Dr. O’Briens. It was two brothers, and they weren’t the nicest fellows in the world.

TAPPE: Are you referencing the Montrose Clinic at that time?

COLEMAN: Yes, the Montrose Clinic.

TAPPE: Between the Montrose Counseling Center and the Montrose Clinic is really how you first got started in the gay community, in terms of volunteer work?

COLEMAN: Yes.

TAPPE: You’ve served on countless political, social, and nonprofit organizations, both in the gay community and outside of the community. Let’s talk a little bit about the politics first. When did you first realize that you had an interest in politics?

COLEMAN: When I was young, my grandparents were Mr. and Mrs. Republican of Cape Cod, and my grandfather would go out and campaign — it was when Eisenhower and Nixon were running. I’m really dating myself here, aren’t I? Anyway, Grandpa would go out and he’d tack up the Eisenhower poster, and then I would tack up the Nixon poster. I don’t remember a whole lot about that, but I often wondered why they weren’t together, but they weren’t printing the vice
president and the president together. It was separate. I was down there trying to hammer in the bottom poster.

It was really my grandparents and my great-grandmother, because of her love for America. I used to watch her hour after hour after hour making flags all year long for various events on the Cape, and she enjoyed it so. And Grandpa would listen to a ball game on the radio, and when the national anthem came on she’d stand up and put her hand over her heart. I asked her why she did that, and she explained it to me.

Grandpa was really more interested in the politics part of it, and I was too young to really realize it all. I knew their dedication, I knew their love for their country, and that’s what I felt strongly about. I wanted to follow in their footsteps.

But my dad took me aside and said, “You know, Marion, he did the same thing with me with religion. Just because we have one way of supporting our government or one belief in how it should be run, that doesn’t mean that you have to do the same. It’s your responsibility as an individual to find out how you feel and what you feel, and then you stand by it and you work for it. When you don’t feel comfortable doing that at any time, then you need to make changes.”

We have a two-party system. For me, in being part of my family and watching them over the years, I chose the Republican Party because to me, I’m really a Jeffersonian. I believe strongly in our Constitution. I felt that was the best vehicle that promoted my political philosophy. I am very conservative when it comes to monetary issues. On social issues, I’m extremely liberal. I’m not left, left, left, but I’m left, and I’m not religious right in any stretch of the imagination.
I just follow that vehicle, and when I don’t feel that that person that’s running in that certain position fits my philosophy, I won’t vote for them, whether they’re Republican, Communist, Democrat, whatever. In fact, I vote for a lot of Democrats. I know a lot of people do not know that about me, but I do.

TAPPE: Yes, we’ve had these discussions.

COLEMAN: Yeah, we have. Kathryn Whitmire, when she first decided to run for mayor, her first meeting was at the House of Coleman. I love Kathryn Whitmire, and she helped start Kindred Spirits, by the way. Then Debra Danburg was a very good friend of mine. In fact, in the old days she came to visit with a friend that she was — I think she was working for Lance Lalor at the time, a House representative. Do you remember that name?

TAPPE: Yes.

COLEMAN: I think it was around the holidays or something, and she came in, and the friend that she was with, he told her, he said, “Well, you know Marion is a Republican,” and she got so upset that I was a Republican. She couldn’t believe her.

I said, “You can believe now. You need to go. Get out of my house.” Later on she becomes the State representative, and I did all of her printing except when she absolutely had to have the union bug. When she could use me for her personal stationery and personal things like that and things that she didn’t need a union shop for, I did all of her printing for years until she stepped aside.

I’ve printed for Sissy Farenthold. I’ve printed for Ann Richards. Anthony Hall. There’s been a few that I’ve printed for. I didn’t turn them away.

TAPPE: You’ve crossed over. It’s good business.
I know that you’ve supported both Republican and Democratic candidates throughout the years. As a gay woman, did you find it particularly difficult when you self-identified as a Republican, either at that time or now in today’s political world?

COLEMAN: No, not at all. I will have to tell you that something just recently happened to me. There’s a member of LOAF [Lesbians Over the Age of Fifty] that I dearly love, and she’s been ill from time to time, and I call her two or three times a week and talk with her. I don’t know how the subject came up. I try to run from that subject because I don’t want people not to like me. I’ve gotten kind of over that now, but it’s hurtful.

TAPPE: You mean politics, the topic of politics?

COLEMAN: Political.

It’s always hurt me because I never felt that way about a Democrat. I was just blessed that they knew who to vote for and they felt as strongly as I did, and so it always bothered me. What I will always object to is people that do the talk and don’t walk the walk and vote. That’s the people I don’t like and I don’t like to deal with, and I won’t deal with them if I find out they haven’t voted.

When she found out I was a Republican, that woman said, “Well, Marion, I guess you’re hoping Trump wins.” She looked at me like that [indicating], and she said, “Are you a Republican, Marion?”

I said, “Yes, I am.”

She had the most disappointing look on her face, and her whole carriage just kind of changed.

TAPPE: [Laughter]
COLEMAN: I know you’re laughing, but let me tell you something. It was so heart wrenching, and I didn’t ever want to hurt her, and I never realized it. That’s what bothers me, and she’s older. I mean, she’s in her eighties. Well, look at me. Here I am, 80. She’s 80, over 80, and I thought, well, is our friendship going to continue? Will she still answer my calls?

TAPPE: Has she known you for a long time?

COLEMAN: Yes. She never knew I was a Republican. I know it’s really rare. I don’t think she could ever imagine me being a Republican.

TAPPE: Apparently she just made an assumption, which I think in today’s world it’s probably a fair assumption.

COLEMAN: Yeah, she did.

And then there are people that have been very rude and nasty. I’ve been spit on. I’ve been hit with a sign. I’ve been assaulted by the union fellows when I was in Pasadena. That’s another long story. I don’t understand it. I do understand it, I guess, but I don’t have those feelings. I don’t know what that’s like.

TAPPE: Do you think it was because of the Republican/Democrat issue when you were experiencing difficulties in Pasadena, or could it have also been the fact that you are a woman?

COLEMAN: That’s a very good question. I could think of it as a woman. I'm just Marion. I just happen to be a woman. I happen to be gay. I don’t look at things like that. I just am Marion, and I try to follow the love that my parents and my grandparents gave me, so that’s who I am. I don’t think in those terms.

All I know is that it was hurtful for people to assault me. They surrounded
me at the rodeo. Senator Tower was running at that time, and I was his campaign manager in Pasadena. I thought, well, what I’ll do is, I’ll organize a booth out at the rodeo grounds. Well, in those days, that was a very liberal city. Today it’s not. It’s totally conservative. I mean, it’s redneck, from what I understand. I haven’t been out there in many years. Because I put up this booth and I had three volunteers, and I stood out passing out John Tower’s pamphlets, it was the first time they ever had a Republican booth at the rodeo, and it upset the union leaders, and they sent some fellows in from Louisiana, and they assaulted me.

In those days — I don’t know if you remember this or not — the sack suits, the sack, where you had a short jacket and you had a skirt and you always had a little leeway between the top of the skirt and the jacket. It was called a sack suit. I believe that was the terminology. Well, they cut me, and they just palted me with their fists in my kidney, and I just collapsed, and then they took off. I could describe one. He had on a wide Texas belt and half of his earlobe was missing, and huge.

TAPPE: He had been in a few fights before, I’m sure.

COLEMAN: Yeah, obviously. I don’t know if they ever found out who they were, but that was my first experience.

And then again, some of the religious right were here when Log Cabin started. Gary Van Ooteghem was asked to serve as president of the
Caucus, and he came to me and asked me if I would be his vice president, so I said sure.

He said, “Well, I want you to read the bylaws and see if there’s anything that bothers you.”

I said okay. So I read it, and nothing bothered me.

Well, when Rosemary Garza came to me — she was a Democrat, but I knew her because she was a lawyer and she had helped some of my men friends out, and she also served on the Houston Challenge Foundation board with me. That was a pantry for outlying areas with people straight and gay that were living with AIDS. She came on our board, and so that’s how I got to know Rosemary.

She decided to run for judge, so I supported her and did her printing. Of course, she had to use a union shop, but doing so much printing for some of the Democrats, I eventually found a quality union shop and I could make a layout where they could do the coffees and the teas and the push cards and the brochures and stickers and all like that all on one sheet, where it saved money. The union shops would never tell them that; that’s piecemeal. But I would show them on a 26-by-40 sheet, this is how many you can get out of it. So figure out, blah blah blah. I would help the candidates in that respect, and I was helping Rosemary, and so was Gary. So was Gene Harrington.

When they came to the Caucus to be approved and voted on to support their slate, I never dreamed that they wouldn’t support Rosemary. She was articulate, attractive, intelligent. She supported the gay community. She was on the Houston Challenge Foundation board.

