Interview with Katy Caldwell
Brooke English

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Katy Caldwell: I grew up, uh, in Houston, Texas, actually, I grew up in Bellaire –

Brooke English: Mm hmm.

KC: Uh, uh, born and raised here, uh, when to college here at University of Houston, um, had pretty much the normal, um, ‘60s, ‘70s, here, uh, um, childhood. It was very involved back then. The, I started, uh, actually what kind of inspired me and got me hooked into politics was, um, during, when I was in college, I volunteered at the International Women's Conference which was here in Houston. Um, and that showed me that there were lots of avenues out there for women, um, to be leaders, to, to, in professions that were beyond teaching, medicine, um, law school, that there were lots of different, different ways that, um, women contributed, and that inspired me. I ended up, I was involved in Women's Political Caucus in, in Philadelphia, and then I was involved in political caucus, um, here in Houston for a, for a number of years. So, it was, it was interesting. We screened candidates, we endorsed candidates based on their views on women's issues, on equal rights, on, uh, and on choice, were our, pretty much our main, our main screening, um, issues. So, the whole time also though, I have always been involved in politics. Back in college, and in, and after I got out, um, I've been involved in Democratic Party politics. So, I was involved at U of H and uh, and in student politics, and, um, uh, so, I've always had, that, um, in the background. So, I volunteered a lot at political campaigns. That's how I met a lot of my friends, that kind of is how my social life evolved as a young adult, was through volunteering on various political campaigns.

Q: What led you to run for political office?
KC: I wanted to make a difference in my community. Um, I, uh, uh, was, you know, interested in the whole political process. I, I got involved in some of the public policy work, um, when, in through my volunteer activities, and, uh, I thought that I would be a good voice representing my neighborhood that I lived in, um, first as a state rep, and I ran for that and lost, um, but it was a really good experience. And then, um, 2 years later, I ran for county treasurer, since I had a background in, um, in finance and financial services. I, um, was, uh, did get elected at that time, and that was when Ann Richards was elected governor.

BE: Mm hmm.

KC: And, as I always say, in with Ann Richards, out with Ann Richards, so 4 years later when I ran for re-election, um, it was a Republican sweep of ’94 –

BE: Mm hmm.

KC: George W. was elected governor and Richards was out, and there was a huge sweep through the whole county, not a single, um, uh, county-wide elected official, judge, anybody, um, survived that, um, survived that election. Everybody went down. We all went down
together. Um, uh, during this time, or, after I got, um, un-elected, um, in '94, the board, I had
been involved here at Montrose Clin, then Montrose Clinic, now Legacy, as a volunteer starting
back in 1987 when my best friend got diagnosed with HIV. And, so we volunteered. I stayed
volunteering, I volunteered with several other fundraiser organizations around HIV, um, uh, had
been always involved politically with the LGBT community and then just the L and the G
community was what we referred it to, referred to as, um, and, I, uh, through politics and all that
was, that, that was where I was. In '94, the Board of the Montrose Clinic then asked if I was
interested in being executive director here. I said no, because I wanted to go do this, pursue a
different angle and stay in the public-policy world and lobbying world. Um, then in '96, they
came back to me and said, "You know, the last person we hired didn't work out. Would you be
interested?" And at that point, I kind of decided I didn't like being self-employed - so I, um, took
the position. Uh, then I figured I'd be here 3 or 4 years. That was almost 20 years ago, so, um,
here I am, and it's been great. Um, it, it, it's truly is, um, what I was meant to be.

