

# GLAMA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT



**PARTICIPANT:** Lea Hopkins

**DATE:** November 19, 2017

**LOCATION:** Lea Hopkin's home in Leawood, Kansas.

**INTERVIEWER:** Austin R. Williams

**BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:** Lea Hopkins was born in Kansas City, Kansas in 1944 and graduated from Sumner High School in 1962. She was the first African American bunny at the Kansas City Playboy Club and modeled with the Barbizon Agency. After moving to New York, she returned to Kansas City and co-founded Kansas City's Christopher Street organization and the Gay Injustices Fund. She also helped to organize the first Gay Pride Parade in Kansas City, as well as Memphis, Tennessee. She served in numerous activist organizations including the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and she is also the author of numerous books of poetry.

**SUBJECTS DISCUSSED:** Coming out, Anita Bryant, HIV/AIDS, the Gay Injustices Fund, Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), abortion, the National Organization for Women (NOW), Liberty Memorial, Christopher Street, Kansas City's first Gay Pride Parade, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), the Lesbian and Gay Community Center of Kansas City, the Niles Home for Children, Emanuel Cleaver, Joanne Collins.

**VIDEO AVAILABILITY:** QuickTime

**AUDIO AVAILABILITY:** MP3

**LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:** 2:20:47

**RESTRICTIONS ON USE:** None

**TRANSCRIPTION PROVIDED BY:** Pioneer Transcription Services/Austin R. Williams

**AUDITED BY:** Austin R. Williams

**ACCESSION NUMBER:**

Transcription of this oral history was made possible by a generous grant from  
the UMKC School of Graduate Studies

## Lea Hopkins Interview

Austin Williams: All right. Welcome! Today is November 19, 2017. My name is Austin Williams and I am the interviewer. This is part of the GLAMA Oral History Project. I spell my name A-U-S-T-I-N W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S. And I'm here with Lea Hopkins, and if you could say your name and spell your name.

Lea Hopkins: Lea Hopkins. L-E-A H-O-P-K-I-N-S.

AW: All right. And essentially we're going to be covering a lot of ground today, but to start with if you could just tell us where you're from, when you were born, and maybe just a little bit about your early years. And then eventually I think we're going to kind of build toward—well, maybe when you first realized that you were a lesbian and, and the coming out process for you was, you know, I think maybe a gradual one?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And however you kind of want to just guide us through your earliest years, and we'll take it from there.

LH: Okay. I was born in 1944 in Kansas City, Kansas, to Laura and Charles Hopkins. I'm an only child; no brothers, sisters, just me. Went to—graduated from—went to Northeast Junior High School, graduated from Sumner High School in 1962, and realized that I was gay when I was 14. That was my first inkling that I was different from my girlfriends, friends that I went to school with, that I was attracted to women. And in the beginning it wasn't sexually at 14; I just enjoyed the company of women more than men—conversationally, spiritually—it just, I felt wholer, if that's a word, in women's company than I did in male company.

AW: Okay.

LH: It's like we were always coming from the same space. Women had the same problems, you know, for conversations and all of that. But being Afro-American, coming from the Afro-American community, that was not something you talked about. That was not something that you even thought about discussing with anyone, especially not your parents because it was such a taboo in the Afro-American community. All through my coming out period, all the years 14 and on, you just didn't talk about it, so I had no point of reference. There was no one I could talk to; there was no one I could tell. So you just keep it to yourself, and you go on from there, go through school, go through the whole process.

Graduated from high school and I went to Pittsburg State in Pittsburg, Kansas. I was there for a year, and I went as a physical education major because I knew that's where the lesbians were. Well, that's not necessarily true. [*Chuckles.*] And after getting a deviated septum in my nose and some other injuries, I thought this is kind of rough and maybe this is not my major that I'm supposed to have. So I also realized when I was going to

Pittsburg that if I stayed for the four years, that college education wasn't going to give me anything I was going to need further in my life.

AW: Okay.

LH: So I was not going—and my grandmother on my father's side had paid for my tuition because my grandfather on my father's side was a professor. So they really wanted me to go to college and she really wanted me to get an education, but I just—I knew in my heart that all the studies that I'm doing would have nothing to do with my future as an adult. So after the first year I left. Yeah.

AW: Wow. And—just there—so after Pittsburg, and then having read the *Essence* article—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: -when is it that you decide to go to New York? Or when did you go to New York?

LH: I went to New York in 1980.

[Note: there seems to be some confusion here. LH returned to Kansas City from New York upon the birth of her son in 1974].

AW: Okay, okay. So, sorry, yeah, that's right. I've got to back up. After Pittsburg, then what is it that you do next after that?

LH: After Pittsburg, I—that was when I got the job at the Playboy Club.

AW: That's right.

LH: After I left school. And it was so ironic because I wasn't sure what I was going to do, and I was looking for a job. And when you're from Kansas City, Kansas, back in the day, and you come on the bus to go downtown Kansas City, Missouri, that was special. So you dressed up to get on the bus to come downtown to where all the better stores were and that. One of my classmates, Jo Marva Garth [*phonetic*] was on the bus and we started talking. She had just quit her job as a secretary at the Playboy Club so she knew they were looking for a secretary. So I called them, made an appointment, and I went in, and that's how I got the job. Applying for a secretary job and I'm talking to the manager of the club and he is sitting there just staring at me and staring at me. And I was like: What is the problem? I don't understand what the problem is. He got in touch with the bunny mother, which every club had, called her in and said, "I think Lea would be a bunny. I think she would work." He was German, and they're talking back and forth, and I'm like—but I noticed that he always kept his eyes kind of right here—kind of right in there. And I was like, "Hmm, okay." So she interviewed me and I got the job.

What I didn't know at the time was that the national NAACP had sent out a—I don't know what you'd call it—but they had got in touch with Hugh Hefner and said we want

to see an Afro-American face in all of your clubs. And that happened as—when I got the job. So that was also part of the reason that I got the job and was the first Afro-American bunny at the Playboy Club. And it was so ironic because the training is rigorous. You know I remember to this day my training, all of it. How to order drinks. What you need to do. But when I first started in training, a lot of the other bunnies were helping me. I'll carry the tray. I'll get this. I'll do that. And I thought something is wrong; this is not working. So I talked to the bunny mother and I told her that I didn't like it; I didn't appreciate it. I'd got the job, so what's the problem? And that's when I found out about the NAACP, that they had said there has to be, and there will be, or we will picket your Playboy Clubs, nationally.

AW: Interesting.

LH: Yeah.

AW: Let me make a slight adjustment while I ask you a question about— [AW *adjusts the position of the camera*] sorry, let me make sure I've got this just right—all right. Perfect.

That's interesting what you just kind of said about lower expectations is what I think you were referring to—

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: -as far as those other waitresses and that.

LH: Yeah.

AW: And I'm curious—maybe we'll maybe kind of incorporate that as we talk later about the ways in which either as a black woman or as a lesbian though—that also factored in as far as these lowered expectations maybe when it comes to like, you know, family or motherhood or something like that.

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: But I—staying chronologically, the Playboy Club, you were there for a few years?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Right. And for those, the person transcribing this, we were just talking about you were hired in 1960—about I don't want to—was it about 1966? Or does that sound about right?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*], '66, '67—somewhere in there, yeah.

AW: Right, yeah. So somewhere in the, I guess, in the later '60s perhaps.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Since we're there, let me ask you did that time period and for instance—I wasn't going to ask about this but it just—the Vietnam War—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: -and I mean so did that have any impact on you? The counter-revolution that was occurring at the time or—?

LH: No.

AW: Okay.

LH: Mm-mm [*negative*]. It was like that's not my fight.

AW: Okay.

LH: That's not my issue. You know the higher powers that are sitting in Washington, D.C., will handle that.

AW: Okay. And so then as—I believe at some point in the *Essence* article, it had talked about that—and I should ask, throughout this time at the Playboy Club—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: -you were not—

LH: Out?

AW: Yeah, right.

LH: No. No, no, no, no, no.

AW: Yeah. And were there any particular reasons for that?

LH: I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready to come out. Possibility that I might lose my job, and I needed the job. And I had absolutely no one to talk to about that. You know when you don't have—as a young, gay person, you don't have any outlet at all to talk to someone about what's going on because finding out that you are gay is a life change. Because everything you've heard is so negative and so defamatory that you don't want to tell anybody until you are—until you're ready for the fight. That's the only way I can put it. So I stayed in the closet; didn't tell anybody; didn't tell friends. No one knew anything about it. No one knew.

AW: Yeah.