There was this gentleman, Wilson, that ran against her, and when he got
up to speak, he stated that he had taken his sons to a prominent gay male businesswoman to sensitize his sons to gay life. He also pushed cards.

I thought, well, surely they’re not going to vote for him. They did, and we were stunned. I had a sign in my yard. Gary had a sign in his yard. One of the — I don’t want to say his name because he’s no longer with us — drove by and saw these signs in my yard. Every one of them was a Democrat. Then he called the board together, and he said, “Marion, you need to pull your sign from your yard.”

I said, “Why?”

He said, “Because we didn’t endorse Rosemary Garza.”

I said, “You’re telling me that I — what right do you have telling me to remove my sign?”

He said, “Because you’re on the Caucus board. We have standing rules, and the standing rule says you have to support the slate or you can’t be an officer.”

I said, “You have standing rules?”

He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Gary, did you know that there were standing rules?”

“No,” he said, “this is the first time I’ve heard of it, and I’ve been part of the Caucus for a very, very long time. I never knew there were standing rules. But no matter what, Marion, we’re not stepping down.”

Well, with that, the Caucus came running out and they tried to impeach Gary and myself. It was just heartbreaking, not so much for me as it was for Gary because I knew Gary was sick and I knew that in a short time we wouldn’t have
Gary.

I said, “Let’s just resign, Gary. It’s just not worth it. I don’t need to be vice president. I’m only doing it for you.”

He said, “No, Marion, we have to take a stand.”

I thought, oh, here we go again, taking another stand. I said, “Okay. Whatever you say.”

Well, you would have thought the whole country was on fire. They got on the membership list and they called all these people. Well, what they didn’t realize was a lot of those people were my friends and Gary’s friends, combination or both, and some of them hadn’t ever been to a meeting before, but they paid their dues. Nowhere did it say in the bylaws that you had to attend so many meetings. It wasn’t in the bylaws.

That’s why I tell all of you, when you’re on a board wherever, or you’re working for an organization, and you have to sign your name, you be sure to sign title after it.

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

TAPPE: Who won that election?

COLEMAN: The man. This is going to surprise you. In those days, you had a recorder on your phone so when people called in, it would go to the recorder that was attached to the phone, right?

TAPPE: I remember those.

COLEMAN: Well, my mother was visiting with me at that time. Now, my mother, I know she knew I was gay, because I brought home not that many, maybe two or three women from time to time, and she never asked me. I knew my mother
loved me no matter what. I never doubted my mother’s love, ever. If she had asked me, I would have told her, but she didn’t ask me. She knew, but she didn’t ask me, so I felt that she didn’t want to know, so I accepted that. I wanted to tell her, but I knew my mother, so I didn’t tell her.

I get home. Gary and I went for a drink, and I said, “Gary, I need to get home for my mother,” because we had to talk it over and hash it over and what we were going to do. Should we step down now, or should we hang in and la da da? Should we subject our friends to this kind of verbal abuse again? Over and over and over, and we decided we’re just going to hang in, do the job that we were elected to do, and it would be the term only, and then we would leave, and that’s what we did.

I get home, and my mother said — and I was kind of still shaking over all of that rudeness and verbal assault; it was, like, I couldn’t believe it. I was worried about Gary more than myself because he was not well. I get in, and my mother said, “Marion, are you okay?” And my mother never asked me that question. That wasn’t a question she ever asked me.

I said, “Yes, Mom, I am.” With that, the phone rang. I thought it was going to pick up. Well, it was Brandon Wolf calling me because he was there supporting me and to tell me how sorry he was that we had to go through that and that he loved us and that Gary and I had his support always.

I go into the bedroom, and my mother is sitting on the bed, and she said, “Marion, come sit here,” and she just heard that.

I’m going, “Oh, my God,” she knows.

There were many more calls on there with support, thank the Lord. Lots
of calls. My mother said the phone was ringing off the hook, and when I started listening to it, I could see why. I was, “Oh, gosh.”

She said, “Marion, come sit next to me.”

I said, “I’m really okay, Mom. I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

She said, “Oh, I’ve heard quite a few, but I want to tell you a story about your granddad. You need to hear this story.”

I said, “Okay.”

She said, “Do you remember when Gerry Studds ran for office for state representative in Massachusetts?”

I said, “Yes.”

“And you probably don’t know this, but your grandfather, chair of the Lower Cape GOP, supported Gerry Studds.” They wanted to run a candidate against him just because he was gay.

Well, my grandfather stood up. He said, “That’s not enough.” He said, “Now, let’s just go over the issues that Gerry Studds ran on, and let’s see if he did indeed do what he said he would do.” Of course, he did. He did all the things that he made a commitment to do.

He said, “Why would we want to run a man against the man that’s done what we’re in agreement with and he did the job he said he was going to do? Why would we run someone against him?”

I looked at my mother. I’m getting goose bumps. I looked at my mom, and she said, “So you’re okay, Marion. Continue to do what your dad told you to do.”

TAPPE: Oh, that’s great. That was your coming out.
COLEMAN: That’s how I was outed to my mother. The Gay Political Caucus. That was my coming out. It was kind of rough, but that was my coming out.

TAPPE: They took it out of your hands.

COLEMAN: Yeah, it did. It sure did, didn’t it? My mother never questioned, asked me anything about it. I did have some success in my business and elsewhere, and I wanted to share that with her. I always felt, well, I don’t know if I should or not.

Come to find out when my brother was on his deathbed, literally on his deathbed, he said to me, “Marion,” he said, “I have something to tell you.”

I’m going, “Okay. What is it, Bert?”

He said, “I told Mother all about you.”

I said, “Bert, you didn’t do that.”

He said, “Yes, she needed to hear that, Marion, and she was very proud of you.”

She would write me little notes every time she’d come to visit. I brought her in for the holidays, and she would leave me little notes. Sometimes it would be under the pillow. Sometimes it would be in the bathroom, whatever. She’d leave, and she’d leave a little note to thank me, and she’d always say to me, “I’ll always love you, Marion, and I’ll always be praying with you, Marion. Don’t work so hard.”

TAPPE: She was very supportive of you. That’s great.

COLEMAN: Yes, and that was her way of telling me.

TAPPE: Marion, I know that you were very involved with George H.W. Bush’s campaign here in Texas a number of years ago. Tell me about your experiences with his campaign and the impact it had on your life.
COLEMAN: Well, it had a major impact on my life. When I met George, I was in charge of 20 precincts: the 17 precincts in Pasadena, Deer Park, La Porte, South Houston, and I had one Houston precinct. When I took that over, I only had three precinct Chairs, and within a month I had them all covered, if you can believe I found Republicans in those precincts. It was amazing.

George Bush decided to run for the Harris County Executive Committee as the County Chairman. There were other area chairmen. The Republican Party divided areas and named them certain areas. Mine was Area 20, so that meant I had 20 precincts. He called me, and he said that he would like to come out and discuss his candidacy with me. I’m really nervous because I didn’t know if I could handle something like that. I was extremely nervous.

He said, “I can meet with your precinct Chairs if you like, or I can meet you at the Tidelands Motel.”

I said, “Well, let me get back with you.”

It was ironic because we had a meeting coming up two days from that time, and so I told them that George had called me. I knew it would be forever, just like when we had meetings. You know, if you don’t know how to manage it, it could go on and on and on, so I said, “Can you develop some questions for me to ask George that are important to you? If every one of you can give me a question from your area, your precinct, or from just yourself, then I’ll ask those questions of George. Do you think that’s the best way to handle it?”

They all agreed to that.

I got the questions together, and I called George. I said, “I have the questions from the precinct Chairs, and I’ll be more than happy to meet with
He came out. To me, he was very handsome. Of course, he came from Massachusetts. He was born in Massachusetts. I was kind of happy that I had some connection. He sat down and I told him I was nervous. This was the first time I did this.

He said, “Don’t be nervous. We’re family here.”

I said, “Okay. Here are some of the questions that they’ve asked,” and he would answer the questions.

Then I came to the one that created a lot of headaches for the precinct Chairs, the Secretary of the Harris County Republican Party. She was mean, and we didn’t like her. She wasn’t respectful of us. They wanted to know, would he fire her if he won?

He looked at me, and I really hated to ask that question. I really did hate to ask that question, but it was a question that all of them wanted to hear. He said, “You know, Marion, I’ve heard about this. I want you to know that if I find that she does the job she’s been hired to do, then I’ll keep her. But if she’s not doing the job, I will let her go.”

I thought wow. I guess I didn’t expect that answer because our 20 precincts was the final decision for his vote to become Harris County Chairman. I thought wow, that’s really something.

His demeanor, he was such a gentleman. He was so kind. I just felt a connection because of the way he expressed himself, how he answered the questions, how professional he was. He looked me in the eye. He was constantly looking me in the eye, and he made me feel comfortable. I never felt
uncomfortable.