Q: What accomplishment are you most proud of and why?
KC: I think probably I'm most proud of becoming a family-qualified health center. Uh, we were
one of the first ones of the, first LGBT HIV clinics in the country to become one. Um, there
were actually, um, four of us that did it, um, and we were the only one not on the East Coast.
Um, everybody else was on the, uh, was, uh, wh, Fenway in Boston did, uh, Calimone in New
York, um, Chase Brexton in Baltimore, and then us, and we were the only ones that did that.
Um, it was not easy in that time. It was us, we, it was a very painful transition for our board,
um, and, but we knew, but the board knew that we needed to do it, make a change because we
could not go on with our fund-, with our funding structure the way it was. We would not
survive. Uh, and we knew we had by that time, about 3,000 HIV patients, that if we didn't have
the Ryan White Care Act, we were not going to be able to take care of, um, and none of us
wanted to do that. But, changing to an FQHC was not easy. Um, and, because, and I think, there
were two reasons, um, uh, our board was still very heavily grass-roots, very heavily, um,
invested in the, um, HIV community and the LGBT community, and suddenly, we were looking
at something where we would have to see people other than, um, those, those populations. Now,
the truth is, we were already seeing them. Uh, because of where we were located, um, many
people were comfortable coming to us whether they were gay or straight, uh, HIV positive or
negative, so we did have people who came anyway. Um, and, we were also known as an STD
clinic, so we always had a lot of people that have come here because that's what we're known for.
Um, and, but the board had to come with grips with the fact that, that, that meant we were gonna
look at, at people other than serving that, those communities. I think the ones that hit hardest
were people who either, had, were HIV-positive and had lived through the really bad times in the
'80s and the '90s of HIV. I think they, they were, struggled with it the most, and I, I really think
it was part of the grief process. Um, suddenly we were taking this institution that had cared for
their loved ones and for their friends and saying that we are going to do something different.
Um, there was a feeling of abandonment, I think, wi, I know, for some people. Um, we've never
abandoned the gay community, never will, as far as, at least as long I'm here, and um, I, uh, we
have that commitment, but it was still very, very difficult. We lost board members who didn't
want to be part of us anymore. We had community members, um, that were very unhappy, um,
but, uh, it, it, I am convinced it was the absolute right thing to do. Um, I, I firmly believe that
had we not made that change, we would not be here today, um, because we were so dependent
on grant funding and that grant funding is getting smaller, and is being shifted into other, into
other areas. And the FQHC has given us the backbone, um, to, to, financial backbone, to do all the things that we do on our team. Probably the other, the second thing I'm most proud of, uh, is our response during Hurricane um, uh, Katrina and Rita, um, with New Orleans. Um, we, during that time, we were one of the first, we, um, were the place to go for Katrina, um, people flee, fleeing the city, um, and down at the Astrodome, our staff was there at the Astrodome, um, helping, uh, to identify, both gay, gay, um, uh, people who were there and, um, and people living with HIV so that we could get them into care, so that we could get them the medications that they needed. We saw 600 patients, um, that came from New, directly from New Orleans on the busses. And, um, we also for about 6 mo, about, about 3 to 4 months, housed, um, the New Orleans AIDS task force, um, also known as NO AIDS, and, um, their staff office did it out of here, we gave the, the, the infrastructure that they had lost so that they could keep operating and so that that organization did not go under. And, um, I'm very proud that they did not go under. They're thriving today, um, and, a, a large part of that was because of what we did to support our friends, uh, in New Orleans. Uh, one amusing story from it is, I got a call in the middle of the night, uh, from, uh, from Tori Williams who runs the Ryan White Planning Council, works at the county. And she, uh, I get this voicemail that says, uh, "Katy, the, the, uh, prostitutes have set up shop on the fourth floor at the top of the Astrodome, and we don't have any condoms, and nobody will let me buy condoms, so can you bring us condoms?" So, I sent my staff over the next day with, you know, several cases of condoms to the, uh, Astrodome because they needed condoms to have safest, uh, you know, it was pretty funny.

Q: What's your biggest takeaway from working as executive director?
KC: Never give up.

BE: Never give up.

KC: Never give up.

BE: Why do you say that?