LH: And that's why I, after I left the club, I modeled in Kansas City with the Barbizon Agency that was here out of New York. I was the first Afro-American model they hired. And I loved the job, still in the closet. You know, still dealing, still not telling anyone. And that was one of the reasons that I decided this isn't working for me. I have to leave Kansas City because I was known as the bunny. I was known as the model. You know this is who—this was my persona in all of Kansas City. *And now you're going to tell people that you're gay? You're not ready to do that.*

That is why I left, and fortunately one of my best friends owned a dress shop in downtown Kansas City called Marcia's Dress Shop. And she was going to New York on a buying trip, and she asked me if I wanted to go. And I said yes. And I went on this buying trip with her, and I met this woman named Jackie Hassel [*phonetic*]. I will thank her for the rest of my life. We talked. We bought clothes, come back to Kansas City. And Jackie said to me, "Why are you living in Kansas City? You seem more sophisticated than Midwest. You should move to New York." I came back and I thought about that. And I thought, *You know what? Maybe this is the answer I've been waiting for.*

I was back in Kansas City about three or four months and I had Jackie's phone number. I picked up the telephone and I called her. And she said, "Hello." I said, "Hi, Jackie. This is Lea." She said, "Where the hell are you? I expected you to be back in New York by now." And I told her as a matter of fact, I bought my round—I bought my ticket last week, but I thought I'd call you and let you know I was coming. She said, "What flight? And I'll meet you at the airport." It just all fell into place. I bought the ticket before I even made the phone call. So I know there was providence in there. *This is your move. This is what you need to do. You need to leave the Midwest, get out of here, because by that point mild depression was setting in. You know, this is who I am. I know now that I am absolutely gay and a lesbian, but I'll never ever come out in Kansas City; I just won't.*

AW: Right.

LH: So that's why I moved to New York.

AW: Wow. And obviously, you have a lot of name recognition around here, and with this being an oral history for the Gay and Lesbian Archives of Mid-America, it's interesting to talk about. So in addition to this being your home and the personal connections, did you also just feel the challenges that a lesbian or gay person in the Midwest might face versus New York City?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: The idea was that was the place where you could go finally be yourself?

LH: Yes. And being Afro-American there was—that wasn't even a question, you know. At that time, and I'm sure in some Afro-American churches to this day, homosexuality is not discussed, and if it is, it's in a very negative way. And Afro-Americans, our backgrounds, is the church. This is your gathering place; this is your family core. Everyone knows your family; everyone knows your grandma, grandpa, generations, whatever. And that was not open for me to even like go to a pastor and say, you know, "We need to talk and there's something I need to say." It would have been horrendous for me and my family at that time.

AW: Right.

LH: So my only option was to leave.

AW: And we're going to talk about New York—but since factoring in religion and when we talked earlier before we were recording about the work that you go on to do with the Metropolitan Community Church—was your family religious and were you religious at that time?

LH: Yes.

AW: Okay.

LH: Yeah. I was—I was baptized as a Methodist and I was baptized as a Baptist because my grandmothers went to different churches. So I went to church with my grandmothers, and I got baptized at two different denominations. But it just wasn't—it just—I didn't feel comfortable.

AW: Okay.

LH: Yeah.

AW: And so to get comfortable or—you go to New York—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: -and I don't want to lead, but within the *Essence* article—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]

AW: --just a great article and it was very in depth, and you talked quite a bit actually about challenges at that time. You had just talked about depression setting in and in the article, it actually talked about alcohol and how that was kind of linked. To maybe help someone understand, especially a young person today that coming out—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: —in the age of social media, everything kind of comes out really quick.

LH: Yes.

AW: But it's not when you went to New York, and then you were just like—now you're out. I mean, you were still struggling with your identity, right?

LH: Yes, very much so.

AW: And what were some of the—

LH: Very much so.

AW: --changing points or key things or experiences in New York?

LH: First I was Jackie's roommate. We lived in Fort Lee, New Jersey. I was finding a job, so I got a job in the garment district as a secretary. Fortunately, I knew shorthand and I could type, so I figured that'll be the easiest job for me to get is to be a secretary. But socially, there—I was like on an island by myself. And when I first started venturing out from friends that I had made in New York, like friends on the job, and Jackie knew people and I ended up meeting some of her friends, I wasn't about to tell any of those people that I was gay or lesbian. But I did tell Jackie. She needed to know because we were living together. And she was fine with that.

AW: Okay.

LH: But she was the only person who knew. And my first introduction into going out per se to gay bars, gay restaurants, and those kinds of things, was only with gay men.

AW: Ah.

LH: I wasn't ready to cross that threshold yet because the only images I had ever seen my entire 14 years to whatever were women who dressed like men. There's the butch; there's the fem. Like there's the man and the woman, the husband and the wife. And none of that fit me at all. I've always worn makeup. I was a lipstick lesbian before they came up with the word. No one looked like me; no one dressed like me. So I thought, "Well, that's not going to work if I go to a woman's bar." I'm going to hang out with gay guys.

And one of the guys that worked at the agency was gay and we just started talking and I said, just one day offhand, it was a Friday. And I said, "What are you doing when you get off work?" And he said, "I'm meeting some friends of mine." I said, "Really? Are you going to go out for cocktails?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Hmm." He said, "Would you like to come?" And I said, "I would love to." So I went with him, met his friends at this man's gay bar. And he informed me out of the clear blue sky, "I knew you were gay." I don't know where he got that from. I had no idea. So that was my first



introduction socially, and that entailed a lot of liquor, a lot of cocktails, and I just fell into that: Go out after work, meet people, drink, drink, drink, drink, drink, get up in the morning with a hangover, go back to work. Friday—

AW: Hmm. A lot of people, yeah, go ahead.

LH: Friday, same story—same story. I left the agency, got another job in the—at the restaurant, Restaurant Associates, so I worked there for a while, but it just continued and continued. And I was like, you know, *this has got to stop. You need to get a grip.* So I decided on my own I was going to go to my first lesbian bar. It was called Cookie's. So I went home, got dressed, and I'm going to Cookie's because I'm a lesbian. And I walked in and I saw the exact stereotypes that I knew. And for them—I don't know how to put this—I'm very independent. If I'm going to go out by myself, I have the money to pay for my drinks. Everything's covered; not a problem. I just want to go and whatever. And I guess they envisioned me as this alien Afro-American woman. I walked in, I sat down, I ordered my drink, didn't necessarily want to talk to anybody, whatever. I'm not fem; I'm not butch. I'm not playing the roles; it's not happening. Don't talk to me. And I guess that was the aura that was around me when I first started going. And they were like, what's up with her? We don't understand, you know. She doesn't have a partner. She's from the Midwest, you know. Just slowly talking to different people, got friends or whatever, and I was like, *Wow! I'm not going to fall into either one of those roles. So what are you going to do?*

And the best thing that ever happened to me was to meet women and listen to their history of why there is a butch and why there is a fem. I knew that I was a lesbian when I was 14. There are gay women who prefer the male side psyche; that works for them. And then there are women like me that look like me that like the other psyche as the feminine woman. And I heard stories about beatings and getting your fem home in New York City at night and men following you in cars. You're making sure that she gets into the apartment or into the house; then you're on your own. You're basically on your own. And the stories that I heard from these courageous women were amazing that they even survived. You know, they were picked up; they were beat; they were dumped on the street. You get home the best you can. You get up the best you can. You get up the next day and you go on with your life. And this didn't change these women from being butch women and wearing the clothes that they wore. They knew who they were. That is what I should have been able to hear when I was 14. The information just wasn't there.

So once I got it, I still to this day don't identify as butch or fem. I'm either-or, depending on the situation, you know. If pretty is the situation for pretty, I'll do pretty. If getting in your face to get my point across or tell you to stop doing what you're doing because it's wrong, that's the other side. So I'm both. I identify as both. But the best thing I ever did was to sit and listen to these women's stories about their lives and meet butch women who bound their breasts. I'd never heard about this in my life—ever, ever, ever—to look more male. And one of my best friends was Bobby [*phonetic*]. And Bobby was a six foot two woman, butch woman, who totally dressed male, bound her breasts to be more male, and had a fem partner. And she was Afro-American and her partner was

Caucasian. And they became my best friends, storytellers, and getting me into the community and taking me different places. It was wonderful, but it took a long road to get there. But alcohol was part of the problem, and depression was part of the problem. Because when you don't have anyone you can talk to, you have no one out there that you can explain to them what you're feeling. You know, maybe I'm gay; maybe I'm not. You don't have anyone you can even make that conversation with because you're going to die; you're going to burn in hell because you're gay. And the bible said so.

AW: Okay, so clearly, a defining, turning point in your life. I mean going to New York and—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Can I ask you just real quick, can we scoot your chair just like an inch that way? I know there's that—

[*Crashing sound as chair bumps into lamp.*]

LH: Whoops!