In fact, Renée, he did get elected. Of course, I had met Barbara. I was responsible for Barbara Bush’s very first political speech. What happened was, I went to work right away when George got elected. I organized a Women’s Club, a Young Republicans Club, and I got all of that together, and then I called her and I said, “Barbara, would you come speak to the women’s group? We only had 10. We don’t have many out here, but we do have a nucleus of 10.”

And she said, “Oh, Marion, I don’t know if I can do that.”

I said, “Well, they’d love to hear from you. We can have a roundtable. You don’t have to stand up or anything, just a roundtable-type thing with just the 10 of us.”

She said, “Well, I’m going to have to talk to George about that, Marion. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I said, “Okay.”

The next day she called me, and George said, "Well, Barbara, you need to get used to this, and I would hope that you would do that,” and so she did. She accepted.

Well, this is so Barbara. I introduced her and she sat down, and she said, "Well, I do have something to share with you. I was trying to get ready and I was nervous. I got my hair fixed and got my makeup on, and then I went to get my dress, and the dress I wanted to wear with all of this was wrinkled, and so I went next door to Marion Chambers, and my maid and her maid had gone shopping, and she didn’t know where her ironing board was. I didn’t know where mine was. We were out of luck. Marion said to me, ‘Barbara, just go home. I want
you to turn on the shower. Run the hot water and let the steam appear, and just hang your dress there, and all of the wrinkles will come out.’ You know, I did that, and my wrinkles did come out, but what happened to me was my hair fell down and my makeup ran.” That’s Barbara Bush, and that was her. She was so supportive.

George, every time I saw him, he held everything with grace and kindness and love. I remember, I was playing softball. There was an executive meeting, and he had something that he needed all the votes that he could manage. I said, “George, I’ve got a ball game tonight I’ve got to pitch.”

He said, “You’re playing ball, Marion?”

I said, “Yes, I’m pitching.”

He said, “Oh, well, I’ll tell you what.” This was when we had our meetings down at the Harris County Courthouse.

I said, “I can’t miss my turn.”

He said, “I’ll tell you what. I’ll just put that on the top of my agenda, and then you can just leave.”

I said, “But my ball suit.”

He said, “Come in your ball suit. That’s no problem. Just come in your ball suit.”

So I did. He put that to the first of the agenda, gave me the sign, and then I left and went and played my game.

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

TAPPE: Was he aware of your sexuality?

COLEMAN: That’s another story. I talked about playing softball. I had a coach that
was not a very pleasant individual. Very demanding, very rude, foul language.
You name it, that was her. The team for some reason wanted me to coach them.
They wanted me to be the coach. I had a bumper sticker on my car for George, so
that’s how she knew I was for George. She made a call to him and said, “I think
you need to be aware of the fact that you have a gay woman.” In those days we
weren’t called lesbians. “I just think you need to know.”

He said, "Well, why do you think I need to know that?"

She said, “Because it can damage your campaign.”

He said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you come on in and why
don’t you bring your attorney, and I’ll have my attorney, and we’ll discuss this.”

I knew he cared for me, as he did everyone. He was a very caring fellow,
but I thought this is the end of my working with George. I thought oh, boy. But I
sat there, and he said, “I just thought you needed to know that Marion.” With
that, he turned to the map of the area that I was in charge of, asking me questions,
and that was it.

TAPPE: So he acknowledged it, and it was a nonissue.

COLEMAN: Yeah. And when Jim made his transition, the first call I got was from
George and Barbara.

TAPPE: Is that right?

COLEMAN: Yeah. And I don’t know if you ever noticed in my room that I have a note,
those postcards, when I had a meeting with Barbara.

TAPPE: Your room at the Montrose Center?

COLEMAN: Yeah. It said, “Whenever I see you in the audience, I’m at ease. From
Barbara.”
TAPPE: Very nice. Let’s talk about one more of your business ventures, and then I want to step into the history that you experienced with the HIV/AIDS back in the 1980s.

You had a second, rather large business venture, which was being a bar owner. Tell me about Kindred Spirits.

COLEMAN: That came about because of a woman that was working at a nonprofit at the time. There was a girl that accused her of unsavory actions. Of course, none of us believed it. We knew that wasn’t true. We realized we had to hire an attorney, and I think it was Sara Fitzgerald that recommended Stuart Connor, who was an Episcopal priest at one time but also practiced law. He wasn’t doing much of that, but because of that relationship with Sara and someone else on the board, he agreed to defend Ethel for $10,000. He normally charged $20,000. Well, $10,000 was like [sigh].

I wasn’t really into that much fundraising at the time. I knew a little bit from working with the Republican Party in my area. We decided to do bake sales. We decided to do poker games. We had so many garage sales, I can’t even begin to tell you. I think we raised around $5,000 doing all of that, and then the rest of the board members went out and they raised the necessary funds. I thought that the balance could be raised from the bars. I never thought about going to the men’s bars because it was for a woman, and I didn’t know whether they’d support that or not, so I went to the women’s bars. All of them said no, with the exception of one, and she said, “Well, I’d like to interview her.”

So I went to Betty. We supported Betty’s bar with our softball teams. We were there almost every weekend and sometimes the nights during the week. I
went in and brought Ethel along with me. The way she questioned her was like she was guilty of what she was charged with, which was an incredible experience for both of us. Ethel was just stunned, and I was mad.

I said, “Surely, Betty. Ethel supports you. She comes in with the ball team every weekend. You know her.”

“I just can’t do it. I just won’t do it.”

Well, when I left the bar, I looked at Ethel and I said, “I am so sorry. I really thought we could raise the necessary monies, but I don’t think there’s going to be a chance we can do that, and I’m so sorry.”

She said, “It’s okay, Marion. It’s okay.”

I said, “I’ll tell you one thing, Ethel. I’m going to open up a nightclub. I am not ever going to have this happen to any one of us again.” That’s how Kindred Spirits came about. I was so mad. I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t know anything about the bar business.

Sara, who owned Fitzgerald’s, was a big help to me. In fact, when she took me to look at glassware, I wanted the best. I didn’t want anything cheap. I didn’t want our venue to be dark. I didn’t want it to be hidden away somewhere. I wanted us to be proud. I wanted us to stand up. I wanted us to be together, be a part of each other and to be there for each other and never, ever have that happen again to any one of us. Sara helped me. I said, “Boy, I love those glasses. That’s the glass I want.”

She said, “Ask the gentleman if he would bring in six glasses.”

I said, “Okay.”

He brought in six glasses.
She said, “Now, stack them.”

You couldn’t stack them. The base was solid.

She said, “That doesn’t work, Marion.” Those are the kinds of things that she taught me.

Then I went around when I decided that I was going to do this. Pat Gardner was working with me at the time, and she wasn’t happy about this. I went to the men’s bars, and I introduced myself to them and said, “This is what I plan on doing, and I don’t know all I need to know, and I’m going to need some help,” and not one of them — Jerry Kaufman with the Briar Patch, Jim Farmer with Mary’s, Gene Howle with Copa, Walter Strickland with The Barn, even The Loading Dock and The Drum all supported me. Jim Farmer took me to a beer vendor, and Jerry took me to where they had the vending machines for Pac-Man and all that that was so popular in those days.

TAPPE: The video games?

COLEMAN: Yeah. So they all took me in hand and helped me and supported me.

When I opened up, the plants that you saw, those plants came from the gay men’s bars, because they asked me, “What do you need, Marion? What can we do to help you?”

I said, “Can you help me with some plants?”

They said, “Oh, yeah,” so they all got together.

I developed a very strong relationship with the men’s bars, and they were there for us, and they supported us totally. They were proud of us because it was a bar they wished they had. Every one of them told me that, but that wouldn’t sell.
TAPPE: That’s not what the men’s bars were; at that time, anyway?

COLEMAN: No. And Jerry owned a bar that was devoted strictly to senior citizens, older men, and that’s how I found out about AIDS. I went in one day to see Jerry. Even though I owned Kindred Spirits, I wanted to learn all I could so I would be able to share with the staff at Kindred Spirits what was going on in the community. If anything came up that someone wanted to know, that they would be aware of it.

I walked in and Jerry was crying, and I thought something was wrong with his mom. I said, “Jerry, what’s wrong?”

He said, “Sit down, Marion.”

I sat down, and he started telling me about this disease and that two of his customers were living with AIDS. Now, he told me “dying with AIDS.” I never use that terminology because that’s too final for me, and so I’ve always used the terminology “living with AIDS.” I knew the two gentlemen, because I knew most of his staff because I’d go in and I’d sit for a while — I just wouldn’t pop in and pop out — to get to know them and just to be part of their lives, to learn from them. When Jerry told me this, I just couldn’t believe it. He said, “This is really serious.”

Then I went immediately, when I left Jerry’s at the Briar Patch, I went over to see Andy Mills at Mary’s. I said, “Andy, I just saw Jerry at the Briar Patch, and he told me.”