KC: Um, I would say never give up, and the second would be, never forget your roots. Um, so, never give up and never forget your roots. Never give up, meaning we've had the doors shut on us numerous times, for various funding sources, for, for, they told us we couldn't do it, they, meaning the various health departments, other organizations, um, many times they told us, um, it was flat out because we were gay, um, or we represented the gay community and the HIV community that we couldn't be a part of something. Um, I was told numerous times we would never become a family qualified health center by the state, by, um, the state association, um, by some of the federal government people, um, but yet we became one. Um, and it was persistence that did it. Um, never forget your roots, I'm a, a firm believer in that. Um, we were started by a group of gay men, um, responding to a need in the community. We've never forgotten that. We, we will always be rooted in the LGBT community, um, and, uh, I, I, I've, believe that. Um, and believe firmly that, that that's what we do, um, and that if we had to shut down, if we had some big disaster happen financially and we had to shut down clinics, um, they LGBT clinic that we have here and the HIV clinic would be the last to go, not the first.

Q: What is something that you feel like people don't ask you about very often?
KC: I, uh, you know, something, uh, I have led a very interesting life, and I have been in lots of places, and gone lots of places, and done lots of things that people look at me and go, "Oh my God." Uh, I am a straight woman who has lived a large part of my life, um, w, working in and socializing in predominantly the gay-male community, um, and, um, I think because of that, uh, I bring an extra sensitivity to, um, to all, um, populations, not merely the gay community. Um, I, I view the, the gay rights, the LGBT rights, um, as the Civil Rights Movement of our, of my time, um, I was involved in the first, um, uh, equal, well it wasn't quite an equal rights ordinance, but it was the ordinance of 1985. And, called, and the straight slate ran against us. I was very involved politically, and, and working on that campaign and, um, as a volunteer and, um, so, I, I, I, I – It is different, living as a, as a straight woman in a, in, and serving the, the gay community, and I have to realize where my boundaries are. Um, and where the line is, is drawn. I am not a gay person, so I will never know what the true discrimination that a gay person gets, or person living with HIV, because I do not have HIV, um, but I, I have to work to be incredibly sensitive and make sure that, that, that everything we do here reflects, um, the, the community and, um, I am not the final arbiter on, on wording and brochures, on photos, on, on all, I, I make sure that we involve, um, people who identify with the community, or with part of that community, um, as, as, as the final arbiter in those, on those decisions, whether it's a brochure, or a poster, or whatever. Um, so, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I've, I have also, like I said, recognized that I'm not, that I'm not gay, and that I, and that I have put very clear boundaries around that. Um, I, as, I've been a member of the gay, of the LGBT Political Caucus since it was called the Gay Political Caucus, um, um, yet, I, I am a member, I've never run for the board. Multiple times they've asked me to be on the board, um, I, I, I think that is, um, uh, not where I'm most effective. Um, also I believe it, it should be comprised of people of that community. Um, and while I'm, um, in and around it, I'm not, I am, I am not, uh, a, a, a, I am not queer. Um, so, uh, most people think I am, uh, and a lotta people do, uh, one, uh, woman who, uh, I love her to death, Lori Jean who runs the LA Gay and Lesbian Center – um, I, I was married for 23 years, I've been divorced – but, uh, when we were at a conference and my future ex-husband came up to me and, and said something and, and I introduced, um, him to Lori, and Lori looked, looked straight at me and said, "Oh my God, you're a closet heterosexual," and, and my ex-husband and I look, we were not ex at the time, we both just busted out laughing and, uh, and said, "Oh yeah, I guess so," I said, "You never asked, and I never said," so, uh, um, so we all had a good laugh over that. Uh, uh, over the years, so, um, and then, of course, when I got divorced people thought, uh, oh well I was, uh, that I was getting divorced 'cause I really was a lesbian, I was finally coming out of the closet, and that, uh, a big rumor went around that I left my husband for Sue Lovel, um, and because we've always been friends, um, and she was really good friends with my ex-husband too, so, uh, it was really funny, and Sue and I thought that was hilarious, um, because I did not leave my, uh, husband for Sue. Um, but it was funny, so, uh, so yeah, but it is, but it is different, and, and I think anybody that works in the community the way I do has to, we, you do have to figure out where your boundaries are, and where your knowledge extends and where it stops.