AW: It's all right. That's my fault.

LH: Is that it?

AW: Yeah, no, that's perfect. Yeah, because you were kind of starting to lean in some way that, yeah—that's perfect.

So with, yeah, New York—you then come back to Kansas City, but I think it's—I think Jason, your son—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Is that what ended up bringing you back to Kansas City?

LH: Yeah.

AW: How would you—however you would like to talk about coming back to Kansas City, but now clearly, you're coming back as an expectant mother?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Right? And, as openly—

LH: Gay.

AW: Right.

LH: A lesbian woman. The last job I had when I was in New York, back to my friend Jackie. Jackie was Assistant Director of the restaurant department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And she had a secretary and the secretary quit. And I was working in the garment—working in the restaurant business, and Jackie called me and she says, “I need a secretary. Come apply for the job.” And I was working at the Metropolitan Museum as her secretary, which was wonderful, absolutely wonderful. And then the restaurant director—the company was called Restaurant Associates. And I really, really loved it. It was—opened a whole ‘nother world of art and whatever, you know, to me, but I was out to her—not to the job, not to the job.

And for some reason, I think I was there maybe two years, and I don’t know what it was. I just say it was a sign—it was a sign from God. I got this urge to have a child. And when I was—let’s backtrack. When I was still in Kansas City, I think I was around 22, I got pregnant, and I had an abortion. And I know that those feelings then had something to do with that. And the only person that knew this was my mother because she ended up taking me to the hospital. And that’s another—that’s another thing I don’t—you know there are certain things you fight for the rights of or whatever. I’m never going to be on that abortion train to say, you know, women should, women shouldn’t, whatever, because I remember laying on this white table in a room with a man with a light over my body giving me an abortion. I’ve never forgotten that. Unfortunately, it could have killed me, but it didn’t.

So I knew when I was working at the museum, I started having dreams and feelings and this kind of thing, and I was like, you know, *I really, really think I—not want to have a child; I need to have a child.* It wasn’t about I want to be a mother. *I—I need to have a child. Now, how are we going to do this? What are you going to do?*

Jason’s father was a very dear friend of mine. Straight. And he knew that I was gay. When I first met him, he was the manager of a gay bar, Italian. And I went to meet friends of mine at the bar. And I’m sitting at the bar, and this tall, gorgeous man walks by. And he turns around and he comes back. And he turns around and he walks back. And he comes over and he says, “Ah, excuse me.” And I said, “Yes.” He says, “Did you know this was a gay bar?” And I said, “Uh, I’m a lesbian; I’m meeting some friends.” And he just fell out laughing because the way I looked, the way I dressed, the way I speak, it’s like why is this straight woman sitting in this gay bar? And he owned the bar and had never seen me before. So we became really, really, tight, close friends. Knew him for at least about two years. And then all of a sudden, I just decided I need to have a child and Joe was going to be the donor. And I need to talk to him about that and so I did.

AW: Right.

LH: You know. *I want to get pregnant. You’re a lesbian, Lea.* “I want to get pregnant, and I’ve chosen you. You can say yes; you can say no. It’s up to you.” One sexual act, and I got pregnant. So I really feel that if I were not a lesbian and I were a straight woman, I’d probably have about nine or ten kids by now. It just—it took and it was and then I came

back to Kansas City. And I thought, okay, you're pregnant. My mother never imagined having a grandchild in her life. I was a businesswoman. I was working to make money. I was working to have a career. That goes on hold when you decide that you want to have a child. So when I came back here, that was like, okay, she's back; she's pregnant. What's going on with her now? Kind of thing. Had a conversation with my mother; informed her that I was a lesbian.

AW: And how was that conversation?

LH: Oh, I just basically told her, "I'm a lesbian. I've known it for years and years and years. The reason I went to New York was to come out and get it figured out before I came back. You're going to be a grandmother. If I were not a lesbian, you would not be a grandmother." It would have never happened with me as a straight woman because I didn't want children. I needed to have a child. I don't know where it came from, but I knew in my heart and soul. That—that was it. And she had a problem with it; she had a serious, serious problem with it. "I don't understand." Then we had conversations; we had arguments. Nothing vitriol. Just I said—bottom line I told her, "You don't have a choice. You're going to have a grandchild, and if you want to see the grandchild, you will accept me as the grown woman that I am, as the lesbian that I am. Otherwise you will never see your grandchild." It was very easy for me, very simple for me. *Now is the time—I'm living my life now. I've got the control I've been waiting to get for years and I'm not giving it up, not even for my mother. It's not going to happen.* Over time, greatest advocate I ever had. TV shows here; I was on the television here; I was on the radio here; I was in the newspaper here. She's clipping articles. She's calling friends: "My daughter's going to be on television and she's going to be on the news at 12 o'clock, and you need to turn on the television at 12 o'clock." Just I don't—I guess she went through whatever she went through to get to the other side. I was very close to my mom because I was an only child.

AW: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

LH: So it's like, this is my daughter; this is who she is. And once she got it together, it was great. Yeah, yeah. She's a neat lady.

AW: Fantastic. Yeah.

LH: Neat lady.

AW: And that's a good transition point to—and thank you for sharing. So now you're back in Kansas City.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And you've had two—I mean, I'm sure more, but these very life changing experiences and now you have a son and you are openly out as a lesbian.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And what is it—I guess without leading—that you start doing around—I think this is the mid-1970's now, right?

LH: Hm-hmm. Yup

AW: Okay. What are some of the earliest things that you become involved in? And then—and I am leading, in the sense of activism?

LH: Right.

AW: I know that. How do—how do we get there? What's that?

LH: The conversation we had earlier when you were here was that—"I'm back. I'm a lesbian; deal with it. Do not bother my child." That was the whole—when I came back, I was seriously out. I can handle that, but do not bring your prejudices and your attitudes toward my son. And I had to make that very, very clear in all of the spaces and all the places that I went. You know, "I'm Lea Hopkins; my son Jason. I'm a lesbian." All the schools that he went to—up front—"because you're going to see me in the newspaper. You're going to hear me on the radio. I'm Jason's mom; I'm the lesbian. You need to know up front. If you're going to have a problem with that, then you need to let me know." And I'd take my son to another school or whatever.

That's when I met—I went—I was a member of MCC, Metropolitan Community Church, Troy Perry's church here in Kansas City that he had founded. And Jason was baptized at MCC. He was the first child baptized at MCC, yeah, which was wonderful. So that—that was a safe place to be, Metropolitan Community Church. That's how I met Judith, Ken, and Michael, and they started Christopher Street. And asked me if I would like to get involved with politics or whatever. Well, I'm like, yes, you know. I came back to Kansas City and they had not even had a Gay Pride in Kansas City. And I was like, are you kidding? No Gay Pride Parade in Kansas City? I don't understand. It's like, okay, I need to get involved and they needed a spokesperson. They said, "Would you be?" I said "Sure, not a problem; I'll be the spokesperson."

And that's how I got involved with Christopher Street, and our first project was to have Gay Pride in Kansas City, to put together a Gay Pride in Kansas City. And I couldn't understand why it had never happened until I got the demographics of the lesbian businesses and the gay male businesses. There was no communication there at all when I came to Kansas City. The gay men's bars made all the money, always packed. That was that. And then lesbians don't spend that kind of money because of the jobs that they have; don't go out every night of the week, maybe on the weekend. So there was—there was just no communication at all between the owners here. And I had met all of them, eventually, like in the first year that I was back. And I thought, *this is crazy. This is not what this is supposed to be about.*

So that was one of my missions was to, number one, Christopher Street will have the first Gay Pride Parade in Kansas City. Number two, if you consider yourself a gay business, you will help pay for this. Otherwise, you're not a gay business; don't use the word. And that's how I approached all the gay businesses in Kansas City. You will give me money and we are going to have this. And every place I went, Jason was with me. You know, I don't have a sitter, whatever. Just loaded up, get the kid, get the stroller and off you go. So he was forever around. There was someone taking him here, taking him there. Potato chip crumbs, cherries, you name it, he's filthy. They've taken him playing and I thought what a wonderful community. Only to realize Jason was the very first baby child to even be immersed into the gay community of Kansas City because nobody was having kids.

AW: Right.

LH: Yeah. It's like, "Oh, yeah, we know Jason." He grew up in the gay establishments as I went about the business of doing what I did. And fortunately for me, I thought, *how am I going to do this?* Because I met with the gay men's owners on this side and there were only three lesbian bars in Kansas City at the time. And I thought, *oh, I got it. I know what I'm doing.* So I went to Pete, who owned a bar here, and I told Pete, I said, "Christopher Street's getting ready for a Gay Pride and we need money from the bars to do whatever." And the first thing she said was, "Have you gotten any money from the gay men's bars, from the other bars?" And I said, "No." She said, "When they put up some money, then I'll give you money and I'll talk to the other owners." I said okay.