He said, “Come on, Marion. Let’s go upstairs.”

We went upstairs, and Jim was there. They called him Fanny Farmer, but I always called him Jim. Then they told me what was going on and that from
what they knew at that time, that “there was nothing that would save the lives of the people that were dying of AIDS.” That was their quote. They explained it all to me, the sexual aspect of it, and I was just stunned. I mean, I couldn’t move.

Then I knew, when I looked at Andy, that Andy was sick too. Now, Andy is still alive. Andy and I were very, very, very, very close. We are very close, and we’ve done a lot of things together. Andy said to me, “You know, Marion, one day we’ll lick this. Nothing looks promising. We’re going to lose a lot of our friends, and we just have to start preparing ourselves for it because it’s going to happen. You’re so involved in the men’s community, you’re going to lose a lot of your friends.”

Well, the first time I started losing someone was, I had a lot of graphic designers that I printed for that were gay. That was the bulk of my work, my quality work that I enjoyed doing. The first one was Dennis Dunwoody. We were very close too, and he brought me all of his business. We used to have the best times. In fact, I went to New York with him. George Bush was there speaking, which I didn’t know he would be there. Dennis was the first one to make his transition and I really felt a severe loss because of our friendship and the professionalism that we shared with his work.

TAPPE: Were you with him through that process?

COLEMAN: Yes, I was. Andy did some home care for a while, and then it got to be too much, because it was one of the first cases. I’m not going to describe it. It was awful. You couldn’t touch him. When I would want to hug him, I couldn’t hug him. I could just kiss my fingers and just kiss his cheek because you just couldn’t touch him, he was so sore. I never hesitated. You know, people said, “Oh, you’re
going to catch AIDS, Marion. You’re going to catch AIDS,” you know.

I hired gay men. I had a lot of problems with the gay women. They didn’t want to come anymore because they were afraid they were going to catch AIDS. I said, “You’re not going to catch AIDS. That isn’t how it happens.” Even though I explained it to them, they wouldn’t believe me. Randy was the first one to get sick, and then Michael, that worked with me at KS, and then I’d go up and hug them and let them know it was okay.

Anyway, before Dennis made his transition, he asked me to be a pallbearer. His family were South Baptist members, and he did agree to have his services at the church because of his parents, but he wanted me to be a pallbearer.

The family wouldn’t allow me to be a pallbearer. The first time I was a pallbearer was when Jerry died. In fact, it’s kind of ironic, because with Jerry, I didn’t realize I was going to be a pallbearer until we went to San Antonio where he was buried.
But with Dennis, I couldn’t be his pallbearer. Andy Mills and I sat together at his service. When the preacher started to preach, he said, “Now I want you-all to visualize Dennis sitting at this beautiful maple table, and the floors are shiny, and the sun is coming in,” and all of a sudden, tears just start rolling down my cheeks.

I’m sitting by Andy, and I’m looking at Andy, and I said, “Andy, I don’t know if I can take this. This is not what Dennis wanted. I don’t know if I can take this.”

He said, “Oh, no, no, no. Wait a minute, Marion. Wait a minute.”

I looked at him.

He said, “I want you to watch that casket.”

I said, “Watch the casket?”

He said, “Watch the casket, because any moment now that casket is going to fly open, and Dennis is going to get up and slap him right in the face.”

After that, I was fine. It did relax me, and then I could deal with anything after that because I could visualize that. I could picture Dennis doing that.

TAPPE: His family took over the service, obviously, and gave him a type of service that he would not necessarily want.

COLEMAN: Yeah, it was awful. It was just awful.

TAPPE: Did you see that happen very many times, where families came in and either interfered with estates or took over?

COLEMAN: I’ll tell you what happened. Gary and Andy were very protective of me, and if they knew that there was going to be a problem, they wouldn’t let me be a part of it. I’ve done a lot of eulogies, which I’ve never done before. In fact, the
first eulogy I ever did was for the straight man that I hired to tend bar. Do you remember Brett? Tall, blonde fellow? Really nice man.

Well, he got shot, and his girlfriend came in and asked me if I wouldn’t do the eulogy. It was really funny because when I walked in — here’s another Baptist church. I walked in, and the minister said, “I want to read what you’ve written about him so that we don’t have any conflict.”

I said, “We won’t have any conflict.”

He said, “Are you sure?”

I said, “I’m absolutely sure.” I wasn’t going to give him what I had written.

He said, “Well, come on. I want you to sit back there behind everybody, and then you can walk up.”

I said, “No, I’m not doing that. I want to be up here to the side, and then I just come on out. I am not going walk and make a — this is about Brett. I’m not doing that.”

He didn’t like that at all.

When I did get out, it was just ironic, because all the straight people were on this side and all the gay people were on this side. It was just so funny. Then I was fine, and that was my first eulogy that I gave. That was ironic.

I think the worst experience I ever had — and I had some of them; I had a few — but the very worst one was when — Gary and I would go to Park Plaza. Gary and I belonged to EPAH [Executive and Professional Association of Houston], and we had an EPAH care team. There were two floors at Park Plaza that were dealing with AIDS patients. Gary and I decided that we would visit,
because a lot of people knew Gary, and a lot of people knew me because of Kindred Spirits. We would go, a sort of sister and brother image, and we would sit down and talk with them, and we knew quite a few of them, surprisingly. We didn’t know that they were sick. Then there were ones that we didn’t know, but we knew the nurses. There were times that Gary couldn’t go and I would go, or vice versa, but we always tried to go together because Gary would go in the room first and make sure everything was okay. Then when I came, the nurses would go in to make sure it was okay. We spent a lot of time with patients just talking to them, letting them talk.

Gary and I never really talked about it, so I don’t know. I’m sure Gary had this experience. I’m almost positive if I had it, he would have had it, where men would say, “Marion, would you mind going to my apartment? I’ve got this and that, and would you throw it away?” Sometimes it was drugs. “Would you make sure that who was sick could take these drugs so that they would be used?”

But this one man said to me — and I didn’t know him, and he didn’t know me; he knew of me, but he didn’t know me — when I walked in, it was one of those days Gary wasn’t with me, and I walked in and I said, “Hello.”

The nurse told me that he didn’t have anyone. The nurse would let me know as soon as I got there, “He hasn’t received any visitors.” They would kind of fill me in so that I’d have some sort of basis, know what to talk about and what not to talk about.

I went into this one room and he looked up at me, and he said, “Are you Marion Coleman?”

I said, “Yes.”
He said, “Oh, thank God. I’ve been praying for someone like you. I’m not going to make it, Marion. I want my mom to know.”

I said, “Okay.”

He said, “My father threw me out when he discovered that I was gay and I have AIDS, and he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me, but I want to see my mama. I need for my mother to know that I’m not going to be here much longer.”

I said, “Okay.” I didn’t know what he expected of me, and I was kind of shocked. How was I going to deal with that, and what would I say, and how would I say it? I was thinking all these things.

He said, “Don’t worry, Marion. Once my mother sees you, everything will be okay. Go on Sunday.”

But he fell asleep. What he didn’t complete was, “Go after 9:00 o’clock,” because his father played golf and he always left a little before 9:00.

I went there a little before 9:00, thinking if she went to church, at least I’d have a chance to talk to her. I knocked on the door, and this man answered, and I said, “Hello, my name is Marion Coleman. I’m a friend of your son’s.”

With that, slam went the door right in my face. He wouldn’t even listen to me. It was scary. I was scared. I ran to the car to get out of there. I was that scared.

I went down to Sam Houston Park and reflected about how am I going to tell him what happened? How do I say this to him, and that I wasn’t able to do what he asked me to do? I got ahold of myself, and I went back to the hospital and I went in, and I said, “Jeffrey, your father slammed the door on me.”
He said, “You went before 9:00 o’clock? I didn’t tell you to go after 9:00? My dad plays golf.”

I said, “No.”

He said, “Oh, Marion, I’m so sorry. Does that mean you’re not going to go back to see my mom?”

I said, “Oh, no. I will. I will. I just want you to know what happened, and if that’s okay for me to go back.”

“Yes,” he said. “Well, go around 9:30.”

So the very next Sunday, I went back, waited for his Lincoln Continental to drive out, went to the door and knocked on it, and she opened it. She said, “Are you the woman that was here last Sunday?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Please come in.”

I had to sit down and tell her what Jeffrey told me and how to say it. I’ve had some difficult things happen in my life, with death and family and friends, but this was — I didn’t know the woman. I didn’t know Jeffrey. There was no kindness that I knew of, no warmth that I was feeling, because it was all this anger that I wasn’t accustomed to, and it was heartbreaking. It was absolutely heartbreaking. So I finally told her that her son was having difficulty and that he was living with a disease called AIDS and that there wasn’t anything that medicine would help with, would take care of, and that he would be making his transition soon.