So I had a meeting with one of the owners—Don, that owned The Cabaret. We had a meeting, set up a meeting, and I told him this is what Christopher Street's doing, so and so, and so forth. And he said okay. And I said, "And it needs to be paid for ahead of time to get a speaker in, have a place for them to stay, organize everything we need to do; it needs to be paid for ahead of time because I don't want to be in debt after the fact. And he said, "Well, have you talked to any of the lesbian bars?" And I said, "Yes. As a matter of fact, Pete gave me \$500. What are you going to give me?" He wrote a \$500 check. I immediately went over and talked to Pete and showed her a \$500 check. She wrote me a \$500 check. Now I have \$1,000.

Sometimes you've got to play the games to make it work. And I got money from all of the businesses. As a matter of fact, three of the busiest gay men's bars in Kansas City let me stand at their doors on a Saturday night. That's the busiest night. And I learned a long time ago that 100 one-dollar bills equal \$100. So if I'm standing at the door for an hour and I'm only asking for a dollar and you give me five, I'm ahead of the game. So that's how the first Gay Pride Parade in Kansas City got paid for. Some people gave me 10, gave me 20. Some people gave me ones. And I did it every Saturday for a month and raised over \$4,000.

AW: Nice.

LH: Yeah.

AW: There is so much to unpack there. Okay, that's great. For those watching this who are not familiar with the history, real quick, since we talked about Christopher Street.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And if you can speak to when you joined them, what Christopher Street's objectives were and why the name Christopher Street? I mean what were the objectives before you joined and then how—well, we know, obviously, what you would want to do immediately but, yeah.

LH: Well, Christopher Street was from New York's Christopher Street where they had the riots. And that's, in most major cities at that time, there was a Christopher something association or whatever. Main goal was to, number one, have Kansas City's first Gay Pride. Number two, get information out to young adults; have a place for them to call. We had phone banks; information, get information out. We did pamphlets; we did flyers at every event that we had. Just to get information out to the younger generation. One of our other main goals was to work in tandem with the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department.

AW: Oh.

LH: That had never happened. And for me it had to. Meeting with the Kansas City Police Department, letting them know, you know, "I'm Lea Hopkins. This is our group. This is what we're going to do." So and so, and so forth. Before Anita Bryant, which turned out to be very, very eventful because they already knew Christopher Street. "This is what they do. This is what they're about. We know." So when Anita Bryant did her orange juice tour and we knew that she was coming to Kansas City, Christopher Street, we phone banked, had—we had at least 50 people on the phone every day, calling, calling, calling. "Come out, downtown Kansas City; she's in town; you need to be there. You need to be there." Constantly for a month, a month before she got here, just working on it. I'd have a meeting with the Chief of Police at the time and I told him, I said, "We are going to be there. We're going to demonstrate, and you just need to know that we're going to be there." He said, "About how many people do you think'll be there?" I said, "I have no idea; I'm assuming maybe two, three hundred, but I want you just to know that we're going to be there and so you can have officers there just in case."

For me, for safety reasons, there were two young men in town, Frank and Len, [*phonetic*] and they own the Club Baths, and the gay community knows about the baths. They were very, very, very good friends of mine. And I got them to come with me to the police department because they both had guns and they were registered and they were going to be my security. But the police department needed to know that, yes, we have our guns. We are Lea's security. She's going to be our speaker. So it—everything was above board and we had no problems whatsoever, none. Well, as it turned out, over 2,000 some people showed up; it was the largest demonstration Kansas City had ever seen of any kind, let alone gay.

Anita Bryant refused to do a news conference with me, which was fine with me. Not a problem, Anita; no problem. With the airport—with the airlines boycotting orange juice, that was enough. Yeah, that was satisfaction enough for me. But the other thing with the Anita Bryant rally was, and we had a core group of about 30 people putting it all together from all Christopher Street plus any volunteers from the community. And I told them, I said, “When this is over, we’re not leaving until every piece of paper, every cigarette butt, every wrapper is off the street and cleaned before we leave.” I did not leave Municipal Auditorium until three o’clock in the morning, and we walked that entire area because I will not have it to be said that those people came down here and they damaged this and they did blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It’s not going to happen on my watch.

AW: That’s an interesting—I mean that all is amazing. So that was important to you—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: --that the group—I guess is respectable the right word?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: You know that—

LH: I didn’t want to give the general public another reason to be negative about my community, you know. This is what they did and so on and so forth. It’s not going to happen on my watch.

AW: Good. Wow. And also, okay, two directions I want to go. Let me ask at the same time—I generally don’t know, in 1976 the Republican National Convention was held in Kansas City.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Did you personally do anything in the protest that took place outside of that because I think Anita Bryant came after that so...

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Okay.

LH: No.

AW: Okay. I was just curious.

LH: Yeah.

AW: So Anita Bryant in the late ‘70s, a very big, key demonstration here in Kansas City.



LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: In a little more of a general sense, could I ask about—you talked about your community...

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: ...and there is maybe a sense for people looking from the outside—the question I have is whether or not you felt as though there were natural alliances between gay men and lesbian women or if there were tensions within those communities that—was there a dynamic that kind of had to be, you know, managed, I suppose?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. Yes, there was. Back to raising the money and getting that together. I remember being at Don's bar and with friends and we're sitting at a table. An Afro-American came in, we're here; Caucasians were there, and I was like wha—I don't under—I don't get it. We're all gay. I don't understand. So knowing me as well as I know me, a record came on that I wanted to dance, and I just went over to one of the groups and asked the guy to dance and he got up and we danced. So I'm assuming—I don't know if that ever happened before, but it didn't matter to me. I mean we are one family. We are fighting the same fight. If they hate me because I'm a lesbian, they hate you because you're gay. We're all in this bucket together, so we're either going to win together or lose together. And that was my whole attitude when I came back from New York and one of the reasons that I got involved.

But, yes, there was a political dynamic because when I came back from New York, only the gay male business owners did anything in Kansas City. Lesbians were not involved at all, not at all, until I came back. And I thought this is—this doesn't make sense to me so we're going to have to do something about it. And that was working with Christopher Street and doing the different things that we did. It has changed over the years. I don't remember the last time that I went out to a gay club or whatever. You know that was then, this is now. You get older.

And I'm assuming that it has changed—it's changed a lot. And over the years because of one man in Kansas City and his name is Michael Burns, and Michael Burns owns Missy B's. And Michael has made tremendous strides in this city, uniting lesbians and gay men while he is the owner of a gay establishment. He's just phenomenal! He's one of my dearest friends, and he has worked so hard for a safe place, a place you can go, a place for you to have meetings. You know you're going to have it, you're going to have it here, you know. When the Orlando shootings happened, the first person out in the street was Michael. You know, "This is what we need to do. This is how we're going to do it. Get in touch with the police. Let them know." We have—they have the most unbelievable security I have ever seen at that one establishment. I mean you—you know what's going on around the entire block to make sure that gay people have a safe place to come. And the assistant manager is Dan Allen, and she's my ex-partner before Pat and one of my dearest friends. Yeah.

AW: That's great.

LH: Yeah. But Michael is—he's unbelievable; he really is. He's worked so, so hard and I mean it. He supported me years ago, you know. "Anything you need, Lea, let me know. Whatever you need, just let me know." Yeah, so it's—it's gotten better.

AW: I imagine so.

LH: But the information to get young people to have that sense of security about their living conditions, about their jobs, that's still lacking, and I'm sure it is all over the country.

AW: Some of the things that were in that *Essence* article that might—and I'm going to throw out a few things here.

LH: Okay.

AW: And then we can just talk about them in a broad sense and then maybe I'll bring up specific things again; however you want to go about it.

LH: Okay.

AW: But in the late '70s, I know that you go to the 1979 March on Washington.

LH: Yes.

AW: I know that when it comes to, for instance, the Equal Rights Amendment and women's organizations, that you were involved in that regard.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: I also know that there was something mentioned in that article, the Gay Injustices Fund.

LH: Ahh.

AW: About—I think that it had to do with legal matters.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And so maybe we should start with—since we have an event for instance—the 1979 March on Washington. You had said in that article as well that you weren't just about gay and lesbianism activism.

LH: Right.

AW: That it was—it was broader. So at that time, what are the other aspects of your activism?

LH: I got involved with NOW because of the lesbians that were involved in NOW right here in Kansas City. That's how I got involved with that organization, and I really enjoyed it a lot. They did a lot of good work here in Kansas City and nationally, leading up to the march. There's a lot of work that had to be done: Telephoning, mailing stuff, getting involved with other women organizations here in Kansas City, you know, that—I don't know how to put this—that don't have a problem knowing that gay women are now also involved in NOW because that was a chasm also. We always end up with these chasms of, you know, that I've never understood and never will.

But I made sure that I'm involved in NOW. "I am an out lesbian; this is what I've done; this is what I do. Can we work together?" And fortunately met some really unbelievably strong women in women's organizations here in Kansas City, predominantly Caucasian, not necessarily Afro-American, to get involved in NOW. Because in the Afro-American female community, NOW was a white women's organization and it really wasn't. That was the opinion in Kansas City. Nationally, not as much, but that was the opinion here in Kansas City.

AW: Can I ask you to clarify whether you're saying that that was the opinion of African American women or that was the opinion within NOW that it was a white women's organization?

LH: That was the opinion of Afro-American women as a whole.

AW: Okay.

LH: That I knew.

AW: Okay.

LH: You know, friends—my Afro-American girlfriends. They were never involved in NOW because—

AW: For instance—you tried to get them involved?

LH: Yeah, hm-hmm.

AW: --and that's why they—okay.

LH: Yeah. It's like, okay, well, I'm a woman, you know. And amazingly in 2017, we're still talking about what women get paid and what men get paid. So it's a never-ending battle, but you've got to be able to fight the fight. As a matter of fact, when they first started raising money for the march and I got this information, *I thought, I can fund-raise. I can do that; I can get money sent in.* I ended up—I don't know if I had the flu or a cold, but I remember sitting in my bed, and I am a business card collector of the nth degree. And I took every business card I had and I called every number on every business card that I

had for all of the gay rights, for all of the things—anything I've been involved in. And I just phoned and phoned and phoned and phoned. I ended being the highest fund-raiser for the March on Washington.

AW: [Laughs].

LH: And I'm sitting in bed with a box of tissues and a cup of hot tea. You know but—but you can take that on yourself. And this is what I hear when I watch the news about young people that are excelling in their sports or their communities or their hobbies or whatever. You know it's like the little boy with the orange juice. I mean who knew? That there's—the little boy wanted to raise money by selling orange juice. It's national now.

AW: Oh, I've missed it somehow.

LH: Yeah. It's—it's like outside of a grocery store and—no, it's lemonade.

AW: Oh, okay.

LH: Lemonade. That's what it is. Just a little idea—this is what we're doing and this is what we're raising money for. And all of a sudden it just catches on, and they're—I think it's Adam's Lemonade Stands or whatever it is, they're everywhere now, you know. One person can make a difference. And that's the message that we need to get out as, as gay people, you know, to that lonely little girl or little boy. We are here. We're here to support you, and you do make a difference. So that's going to be ongoing until you and I are no longer on the planet, you know, because it's still not the way it should be for gay youth.

AW: Absolutely. Yeah, very true.

LH: And the march was wonderful. But then it—

AW: Any particular memories of it?

LH: Just being there with all these women and the power of the togetherness—because it wasn't as expected to be as big as it was. You know women took off their jobs. You know they left their husbands and their kids at home and said, "I'm going to be in Washington, D.C., because this may never, ever, ever happen again. I'm going." And it was just phenomenal! I'll never forget it. It was absolutely awesome! Got the message across, but there's still work to be done on that even now.

AW: What—because I think the other aspect of that obviously is that, you know, the Equal Rights Amendment was a big part of that march, and it—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: --you know didn't pass and—

LH: Yup, yup.

AW: Yeah. Let me triple check my [unintelligible 00:58:38]. Okay, so go ahead.

LH: And it just struck me about getting involved with NOW and the thought that just flipped into my head was *I was a woman before I was a lesbian*. So, yeah, you've got to help there too. Before I even knew what a lesbian is and was, I was a woman. And this is what we're fighting for and that was the thought at the time. *Yes, I will joint NOW. And I will do whatever I can in any capacity to further our goals*. Yeah.

AW: And the other thing that I mentioned about the Gay Injustices Fund.

LH: Hmm, okay.

AW: If you can recall that and what was that? What were the objectives?

LH: Okay. I started the Gay Injustices Fund and I also raised money from the gay businesses to start it. And the reason I started it was if you were a young—you always—not because—no lesbians, but if you were a young gay male and you were leaving a gay bar, one, two o'clock in the morning, by yourself, you would be picked up by the police because they focused on gay bars. And you'd go to jail. And you had one phone call. Who are you going to call? You know if you are drinking age, okay, say 18, 21—you're going to call mom and dad? Don't think so unless they know you're out of the closet, okay? Do you have friends you can call? Maybe you do, maybe you don't. You've been picked up. You're in jail. Does anybody know you're even there?

So I—this happened to two young men that were friends of someone I knew. And I thought *Okay, I'm going set up the Gay Injustices Fund. It's going to be at a bank. This is where the money's going to go. They're going to have a phone number. All they have to do is pick up the phone and call*. So your one phone call will be to Lea Hopkins. And I've got lawyers on board, Thad Nugent, my heart—he doesn't live here anymore. Thad Nugent was an attorney, one of the best attorneys I've ever known at the time. And I did a conference and he was there. And one of the comments I made was when it comes to lawsuits that gays want to file, lawyers won't step up because it's a gay issue. And I remember we broke and we went to lunch. And he came over to me and he said, "Lea, my name's Thad Nugent. Can I talk to you?" He said, "Did I actually hear you say that lawyers won't take cases because so on and so forth." And I said, "It's absolutely true." He said, "Here's my card; call me any time." I would get the phone call, get the money down, call Thad. He's at the jail that morning; get this young man out. That's how it started.

AW: How long did that go on for?

LH: About four years. Yeah, about four or five years.

AW: Could you even ballpark how many people were assisted by that?

LH: God, I would say 200-ish.

AW: Oh, wow!

LH: Yeah.

AW: Wow.

LH: Yeah.

AW: Is anything about that in your collection or do you know of any records? Well, we can look through stuff later.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Yeah, that's just—

LH: I'm sure, I'm pretty sure there is and he [Stuart Hinds of GLAMA] may already have it.

AW: Okay.

LH: I'm not sure but I've got some—I'll look through some more stuff.

AW: We'll look for it.

LH: And the other thing, too, and this is back to Frank and Len from—for Anita, I'm getting these reports that—okay, I'll preface this with this. I don't have a problem with gay men's sexuality; never have. It's somebody else's business, okay? That they go to parks, that they go where—none of my business. I don't care; that's your life; live it. But for someone to have the audacity to go to the mall in Kansas City, Liberty Memorial, and get a baseball bat and try to beat your brains out, now you're stepping on my toes. And I'd heard about these occurrences happening so I called Frank and Len. And I said, "I want to ride with you guys." And they were marshaling the mall—I said, "I want to ride with you guys." And they're like, "Oh, Lea." I said, "No, I want to ride with you guys. I want to ride with you guys on the mall. I want to see for myself what's going on." And I rode with them for a month.

It is one, two, three o'clock in the morning and my girlfriend is at my apartment and she's watching Jason—my partner. And I said, "Okay, I'm on my way; I'm going to go up to the mall." And that—that's what was happening. Young, white men were arming themselves with baseball bats and catching young gay men and trying to beat them to death. And I said, "This is not right. It's no one's business; it's no one's business." So another time that I got in touch with the Kansas City Missouri Police Department, face to face. "I know this is happening because I have been there at two and three o'clock in the

morning. We have followed in our truck, pickup trucks and cars, and listened to the words being shouted out of these windows. What do you intend to do about this? You need to get some more police patrols up at the mall.” And I was told, not by the chief at the time, but this other officer just flippantly said, “But if they weren’t up there, it wouldn’t happen.” And I looked at him, I said, “And that is none of your business. You are here to serve and protect. Do your job.” And on that note, I got up and I walked out. And they did increase patrols at the mall. Yeah.

AW: Oh, wow. I got chills inside.

LH: Yeah.

AW: So the—the Injustice Fund— and there’s a number of different—however you would like to, if you could break down some of the legal challenges that a lesbian or gay person might face at that time, and you don’t have to exactly provide me specific examples as they pop to mind, but discrimination and harassment and what frequently gets referred to as “gay-bashing,” for instance, is a threat from society.

But specifically within legal—whether it be employment or whether it be housing—what were some of the challenges that gay and lesbians might face at that time?

LH: You had to stay in the closet. You know that was the only way you kept a job. That was the only way that you stayed in the apartment that you were in. And it was—it was so prevalent; it was just—it was insane. It was just insane. The young people that I know, 20’s, early 30’s—you know all of a sudden it’s like, “I came back to so and so and I don’t have a place to live.” What happened? “Found out I was gay.”