She said, “I need to see my son. If I call a taxi, my husband will know about that. I’m only allotted so much money.”
I’m sitting there and going, “What?”

I said, “Well, I’ll come pick you up. I can take you right now, if you want me to.”

She said, “You will? I have to get ready.” She was in her gown or housecoat. She said, “If you don’t mind waiting.”

I said, “No, I don’t mind waiting.”

“Well, he’s gone all day, so I don’t have to worry about him. You will take me to my son?”

I said, “Yes, I’d be more than happy to do that.” So I did that for three months, maybe four months. Every Sunday, I took her to Park Plaza.

I would say, “Now, you stay as long as you want. I have a lot of people I can visit with. I can go home and have lunch. We can set a time if you like, 4:00 o’clock, 5:00 o’clock or whenever your husband will be back, and I’ll come pick you up and take you home. You just give me the hour.”

They’d talk about it, and depending on how he was feeling.

So I did that.

TAPPE: I’m trusting the father never found out about that?

COLEMAN: I don’t know, but I will say this. I went back to the house. I had been to see Jeffrey, and he was doing pretty well that day. You know, a lot of times, they’d have a couple of really good days that you think oh, maybe they’re turning the corner, and then all of a sudden that wasn’t going to happen and they would be gone. That’s what happened to Jeffrey. He had two or three really good days, and he was so happy that he could talk to his mother and that he knew that his mother loved him and that he could die with that peace and that love. So if I did
anything in my life that was so important to me, I didn’t realize what I was doing at the time. But when he made his transition, I went home to tell her, and she thanked me.

I said, “Do you have any funeral arrangements, because Jeffrey has given me what he would like to have done. Mary’s.”

I went with her to a place where that hospital Southwest Memorial Hospital is, a funeral home out there — I don’t remember the name of it — and I had him cremated. She picked out the urn she wanted. I had called the people and told them what was going on, and they didn’t charge us for the urn or the cremation, which I wasn’t expecting, because I went to Jim Farmer and he gave me the money to pay for it. I had the money to pay for it, and I told her that Jeffrey had saved the money, but that didn’t happen. It was Fanny Farmer who gave me the money.

We had the service, and then we buried him at Mary’s. Then I would go back every so often. I didn’t want to lose contact with her. I wanted her to feel like there was someone that cared about her and loved her.

I went back, I think it was about two months later, and there was a black wreath on the door. I searched the papers to see if there was something in the papers. From that time forward, I’ve always watched the death notices, because if it was in the paper, I didn’t see it. From that day forward, I’ve always looked at the death column in *TWT* and then in the papers.

TAPPE: She passed away?

COLEMAN: She passed away, so I never got a chance to say good-bye. At least I know that she had a chance to tell her son — that they had time together.
TAPPE: That’s right. What a gift that you gave both of them.

COLEMAN: Well, she gave me, too. And mostly Jeffrey, because Jeffrey was an exceptional son, and he loved his mother so and she loved him. It was so neat to see that, and she told me on the way home from the services that Mary’s didn’t bother her. She didn’t care. She was just so happy she had the chance to be with her son, to see this happen, to go out to the funeral home and to go through this whole process. We had to do it when her husband was either at work — most of the times, we couldn’t do that on a Sunday.

Then I would go back from time to time, and I would take her to lunch. I got to know her, and I really cared about her, and then I didn’t — she must have died of a heart attack is all I can tell you, because to me she didn’t look like she was sick. She didn’t mention to me that she was sick. I think she died of a heart attack. Of course, I never would go back for the father, so I don’t know what happened to her. If it was in the papers, I didn’t see it, so I just lost — it just was gone; it was just gone.

TAPPE: What a gift, though, truly.

COLEMAN: Well, we all did that. A whole lot of us were doing that, one way or another. I wasn’t the only one. There were lots of us. Gary was helpful. We were part of an EPAH care team. We had a lot of things happen to us when we were taking care of some of these individuals that we took care of and they were part of EPAH, they were family, and so we did whatever we could do. There were times when we would have to do the eulogy. Gary and I would take turns.

My hairdresser was living with AIDS, and he got very, very, very sick, and his family ignored him, didn’t want to have anything to do with him either.
Steven was such a sweet boy. I always called him a boy, I guess because of my age at the time. I guess I’ve always felt old. He was such a sweet man, and he’s the first one that did that Barbara bouffant hairstyle thing. He decided that that would be the best for me. I didn’t really want to have it. I wanted my hair to look like it is looking now, and he didn’t want to have any part of it because EPAH was going to have a casino night at Harold Farb’s restaurant, and I was co-chairing, and so he wanted me to look great, so he made me go into his shop and get my hair done. I did it for him.

Anyway, he became very ill, and I took him in my home and I took care of him. Then he was getting to the point where he was in a lot of pain and he wasn’t himself, and that’s when I could always sense with people I was taking care of. Gary and Andy and I, we kind of figured it all out as to the signs and what to look for and what not to look for and how to deal with it.

You have a way of lifting people. It’s like you lift them up, there’s a certain way where you can hold onto them if they start to fall down and you won’t fall down. I was backing Steven up to the bathroom and he tripped and he fell on me. He was so lightweight, he’d lost so much weight, I couldn’t believe he was so heavy, but it was like dead weight. I could not get him off of me. I said, “Please, Steven, get off me. I’m hurting. Please get off me.”

“Huh? Huh?”

I said, “You are on top of me. Get off me.”

He wouldn’t move, and I kept saying, “Please, get off me.”

He said, “What?”

I said, “Steven, suppose that somebody came in and saw us like that.”
With that, he flipped off. Someone may come in and see us like this, you know.

TAPPE: That got his attention.

COLEMAN: Yeah, that was hysterical.

Then, the second day, I realized that when he didn’t understand to get off, that was a sign. Omega House came out and they checked with Steven. The following people that were in line were not as sick as Steven was. He wasn’t there but a week when he made his transition.

When I was taking him, when I sat down to say that I thought he would get better care at the Omega House, he understood that. When I took him and they got him settled and all, he said, “Don’t come back, Marion.”

I looked at him, and I said, “What do you mean, ‘Don’t come back’? Why wouldn’t I come back? You’re my best friend, Steven. Why wouldn’t I come back?”

He said, “I don’t want you to see me like this, Marion. That’s what’s been worrying me for so long. Now I can go. I can leave. I can go.”

Wow, that he was keeping on —

TAPPE: He was staying in part for you.

COLEMAN: — so that we’d have our friendship, because we had long conversations.

I’ve been the executor of many estates, as well as Steven’s was one of them, and of course Gary Van Ooteghem, and I will be with Andy Mills, and I’ve been an executor — it’s just quite the trip, with the things that they want, in their will, and want to say or whatever. It’s quite an experience.

But boy, I’ll tell you, although there was a lot of pain for me losing people
that I loved, it was also a gift for me too because I knew the good and I knew the bad. I understood the transition. I knew that when I lost my grandmother and then my mother. That experience was something that I’ll always live with.

TAPPE: Did you develop some sort of coping mechanism to deal with all your losses, or was it just what you did was put one foot in front of the other as time went by?

COLEMAN: Not necessarily. You know, Renée, when you love people and they give that gift of love back to you, that makes you strong. That made me strong, where I could carry on. Then with all of us, mostly the men — come to think of it, I didn’t work with many women, if I worked with any one — it was the men, and we just held onto one another and we were stronger together by doing that. We could talk to one another, and they could talk to me because there wasn’t anything I didn’t know or didn’t see or couldn’t cope with, and so we would talk things out. What made us even stronger was when we would talk about individuals that we lost, it was the love and the friendship that was connected to all of that made us it was okay to deal with it. We understood it. We knew that they were in the best hands they could be in; that they had made their transition. I felt really good about that.

TAPPE: It was a good support.

As a businesswoman and a friend to the community, tell me how you supported fundraising for HIV/AIDS. Talk about your blood drive.

COLEMAN: Well, the first thing I did with the House of Coleman was, I printed memorial folders for them. I wanted them to go out in style, so I always had the best paper, I’d always get the best photos, and when I had a chance to discuss it with them, they would tell me things that they would like to have or songs that
they would like to have. They knew that they were going to die, so I would do that.

Renée, I must have printed over 100 memorial folders, and I never charged for that, because it was the quality that they gave us, they went out in style. They went out in quality. They had something they could leave with someone that was them, and it was printed on the best paper, the best typeface that fitted their personality, and the things they wanted to say. That was what I did with the House of Coleman.

Of course, with Kindred Spirits, the bar owners, we all got together and decided who would do the fundraisers. The bake sales, believe it or not, went to Mary’s of all places. Jerry did a little drag, and then I did the main drag because of the dance floor space that we had. I did plays, theatrical plays where we tried to make some money, and we did make a lot of money on those plays, believe it or not. I think I produced maybe six different plays at Kindred Spirits. We had many drag shows, and we had many casino nights. Casino night was very popular. We made a lot of money with casino nights, and we mostly did that at Kindred Spirits because we had that large area. That’s why, when I went from Buffalo Speedway to Richmond, I did that on purpose, not realizing that my insurance tripled because of the liability, but we could do better fundraisers and raise more money.