You know and sometimes entered the apartment, and take the furniture and the clothes and dump it on the sidewalk. So you come home to that because someone on your job found out you were gay and called your landlord or your job and informed them of that. “Well, did you know that he was gay? Did you know blah, blah, blah, blah, blah?” And it usually—it more often happened with gay men rather than lesbians. We tend to be a little more quieter of, you know—two women living together, no problem. You know they may be cousins; they may be mother/daughter. But it’s not seen that way on the male side. It’s not seen that way. You know this is not an uncle living with his 20-something year-old nephew. Don’t think so. And that—that’s a big difference. That it’s viewed that way.

But on the other hand, what do you do? Now you don’t have a place to stay. You call a lawyer; you call Lea and Lea gets you an attorney. And his name is Thad Nugent. Yeah. “I’ve got a case for you.” “Okay, Babe. What do I need to do?” And in the process of getting to know him and work with him, because he had a law firm, he pulled in associates of his to also help. And that’s—sometimes it really comes down to who you know rather than what you know. And I don’t know what I would have done without him. But he was always on call; he would take the cases; he would bring the landlords to court. You know win some, lose some, but at least you knew you had someplace to go,

you know. You had an outlet; you had someone you could call; someone who cared that you had a roof over your head. And the only reason that you had been kicked out is because you happen to be gay. Paid your rent on time; kept the place clean. I mean like everyone would want to live. But, “ah, he’s gay. I don’t want gays living in my establishment. You know I don’t want gays blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And you have no place to turn; you had no place to go.

I remember I got a phone call from a young man; this was during that time. And he worked at a Plaza Restaurant. And he got my number and he called me. And he said he wanted to meet with me. So I had him come to my house, and we’re talking. The manager of this restaurant was harassing him and harassing him; “You will lose your job if you don’t.” And so on and so on and so forth. And I asked him, the first thing I asked him I said how’s it make you feel? And he says, “I need my job, but I am not sleeping with this man, but I need my job.” I said, “I got you.” So I called the restaurant and I made an appointment to see the—not the manager, the owner of the restaurant. Set up an appointment and I went to see him at his office. He is not expecting—number one, he didn’t know that I was lesbian, but he also wasn’t expecting to see the woman that walked in that really had herself—her stuff together. And there’s one thing I’ve always done when I have a meeting with someone of supposedly authority in their office, I never sit in the chair that’s right across from your desk. That gives you the advantage. There’s always a chair here, and there’s always a chair there [*points to her sides*]. And if I’m in the room, you will turn. You’ve got to turn. I’m not doing that with you.

And I had a meeting with him, told him who I was, told him why I was there, gave him his manager’s name, and I said, “You will fire this man.” No—“First, you will warn this man.” This is a very popular restaurant on the Country Club Plaza. “If the warning doesn’t work, you will fire this man. You have one week. If it isn’t done, you will be boycotted for the rest of the month. I will have people with signs in front of your restaurant every single day.” The manager got fired, and I found that out from the young man who had contacted me in the first place. You know we as a community have to be willing to put ourselves on the line to step up for the less fortunate. And I’ve had the privilege of being that person on so many fronts, and I don’t take it lightly. I never have, and I never will.

AW: I don’t doubt you a bit. So chronologically, we have kind of gotten to the 1980’s now and I admitted earlier that as far as the—some of the things you were involved with, this is—I get a little sketchier in my head, but could I ask one thing that comes on the scene in—

June of 1981 is when the first reports come out about what at the time was referred to as a gay related immune deficiency—

LH: Mmm.

AW: --and eventually then a couple of years later, it gets referred to as AIDS.



LH: Mmm. Hm-hmm, hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: From a lesbian's experience, how did the AIDS epidemic change either the dynamic in Kansas City or people's relation to activism or—and maybe I should back up because it doesn't really come in great numbers until about 1985 in Kansas City—

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: --but how do you—I guess maybe we'll just start with—when do you remember hearing about AIDS and what were your initial thoughts and how did those thoughts maybe change over time?

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. I first heard about AIDS when I was living in New York and I was pregnant with Jason. Yeah. I was living in New York and I was pregnant with Jason, and I had for three years, I had part ownership in what they call a house on Fire Island.

AW: Okay.

LH: So I spent weekends on Fire Island, and Fire Island, basically, we got a few lesbians but a lot of gay men. So the majority of my friends at that time were gay men because every weekend, I couldn't wait to get off, get on the ferry, get over there, kind of relax for the weekend and then come back. And then I got pregnant and they're like—so I'm on the ferry, get off, like, “You've got to be kidding!” “Yes, I'm pregnant. Okay. So we can't have cocktails; we can have orange juice.”

Okay. And I continued to go and before I noticed that friends were missing, like certain gay men I knew, like knew well, were missing. It's like he didn't come out this weekend. Oh, okay. Missed the weekend going out, like the next weekend. And the—and I was going out all the time before I got pregnant. That was my weekend place to go. He wasn't feeling well; he's not coming out. Oh, okay. And then three people that I know well just aren't there anymore on Fire Island; they're just not there. And I thought and that's when the papers in New York start talking about trying to give it a name. And I thought *Okay, this is what's going on. My friends are dying. Wow.*

I never expected it to be as worldwide, as large as it became. It just seemed like there was something out there that was slowing killing a few gay men. You know, it wasn't like you go to Fire Island and there're 50 guys in the bar and two weeks later, 50 guys are gone. It was so gradual and so slow and just like I'm miss—I'm missing people. You know what's going on? And I would talk to my friends about that. It's like something's going on. And I'm, I'm preg—and before I was pregnant, it started happening. And then I'm pregnant so I know I'm coming back to Kansas City, and I'm missing people. And we're talking about it, but no one could really get a handle on what was going on. You know we just knew that people that we knew died or so and so was rushed to the emergency room at four o'clock in the morning. And when the different facial things started happening, I don't remember what they called them—

AW: Kaposi sarcoma.

LH: Yeah. Then you wouldn't see them at all because gay men didn't want you to know they had AIDS. So when that started, they just didn't come out at all. So you wouldn't see that. Maybe if that hadn't have happened that way, then you'd kind of go ah-hah! Something's going on, whatever. But I remember I'd made my reservations to come back to Kansas City, and I am about ready to pop. And I told my girlfriend, my partner, I'm going to Fire Island for my last time. Pregnant. And I got on the ferry [*very long pause*] and I remember going to the bar, the main social place that's on the island. And I made sure that every gay man in that place patted my stomach before I left. These were my friends, you know. I knew all about them; they knew all about me. And I refused to leave before because it was like me getting pregnant to them was like a celebration. You know lesbians don't get pregnant and go to Fire Island. Doesn't happen. So for me to make this decision, it was like a celebration for them to be part of something special. And I made sure that afternoon I spent there that every gay man in that bar patted my stomach.

AW: Thank you. That's very powerful.

LH: It's probably how I ended up getting that marvelous young man that was my son. Yeah.

AW: Truly.

LH: Lot of blessings, a lot of love. Yeah. And then when I came back here it was like, *Maybe AIDS hasn't hit Kansas City yet*. You know, because New York, hey. And I came back here and it was like, oh, okay. And I joined GLAAD; I was on their board. And I was a member of the board at the Gay Community Center when it first started in Westport; I was on their board. And just being around my peeps I'm noticing something's going on. Something's going on. And then I realized *Okay, it's—it has crossed the continent now. You have friends now, gay men that you know and love, who have AIDS. And what can we do?* I mean, you know, what can we do?

And my Michael Burns, again, got the bar owners together and said, "Okay, we've got AIDS going on here and that's how the free health clinic started and all these other things to help Kansas City. They pulled it together in a short period of time. It's got the right people; got the right doctor, Dr. Sharon Lee. I don't know what gay men in the Midwest would do without that woman; she is a miracle woman and she walks on water because she is a fighter and she's saving lives. And I've had the opportunity to meet her; I had the opportunity to speak with her at an AIDS function. She is phenomenal! I love this woman to death! Just—and I've lost friends because of AIDS, close friends who had been in my house that knew my son. They helped me raise my child, and they have died of AIDS.

I remember when, at St. Luke's Hospital where Jason was, the fifth floor is a cancer floor. And if you were on this side, there's a possibility. When you move to this side,

they know it's over; it's done. So he was on the—on the back side of five. Whole other story, this is going to be a book. Because that was the most phenomenal thing that ever happened to me that he was as sick as he was, and that whole story is a whole other story. But he was there and then he—they—I got to the hospital and they said, “We’re going to move him.” And I knew it was coming. And I was like okay, I’m okay with that. We have to do this now. We have to get him to the emergency side. So they moved him and the nurses were like they’re moving him. Can’t believe it. This is not happening.