Then I had a customer that was a nurse, and she worked with the Red Cross. She came up to me and she said, “Marion, I don’t know if you’re aware of
this or not, but there’s a lot of men out there that need blood. I’ve gone to the gay
men’s bars, but the Red Cross won’t hear of that, so I was wondering if we could
do it at Kindred Spirits. Is that something you’d be receptive to?”

I said, “Oh, absolutely. Bring it on.”

I think we had four different blood drives before Red Cross cut us off, and
I think we raised over 500 or 600 pints of blood.

TAPPE: That’s great. But the Red Cross told you no more?

COLEMAN: When they found out it was a gay bar. Cut us off, but we did get that much
in.

I wasn’t on the outside that much. I was on the inside in the community
because I was with all the organizations and the nightclubs and so forth, so I was
part of the inside. On the outside with the women and all and what was going on
out there, I wasn’t much tuned into. I do know that the blood drive helped women
realize that they needed to keep giving blood, and a lot of women kept giving
blood. A lot of women would support the fundraisers, and they’d always ask,
“When is the next fundraiser? When is the next casino night? What can we do?”

Then when people that I thought might babysit — I knew most of my
clientele, and some of the women would say, “Marion, we want to help. What
can we do?”

Well, babysitting was very important. A lot of our staff members and
some of our customers babysat. They ran errands for them, like if they needed
medication or they needed even clothing. Whatever they needed, we all did that.

TAPPE: So you did see the women, part of the women’s community anyway, step up
and help out with the men?
COLEMAN: Oh, yes, and the men will tell you that. The men will tell you it was the women that stepped up, the gay women, that helped them.

TAPPE: So many of the men were ill.

COLEMAN: And the men remember the blood drive that the women of Kindred Spirits donated.

TAPPE: When you were involved with the fundraising, did you see a difference between the women’s bars in general and the men’s bars in terms of their participation? Did other women’s bars participate, or was it yours, Kindred Spirits?

COLEMAN: I’m not being negative. Whatever I say, it’s never meant to be negative, because that’s not something I would do or want to do, but the women’s bars — I think if anyone helped the most, it was The Lamppost. They helped a little bit. Most of the women’s bars were small. We didn’t have The Ranch at that time. They were small places, and they didn’t really feel comfortable.

A lot of women, to tell you the truth, did not like being around gay men with AIDS, period. In fact, I lost quite a few clientele when they realized that I was going to keep Randy on and I was going to keep Michael on; that just because they were living with AIDS didn’t — they could still do their job, and when they couldn’t do it, then I’d move them to the front to be at the door, or I’d send them back to do something, whatever we needed to have done. I held on to them as long as I could hang on to them.

They were irate, first of all, that I’d allow a man in the bar, and that wasn’t anything I was going to — in fact, Renée, if there’s another good thing that I did, I think Kindred Spirits was responsible because of our women that came to Kindred Spirits, and our pool team was the best PR we ever did. I sponsored a
pool team. I sponsored a softball team. The pool team would go from men’s bar to men’s bar, to women’s bar, to men’s bar, and our group of girls were just outstanding and the men loved them.

I think we brought the men and women closer together in the gay community. The men have told me that. The gay bar owners have told me that. Jerry Kaufman decided to sponsor a women’s softball team to bring us closer together.

Competition, I never thought about competition. I never felt I was in competition with anyone. I didn’t think we were unique in any way. I knew that I did things differently because of what they were doing and that I didn’t want to do that because I didn’t think I’d be successful. I’d be just another bar owner. I wanted to give back to the community, because I really wanted a community center. I didn’t want to run a bar, but nobody would support a community center. No one was interested in that. Of course, when I mentioned the word “nightclub,” they were going, “Nightclub?” And so that was kind of off limits for them, so I naturally had to call it a bar. I wanted it to be a nightclub, not a bar. Then I just said a “community bar,” and I tried to force that terminology; that we were a community bar, we’re for everyone.

I really think that we brought that together. Especially with the AIDS crisis, that certainly brought us a lot closer together. There’s no doubt about that. I think Kindred Spirits did a large part in that because I went to the AIDS Foundation, and I printed some of those brochures myself. When I printed them, I’d always print an extra thousand, and I would lay them out on the table. When anyone ever had a question about something, I had a little area where they could
pick up literature that they wanted.

TAPPE: Tell me how your friendships and the losses you suffered played a role with your involvement in various organizations such as the Colt 45’s.

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

COLEMAN: The Colt 45’s, I think they were from the bar called The Barn and Brazos River Bottom. Those were where those boys hung out. Some of the men were having problems with their utilities and food and not able to pay the rent, and so all the boys got together — I call them boys, but the men got together and decided that they would start an organization that would support these individuals. I was aware of it going to bars from time to time, each bar, I would learn that this was happening.

Then Judge Patronella — now, Renée, that’s another Democrat — but anyway, he called me — and I love Judge Patronella — he called me, and he said, “Marion, I have a problem. Do you mind coming down and seeing me?”

I said, “Of course not,” so I went down to the courthouse and went in his office.

He said, “I have some gay men that have problems.”

I looked at him, and I said, “Okay.”

He said, “They can’t pay their rent, they’re behind on their rent, they can’t
buy food, they owe this person money, they can’t pay this person, and I don’t want to incarcerate these people. I don’t know what to do, and if anyone knows, you do.”

Well, of course, that wasn’t true, but I said, “Well, yeah, I do know what to do. I’m sure they have some sort of” — and I told him what the Colt 45’s did. I explained to him what the Colt 45’s was all about.

He said, “That would be perfect.”

I said, “Well, let me go get a form from the Colt 45’s, and I’ll bring it back down to you. You review it and change it however you want to change it, and I will print as many copies as you need, no charge, and then you will be able to refer them to the Colt 45’s.”

So in one day the Colt 45’s got that back to me. They were so excited because they had someone that was supporting the cause. I took it down to Judge Patronella, and he was so ecstatic. I printed the copies for him, and that’s how my connection was with the Colt 45’s.

TAPPE: That’s great. They did a lot of good, and no overhead.

COLEMAN: DIFFA [Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS] was an organization that I wasn’t real familiar with, but Kermit Eisenhut came to me, and they said that the board had chosen Kermit and myself to be co-chairs for the next event. It was a big shindig. I don’t mean to be rude, but there’s some things I just don’t remember. Parts of it, I just can’t remember. I’m not kidding you. DIFFA was a great organization.

All I know is that every time somebody asked us to raise money, I’d always ask them, “Well, what did you do last year?” because that was my goal. I
had a goal. That’s all I knew.

At that time, I knew so many rich men. A lot of them were my clients. A lot of them, I knew meeting them in the gay bars and having conversations with them. A lot of them would say, “Marion, if you ever need any money, you let me know. You come to me.”

That’s just what Barbara Bush and George Bush did when Jim died. They called me and said, “If you ever need us, you call us. Don’t call anyone else.”

Well, the boys in the clubs were like that too. Kermit and I were able to raise more money than they did the year before.

TAPPE: That’s great.

COLEMAN: EPAH care team, I think I talked briefly about the EPAH care team. That was formed by the board, and I was on the board, at that time, of EPAH. We had people that were alone; they didn’t have anyone. Those are the people that we basically catered for, or people who wanted us to assist them in whatever capacity. I thought that I would have problems with me being a woman and would they allow me to help? It never was the case. They always were very receptive. In fact, they were happy that they could tease me about my being a Yankee and a Republican.

TAPPE: Yeah, to boot.

COLEMAN: To boot, yeah.

Body Positive was an organization that Richard Wiederholt, who owns Basic Brothers — I would always go to him, with all these various organizations I worked with, to sell tickets. In fact, he got to the point where, “I’m just going to have to develop some sort of a form so that we’ll know what we’re doing when
you bring in all these organizations.” He established the form that I still have to this day. It’s the same form with Kindred Spirits on it.

He came to me and he said, “You know, Marion, we have a couple of women, and they’re both straight, and we really would like to have a gay woman.”

I said, “Not another token woman. Please, Richard, please.”

TAPPE: Another token gay woman.

COLEMAN: Yes, a token gay woman.

He said, “Well, Marion, we know you’re good at fundraising. We really need for you to help us. We’re almost ready to close, and you’re the only one I can turn to.”

Well, Richard used to give me money. I was on the board of The Diana Foundation at that time, and so I went to the boys — I was the only girl, only woman — I went to them, and I said, “I just became vice president” — of course, they put me right at the top right away — “vice president of Body Positive.” I guess it’s to help with the fundraising aspect of it.

I went to the Dianas, and we were deciding on our beneficiaries for that
year. I said, "Well, I just want you-all to know that I’ve joined the Body Positive board, and they’re about to close, and they really need money, and I was wondering if they could be one of our beneficiaries. I’ll bring Richard to our next meeting, and he can explain everything to you because I’m not that familiar because I’m here to raise money for them." Of course, I was raising money for the Dianas too.

Richard came and talked to them. It was so cool. Instead of having two or three beneficiaries, we only had the one for the Dianas.

We went, “Yes, yes,” you know, because that meant more money, and that meant that they could stay in existence for another three or four years. I raised quite a bit of money, around $30,000, for Body Positive. That’s where we met Ellen, who became a treasurer of Kindred Spirits. She was a go-getter, let me tell you.

TAPPE: Were you involved with Omega House from the beginning?

COLEMAN: I was instrumental in the knowledge of it because sometimes when startups would come to bear, my name would always be mentioned, and I just couldn’t take on anything. I did do a fundraiser for them. I can’t remember the woman that sang. She had a throaty — gosh, what was her name? She had a crew cut. Great voice. They hired her to come to the Omega House fundraiser. I have a picture with her at the [Montrose] Center, and I can’t think of her name. k.d. lang. Is it k.d. lang?

TAPPE: Really?

COLEMAN: Yeah. So she came.

You never looked at any of my stuff there, right?
TAPPE: k.d. lang? I’m impressed.

COLEMAN: She came and did a fundraiser with Omega House, and they asked me to co-chair that fundraiser with a gentleman from the symphony because it was an operatic function that they were putting on, and k.d. agreed to come in and sing.

I tried to take care of the patients after Steven died. I’d go from time to time, but I was having difficulty because it brought back Steven, and I had a hard time. When Jim was making his transition and he did make his transition, and he was a veteran, I’d go to the veterans hospital and I’d talk to these fellows. I had the best time because they could talk sports. Any sports, they could talk, and I could bring them magazines.

I did this for about a year, and then it was getting to the point when I’d go back and I’d have something for them and they were no longer there. I had a hard time getting over that, and then I started with Omega House, and then I went — it was a transition from group to group, to problem to problem. I hate to admit this, but I just had difficulty. I just couldn’t do it anymore.

TAPPE: Too many losses after a while.

COLEMAN: It was too many, yeah. There isn’t a day that goes by, Renée, that I don’t remember my mother. I always remember one person every day that I lost, just to remember the good times. I’ve done that since I lost Jerry.

And then Gary Van Ooteghem started taking in patients at home, and he worked at the Doctors Club. Because I was a business owner, sometimes when he had to leave his patient, he’d call me and I’d come and take care of him. Well, this one person was a gentleman by the name of Michael, and I can’t remember Michael’s last name. He was one of the original EPAH members. Great fellow,
but he was the other half of Brandon. I didn’t know that he was the other half of Brandon all the time, and I spent many, many hours with him, Michael, and then he was placed into a hospice.

One of the things that Gary and I did that was very difficult with the EPAH care team was, when they were celebrating their birthdays, their last birthdays, Gary and I were the ones that went to do that. I always got the cake, and Gary always got the card. That’s how we did things.

This time, he drove up to Walgreens, the old Walgreens, and he said, “Marion, we’ll just change. I’ll go get the cake, and you get the card.”

I said, “Okay.” I thought this is great, because I love picking up cards, choosing cards. I went in, and I looked, and I thought, and I picked up this card, and I picked up that card. I’m going, “There’s no card for that. I can’t find a card. There’s no card. How do you express yourself? A last birthday.”

So help me God, I don’t know where this man came from, but there was an older man a little ways down from me on my left, and he was watching me, and I’d pull up — I have to tell you, the tears were just pouring down my face. I came out with the words, and I heard myself when I said, “Please, dear God, help me find this card.”

The man came over to me. He said, “Are you having problems finding a card?”

Please see Appendix for complete memorial brochure.
I said, “Yes.”

He said, “And they’re dying?”

I looked at him. I said, “Yes.”

He said, “I have just the card for you.”

Went down, picked it up. I open it up. Sure enough.

I’m walking out the door, and I’m looking at Gary. He’s waiting on me. I was so mad. I’m going, “This is it. End of our friendship. I’m not going to put up with it.”

He was laughing. He thought that was the funniest thing. What happened, it put us in a good mood, because we knew this would be the last time we’d see Michael, and we did celebrate his last birthday.

I was a pallbearer. Brandon asked for me to be a pallbearer. I think that was the last time I was a pallbearer. We had it at Bering, going up those steps. I can’t remember, really. Sometimes it’s kind of hard to remember, but I think I did about seven, maybe, was a pallbearer, and I did about a dozen eulogies.

TAPPE: And attended many more services.

COLEMAN: Oh, yeah. I can’t even tell you. It was to the point where it was almost every other day, almost. I’m not exaggerating. And then two and three times a day. At Mary’s, I was there one time when — there were a couple of bodies buried back there. Okay? That’s what I was told, and I was told by a good source. Most of the burials were cremations. In fact, Jim’s body was buried somewhere else, but a part of his body was cremated and put back there with the ashes. A lot of people think Jim Farmer was buried at Mary’s, but just part of his body, the ashes that we buried, and I was there. It was kind of neat, the way they
did Jim’s, because they had a big mound of dirt on the side, and you just picked up some dirt and you just carried it over. It was kind of neat to do that. Some choice words from the guys were precious, I’ll tell you, as they were tossing this dirt onto the grave.

Some of these people, I did not know, and I was there either because I knew someone who lost someone or they asked me to be there or, like with Michael, they had no one, and they worked with me, and I had them cremated and buried at Mary’s. There could be, I’m not kidding you, maybe a dozen or more, sometimes, on a Saturday or a Sunday.

TAPPE: All in the same day, you mean?

COLEMAN: Uh-huh.

TAPPE: Oh, my gosh.

COLEMAN: That really bothered me a lot, you know. I had a hard time dealing with it. I guess it was because of the love my family gave me and the love that I’ve been blessed to surround myself with. It was always difficult for me to figure out how they could be alone. How could they be alone? I’ve never really gotten over that. I always try not to think of that because it’s so hurtful and it brings back the harshness of everything we dealt with. But all those people. A lot of them I didn’t know. But we were all there even if we didn’t know them. We all joined hands and we sang a hymn or we said a prayer, we would light a candle.

TAPPE: Or had a toast.

COLEMAN: Yeah, many toasts, many toasts. I learned not to drink toasts, and I don’t like champagne, so it was pretty easy for me not to indulge in champagne that much.
TAPPE: I have learned that some of the men’s families weren’t even aware of their son’s sexuality or the fact that they were gay until they were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. It was kind of a double whammy.

COLEMAN: A major double whammy. Of the people that I knew, I would say 25 percent of those people that didn’t know their son was gay or didn’t know that their son was ill, they didn’t want to have anything to do with it. But the others that I knew of, the majority of them were very supportive.

In terms of burials, Earthman Funeral Home gave good rates and they made a lot of money on services. There were very few, except for the ones that could afford Geo. Lewis, the ones that could afford Earthman, and they gave them all a very good price. Stan Ford was one of the gentlemen; you remember him. Kathy Monahan. They were very helpful in that regard, with Earthman Funeral Home. Jim Earthman was a giant when it came to helping people that couldn’t afford it.

TAPPE: They weren’t turned away.

COLEMAN: Yeah, they found a way.

TAPPE: I want you to tell me a little bit about the Kindred Spirits Foundation, which is an organization that you started and have devoted many years to.

COLEMAN: That’s a big statement. “Many years” is right. It really went back to trying to raise more money. As you very well know, I don’t do anything without my attorney. Michael had been telling me that if I wanted to raise more money, and explained the reason why I would need to do a foundation and have a 501(c)(3),
that people would feel more at ease giving money, they could write it off, and so forth and so on. By opening up the foundation, we were able to raise more money.

In the early part of Kindred Spirits, I would say from 2002, when we had a reunion, a celebration, you remember when we had one beneficiary, the AssistHers, we were giving $12,000, $10,000. Now we’re fortunate that we can — well, we raise that much money, but we divide it amongst two or three beneficiaries, so you can see the impact that the foundation had.

I think my failure with the foundation was two failures. One, that I tried to do an educational endowment, and I didn’t realize the scope of what that entailed, and I was toward the end of my volunteerism, and my health has been failing, and I knew that it was short-term. The person that I chose to carry that, that would have been the perfect person, she became ill, and so that went aside. I feel badly about that, because I think education is so critical.