And I’m visiting him one day on the cancer floor also, and I come out of his room because I’m getting ready to go home. And there was a young man named Jeff Hiles. Jeff was a friend of mine for a long, long time. And I come out of Jason’s room and I see this woman and she has Jeff in a wheelchair. And I was like, “Jeff?” And he went, “Lea!” And I was like, uh! Uh! [*begins to tear up*] I was like oh, my God! Sweetheart! How are—no, I said, “I’m not going to ask how you are because I know how you are. I have missed you.” Because he basically just disappeared; you just do. And the woman was his mother. [*begins crying*] And I grabbed him in the chair and I hugged him. And his mother started crying, and I’m hugging him and I’m looking at her, and she is just balling. And I was like, “What’s going on?” I hugged him and then I grabbed her and I’m holding her. And you know what this woman told me? She said, “You are the first person who have touched my son since he got AIDS.” I was livid! I was livid! And not because of Jeff, because all of us knew someone who had AIDS. That this mother would have to go through this alone and watch her son die. I was livid. I’ll never forget that; I’ll never forget it.

And when we put our pool in, that’s out here in this backyard, gay men that I knew that had AIDS that were my friends, they swam in the pool because no one knew how you get it. I thought, *Well, I’m going to be in the pool with my friends so I guess if I get it, I just get it. But I’m not turning my back on my friends. I’m not doing it. You do what you have to do.* And Jason was in the pool with the gay men who had AIDS. They were his friends. You do what you have to do. Yeah.

AW: Thank you. Do you need a break from everything right now or?

LH: Yeah, I do. Ah.

AW: You can—

LH: And I swore I wasn’t going to cry.

AW: Well, it’s all right. I mean it was—

[Pause 01:26:01]

AW: Okay. So again we are officially back from our break now for the person transcribing. When we left off we were talking about the AIDS epidemic.

In the 1980s, more in the general sense, can I ask—and it doesn't have to be in any way gay or lesbian related—but what other causes or what other activities were taking up your time personally and where were your devotions? I can probably guess the number one was raising your son, yeah?

LH: Yeah.

AW: But what other—when I arrived here, you showed me something from a school for instance. And that was from 1983.

LH: Yes, right.

AW: Can you—could you speak to what that was?

LH: Yeah. There's a—there's a place called the Niles—Niles Home for Children. N-I-L-E-S. And it's still in Kansas City today. And it takes in disadvantaged, predominantly Afro-American youth. Some are homeless or were; divorced families; not necessarily mental problems but anger issues kind of things. Like young people kind of fall through the crack and you have to find out what's wrong, what causes this, whatever. And this was early on with Niles. And they were going to have their annual yearly celebration, and another friend of the founder had told him about me and that I was a poet and that I had published poetry. And I had been working on my latest book, which is years overdue, and he called me and he said, "I'd like to meet with you because I'd like for you to be part of our yearly celebration." That's when they open the whole place to have the public come in and the parents come in and everything and work with the kids. So I had a meeting with him and he said, "You're a poet." And I said, "Yes." He says, "Do you have some poems that you could work with these children with?" And I said this is perfect, perfect opportunity because the poems in this book relate to them and us as Afro-Americans. Okay?

My first book was called *I'm Not Crazy, Just Different*. And I called that my angry, lesbian book. And my second book—okay, where is it, Lea, in your head? *Womyn I Have Known*, you spell it W-O-M-Y-N. And that was my book to the lover of women. This is my *I'm An Afro-American Woman* book and our experiences from the south all the way through the Black Power movement and into the future. It's the best thing I've ever done; it took me years, years to get all of this out of my head. Like you were saying, and some of that—what were you doing? That this last poetry book that I wrote took me four years.

AW: Wow.

LH: And this is back in the '80s. To get it right, to get it, whatever—and my first time really dealing with Afro-American, you know, Afro-American because I've told people for years that in the fight for black people and whatever, that's not even on my radar because I'd have killed somebody by now. It's a non issue to me that Afro-Americans should be treated differently. It's a non issue you know. The White House wouldn't be there if the

black people hadn't built the White House, okay? We know that now. We're finding out our history now. Word's coming out about our history and we still have a problem. So I'd have killed somebody back then; my issue is gay rights. You know that we can get into and make huge strides in a less—it's been a hard struggle, but the gay rights movement has made more strides than anything doing with Afro-American people in this country. Can you believe it? It's amazing to me!

So I went over, met with the kids. Some have learning problems, some of them don't. And I would go over every Friday night for a month, and they would learn the poems and their gestures and how to be the person in the poem. It was such a joy to see them come out of themselves. You know there was one young lady, she was so shy and I picked this certain poem for her, and she just rocked it. I—just to watch them, you know. And there's always the one; he's got a lot to say and he's serious about it. And he is just too cool for his own good. Well, we had a little problem with him. So kind of had to take him out of the room and say, "Okay, this is the plan and this is what we're doing. And I love your energy, but I want the energy into the poem that you picked, not into us just being together and you want to be in charge." He was adorable; loved him to death. So when they had the open house and I came, and when I walked from the parking lot, they had this poster that they had made of me and signed it. All of my kids signed it, and I still have that to this day and it will go to the archives. That's one of my proudest moments. I love working with young people, you know. I really do. That's why I got involved in the Westport Community Center when it first started.

AW: Do you recall roughly when that was? I—

LH: God!

AW: --know that's a more recent thing than everything we've been talking about.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. Jamie [Rich] would know.

AW: Okay, right. Yeah.

LH: Jamie would know because he was on board too.

AW: Right. Okay. Well, while we're on it actually, and we don't—and that's the thing, now we can kind of dance around. For someone listening to this, I do believe that this is more of a—we could even probably say 21<sup>st</sup> century thing—that it might have happened in the late '90s, but I think this is in the 2000's probably, right?

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: What is your involvement or has been your involvement in that?

LH: I got involved in the community center just to kick—get it kicked off the ground and to have my name involved because everyone knows me as a very serious person and if she's

involved, then we need to get on board and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Back to not what you know, who you know. And that—that's one of the reasons they contacted me. We'd love to have you on our board. Just—and I know it's name recog—it's me, but it's also name recognition. You know if she's taking the time to do this, then this is serious. And this is when it first started and it was wonderful. And we would have meetings and I'd go over and meet with some of the young people there and just kind of talk, you know. Kind of let them just say what you want to say, do what you want to say, and I'm listening and we'll work it out from there. And then—I'm trying to remember why I—something happened and I had to get off the board, and I don't remember what it was, but it was nothing that they did. It was something happened in my life; I don't remember what it was.

But I was with GLAAD and I loved coming on board, being with GLAAD, but I had to leave. This is another Lea. Meeting starts at 12 o'clock. Let's start the meeting at 12 o'clock—not 12:15, not 12:20, not 12:30. Everyone's busy. We've got an agenda; let's get on it, whatever. And we can socialize and talk about other stuff later. And it was new to Kansas City; it was a new board and whatever. But that kind of just never stopped for me. And I thought, You know, *I'm here for serious reasons*, you know. We can chit-chat about the weekend and who came over and whatever later. But if it's 12 o'clock, show up on time, get the business done, get on the agenda, then if you have to leave you can leave or whatever. So I was with them—I think I was with them almost two years, and all of a sudden I just went, *This is not working for me*. So before—

AW: Let me back up. Sorry, I'll let you finish that.

LH: Yeah.

AW: For someone watching this, I don't know if we've defined the—or the acronym yet. What was GLAAD?

LH: Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. That's it, yeah.

AW: And do you recall how, how you were asked to join or, or how you came to join?

LH: Hmm, someone—God! Name-wise I don't know.

AW: Perhaps you can just—what the main goals of GLAAD were.

LH: Was to just work on changing the perception of gay people. That was—that was the bottom line; that was the initial start of it. You know we are your neighbors; we are your—other than being your hairdresser [*laughs*]. We are your doctor, your dentist, your surgeon, or whatever; against defamation. That was basically the crux of it. And I enjoyed it for the time that I was in it, but I just—I do business. You know, let's get on with it and then we can socialize or do whatever. And there was just—it wasn't quite where I needed it to be for me to be involved after a time. But still know the people that

were involved in it. You know I've run into them periodically. But—and it took off like a rocket. Look at GLAAD now, yeah?

AW: Could we speak to—or you—speak to—I know that you were on, I believe it was named in 1992, Mayor Emanuel Cleaver forms a human rights commission, and there was a gay and lesbian task force that I know that you served on that.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Could we start maybe with your recollections of the task force and what you might have been doing on that?