I know that I had funds for my education to go to Smith College. That’s where I wanted to go, but my dad died, and my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, purchased the house we lived in, 22 rooms, four stories, three-car garage, summer home on the water. Of course, she was going to leave that to my dad, and she never did that. When he died — and my mother was Portuguese, so she always felt that her son married beneath the family. Now, I love my
grandmother, my paternal grandmother. She just wasn’t in tune with how I was
brought up, although she wanted to adopt me, but my mother absolutely said no,
she would take care of the three of us, and she did. My mother never worked a
day in her life. She didn’t consider being a librarian work.

My father didn’t realize the scope of what he was doing at that time, but
he was such a gentle soul. Because Mother had three children to raise, and we
were stair steps, you know, one year after another, so on the weekends, he
wouldn’t let her drive because he didn’t want someone to run into her. He didn’t
let her pay the bills, because he wanted to do that. He felt that she had enough to
do, raising three children. On the weekend, he would do the laundry. He would
do the grocery shopping. She never did any grocery shopping. He paid the bills,
never realizing that once — and he made his transition at the age of 52 with a
severe heart attack — that once he wasn’t there, what was my mother going to
do?

Of course, we were blessed that my mother and my dad were always in
Oddfellows, Masons, Masons Eastern Star, Woman’s Club, you name it, so we
had a lot of support of the community. When it was in bad weather, they’d have
someone pick Mom and myself up, but many times Mother and I would go
shopping. We would walk back with a cart, a couple of miles, and then I would
take the cart back. My mother, they took her in hand and showed her how to do a
checkbook.

She went to work. Her first job she got was at a clothing store called
Watson’s, and the man was not a pleasant man to work with. My mother really
was seeking another job, but when she went to work — now, this was back in
1953. My mother, by the time she took home her salary, it was $25 a week, for three kids. When we were ousted from that building, from that home, my mother found a home close to where she was going to be working in the center, in the township, and she found this house that was built in 1896 or something like that. It was an old Cape Cod home where it had 12-inch floorboards where you had wooden pegs to keep the floor. It had an apartment upstairs, a cottage in the back. There were two bedrooms in the downstairs, so we put Bert in one room, and we had my mother and Amy and I in the other room. She rented upstairs, rented the cottage, and that paid for the mortgage, but the down payment was funds that my dad had saved for my college. My paternal grandmother had total control over my dad.

My father always allowed us, whatever my mother wanted to do on the weekend, wherever she wanted to go, that’s what we did. It was my mother’s two days of whatever, however she wanted to spend her time. Of course, we were always together.

I still have this, Renée. There was an envelope that a folder had folded over. It was green checkered, a green-and-black checkered thing, and it had, I think, six compartments, and one was Rent, Food, Utilities, Health, and I don’t know what else.

Cape Cod was a place where people visited. It was summer homes, summertime when all the people — we called them summer jerks — would come from
everywhere, and they needed babysitters, and my mother used to babysit, and she’d bring the money home. I would sit there and watch her put $2 here and $2 there. I have that to this day. I thought, I never want to be like that.

I remember nights when my mother thought we were all to sleep — well, Amy and Bert always went to sleep right away, but I never went to sleep until I knew my mother was asleep, and I would hear her prayers, and she would pray to keep us kids together, for the Lord to give her the strength to keep us together. I remember that. And never, ever complained, ever. I never heard my mother complain about anything. She just took it upon herself that she had three children she was responsible for. She would give them all the love she could.

There were times we went without. There was a time when our family had everything we ever wanted, and then there was a time when we had nothing. I experienced both of those things.

To me, you can tell that we’re not very materialistic. Not that that’s wrong or bad. I could live in a tent and be happy. I’m just that way. I learned that because I realized it doesn’t make any difference if you have the money. It’s what you have here [indicating]. Thank God I had that experience that I learned that, and I learned so much from my parents.

TAPPE: You learned also to take care of yourself and have the skills that perhaps your mother didn’t have because your father was so protective of her.

COLEMAN: Right, very protective.

TAPPE: Certainly out of love.

COLEMAN: Yeah, oh definitely.

TAPPE: As I mentioned earlier, you have received many awards and recognitions,
ranging from being a business leader to your political involvement. You are a fundraiser and a community organizer. I’m wondering which accomplishment brings you the most pride and satisfaction. Is there one award, recognition, or activity that brings you more satisfaction than anything else?

COLEMAN: No, not really. I think, if I were to do it professionally, if I had to choose one, if I could do it that way, it would be the House of Coleman, because for a woman to be in business at that time — I happened to win the highest award. I think that’s the proudest in my profession, when I won the Ben Franklin Award, which is the highest award you can win in the printing business. I won that early on. I was the first woman in the Southwest area to win it. I have a lot of pride because of my work and my dedication to my work. I was a good printer, I was a good graphic designer, and I could develop film, and I could do layout and all those things, and I had the opportunity to do what I loved.

When it comes to nonprofit, that is so hard, because yes, I did win a few here and there, but it wasn’t just me. It has always been difficult for me. In fact, I have difficulty even standing up and talking about myself, period. Then to receive awards when I know that there are other people that were there to help make whatever we were doing happen, I’ve never been able to really express that because it’s so deep inside me, and I felt guilty doing that. Yes, they say they need a leader and all of that, but that’s not where I’m at. If I had a satisfaction with a nonprofit, it would be with all the people that surrounded me and that I surrounded myself with to accomplish what we accomplished together.

TAPPE: That’s wonderful.

COLEMAN: So that’s the only way I can explain it, and I’m sorry. I try not to get
emotional.

TAPPE: I think it says it well.

Marion, I have one more question for you. Throughout this conversation today, you have referenced someone’s death as a transition, and very seldom have you used the word “death” or referenced someone dying. Tell me what that means to you.

COLEMAN: I’ve never had anyone ask me that before. It’s kind of hard to explain. The way that I can explain it is that I believe in God, and I believe in eternal life. If life is eternal, the here and now is part of eternal life. When you die, I believe you make a transition from now, from a part of, to another, from one transition from life to another. I know I can’t see my mother, I know I can’t talk with my mother, but she’s all around me. I think I’ve referenced a lot about love, because that’s what was given to me, and I try to give that back. That’s what evolves. It’s my whole part of life. Death is so final. The word “death” is so final, and I don’t see it that way.

TAPPE: You don’t view it as an ending.

COLEMAN: No.

TAPPE: “Transition” is a perfect word.

COLEMAN: Yes, transition to the here and the now. It’s a transition to the here and the now.

TAPPE: I understand. Thank you for explaining that.

COLEMAN: You’re welcome.

TAPPE: And thank you so much for your time today. I very much appreciate it.

COLEMAN: Oh, you’re welcome, Renée. I want you to know that I would not do this
for anyone else. I promise you that. I also want to thank you and those of you who have put this project together because there is so much out there that people are not aware of. I think I’ve shared a couple of stories that kind of shocked you a little bit. I didn’t mean to do that, but that’s the way it was. I’m very grateful to you and to others that are doing this project, and I thank you for the chance to share some of the stories of the good people that didn’t live long enough to keep giving us their love.

TAPPE: Transitioned at much too young an age.

COLEMAN: Yes, right.

TAPPE: Thank you, Marion.

COLEMAN: You’re welcome.

[END OF AUDIO PART 4]

[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

* * * * *
APPENDIX

Gary J. Van Oosteghem, CPA
February 1, 1922 - July 8, 2000

Saturday July 15, 2000
The Celebration of a Legend's Life
The Alley Theater

I. Call to Order
The Last Meeting of GVO will please come to order

II. Welcome
Introduction of Dignitaries

III. The Order of Business
Invocation
Presentation of Agenda
A. Recognition of Leadership and Friendship
B. Recognition of Friends and Family
C. Recognition of Community Service
D. Recognition of Business
E. Recognition of Friends and Family
F. Recognition of Business
G. Recognition of Community Service
H. Recognition of Leadership and Friendship

IV. Story Time
Gary J. Van Oosteghem: A Life of Service

V. Love Song
"A Mary of the Light"

VI. Call to Order
The Last Meeting of GVO will please come to order

VII. The Order of Business
A. Recognition of Leadership and Friendship
B. Recognition of Friends and Family
C. Recognition of Community Service
D. Recognition of Business
E. Recognition of Friends and Family
F. Recognition of Business
G. Recognition of Community Service
H. Recognition of Leadership and Friendship

VIII. Other Business
"A Song of the Light"

IX. Adjournment
The Last Meeting of GVO will please come to order

X. Acknowledgments

XI. Call to Order
The Last Meeting of GVO will please come to order

XII. The Order of Business
A. Recognition of Leadership and Friendship
B. Recognition of Friends and Family
C. Recognition of Community Service
D. Recognition of Business
E. Recognition of Friends and Family
F. Recognition of Business
G. Recognition of Community Service
H. Recognition of Leadership and Friendship

XIII. Adjournment

Thank you for attending GVO's Last Meeting. Gary loved you all.

The Celebration of a Legend... Rights Activist... Mentor... Leader... Challenger... Role Model... a Friend for Life.

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