LH: Basically, I'm trying to remember—because we worked really, really hard to get Mayor Cleaver to change his opinion of the gay community here in Kansas City. I had met and not know personally, girlfriend to girlfriend, but his wife, Dianne, and I had crossed paths when I've done lectures and things like that. And couldn't quite get him on board, being that he's a minister and has church, you know. And it's like, duh, I get it; I understand that. But he—with meetings and going down, meeting with him, talking to him about functions we were having, making sure he was invited to different things that we had so he could get to know the community, get to know the leaders in the community, and bottom line is we may need this from you, but if you need this from us, please feel free. You know pick up the phone, call, do whatever. We'll be there, whatever you need. And that's kind of how it started. And it was just basically, for me, it was just elevating, having the mayor do this elevated our presence in the city.

AW: Got you.

LH: Yeah.

AW: Do you—I've seen some pictures and I don't want to be leading again, so I'm not going to say the names, and then I'll say the names—as a historian I always try to make sure I want you to tell your story, not vice versa. But when it came to city council members or when it came to city government officials of any sort, do you remember particular allies that were very helpful in fighting for gay and lesbian rights, people that you worked with, anyone that you feel should be mentioned?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. Reverend Meneilly is one. Better—I just, I think didn't I just read something about him in the paper? Oh, I know what it was. The new Johnson County Museum that just opened over on Metcalf.

AW: Yeah.

LH: They have a whole display. They had it on the news about him and his church and his efforts with the gay community. Phenomenal pastor! Phenomenal man!

AW: What—what is his church?

LH: I don't remember.

AW: Okay.

LH: But you might want to go over there and look at it.

AW: Yeah.

LH: At the new museum.

AW: You said Meneilly.

LH: M-E-I-L-L-E-Y.

AW: Okay.

LH: There's a picture of me with him and he has them. All those pictures have the names on the back.

AW: Okay.

LH: Okay. But—and I was listening to the news and all of a sudden they said there is this minister. And I went, "Oh, my God! That is so cool!" He was the neatest man, and he was a staunch supporter of the community. Let's see. Congresswoman Joanne Collins, Afro-American. Love, girlfriend, yeah. She was at our class reun—not our class from '62, but last year—not this year, last year she was there. So every now and then we get to touch base. Wonderful lady, great supporter. Let's see.

AW: What—and can you remember with Councilwoman Collins any particular things that you worked on together? That was actually the person I'd seen some pictures of you in your collection with her together.

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And maybe I'll even ask right now about the push in Kansas City for sexual orientation to be added to the ordinance.

LH: Mmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: I haven't come across, you know, I know you didn't go and testify or anything. I don't think you were part of the Human Rights Ordinance Project or anything like that.

LH: Mmm-mm [*negative*].



AW: But do you recall that time and the debates? Or for instance ACT UP/KC, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—do you remember any of this going on like in City Hall and—

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: --okay. And what are your recollections, I suppose, of the process?

LH: A slow process, still slow. But I wasn't involved in like going down and sitting in and doing any of that. Mine was one on one. Talk to Joan Collins; talk to people that you know; call them. Meet, go to lunch. "Do you want to go to lunch?" Need to go to lunch. You know what's going on to find out. It's easier for me to go to lunch and talk about and get information than to go down and go through all of that.

AW: Right.

LH: Yeah. It wears me out. It's meet and then it's this and it's just—you know, I want to talk to this person that I know is on the board, is a council member, is whatever. "Okay, tell me what's going on." And that's how I got my information as to what I needed to do.

AW: Got you.

LH: You know. "Do you need me to write? Do you need me to do this? What do you need me to do? "

AW: A name that my—I was, in fact Tuesday, David Weeda flies into town.

LH: David, David.

AW: Yes, yeah.

LH: Yes.

AW: He is going to be there on November 30<sup>th</sup> [*referencing a group discussion scheduled to take place at the University of Missouri-Kansas City*]

LH: Yup.

AW: And he—we were speaking on the phone—mentioned and we'll probably speak more about this on the 30<sup>th</sup> when you're together, but about how Missouri was going to change its constitution, potentially, in 1994, I want to say, to ban these city ordinances that had just been passed.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: And he said something about you and him going door to door.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Does that ring a bell?

LH: Yeah, it does. Trying—just—because it was a vote. Get people to vote, you know. What do we need to do? And it's so funny because I've lived on this side [Kansas side], you know, like Missouri is a block away. This is just the first step into Kansas. So politics had basically been in Kansas for a long time. My politics have always been in Missouri because that's how I've always done all my work, and I lived in Missouri for so long as a res—you know, got to be a resident, got to be registered. But that was what they asked us to do. You know. "What do we need to do?" They said you need to go door to door. It's like, okay, let's do it. You know, go through neighborhoods, talk to people, pass out stuff. Let them know this is what we're trying to do.

Some people are okay—you know some people perfect with it. Then there are other people you handed the information to, you know it—then they're smiling. As soon as the door closes, they threw it in the trash. Then there were other people that wouldn't take it at all because it had—it was a gay issue. Yeah. And the fact that it's still—the fact that that it's still an issue in 2017 and hasn't been passed in every city in this country amazes me. We have gay marriage now. You can get married; Supreme Court said you can get married. But you can still get fired from your job or kicked out of your apartment. That makes no sense to me. So you and your groom or bride can get kicked out together now. [*Laughs*]. You know.

AW: Yeah.

LH: That just—I don't understand the sticking point on that, I really, really don't. That, you know, the fact that overall, people do not recognize the fact that when you pay your taxes, I'm paying my taxes too. When you're voting for the betterment of your city, I'm voting for that too, you know. We had a vote for the airport; well, the airport's going to be in Kansas City, Missouri. I couldn't vote on that; I live in Kansas, but I support the airport. You know you—I mean anything that we do as a community includes all of us, financially, beneficially, whatever it is. But you still will not pass an ordinance for me not to be afraid to be gay. You know the closet's a very lonely, dark place. And I think if most people really thought about the dark times they've had in their lives and how it complicated their situations, I think they'd kind of understand. It's really hard not to be able to be who you are.

AW: Could I ask along those lines something you were talking about earlier? In the ordinance testimony that I have, the VHS tapes, many people were able to come in support of the ordinance. And I think I talked about the fact that I had interviewed a teacher who wanted to come testify, but she could not because of her job.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: One thing that is very much absent in that testimony are any gays or lesbians of color. And one other thing, and you talked about this earlier, that was there though was, for instance, the Baptist Ministers Union came out in full force [in opposition to the ordinance].

LH: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Would—let me just frame it in the form of a question. Was the fact that no gays and lesbians of color were there testifying because there are no gays and lesbians of color [chuckles] or were there particular challenges perhaps that kept people from—you were just talking about hiding in that closet?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. It's because there are none. [*laughing*] There are none. I am a figment of your imagination. Okay?

AW: Yeah. [*laughing*]

LH: It all comes back down to faith-based religion for the Afro-American community. It always has. You know you will have an Afro-American minister stand in front of his congregation of one, two, 300 people and totally demonize gay people. Your choir director and half of your choir are gay and lesbian, but that's okay because they're serving your mission. And it just makes me crazy. As long as they show up on Sunday—you know when I first came to Kansas City, I was invited to maybe, through this friend of mine who's still my friend—I love her; we call each other sister girls—to a lesbian party. There was an Afro-American, lesbian party. And I was like this is going to be different; I'm going to go. And we had, of course, we had the butch; we had the fems; we had whatever. And I was just an enigma. They didn't get me at all.

AW: Why?

LH: Too outspoken, you know. They knew that I had been involved in gay rights and stuff and just—it's like, "We don't get her. We don't understand." You know, because they are in the position to be quietly gay on a day to day basis, seven days a week, especially on Sundays. And I—I'm not having it. So I was invited to a couple of functions, and then that was it for Lea. No more invitations for Lea. And that was fine because I knew that was coming. You know I'm not—I'm out and they were afraid to be out.

Socialize—go to an Afro-American gay—you've got 50, 60, 70 people there, but you—it's like you'd never see them in the light of day of being gay. That's just a step a little too far from our basic tenets of church and faith and God. Yeah. And I said this is not working for me because the God I know, the God I believe in, doesn't make mistakes. So I'm not a mistake. I'm supposed to be here, and I'm supposed to do what I'm supposed to do: To help and lift people, not put them down, not degrade them, and let them be free to be who they want to be and not have to worry for their entire lives. Am I going to lose my job? Will I have a place to stay? That is so inane in 2017 that we are even still dealing with this. Makes no sense to me. But we can marry now, you see?

AW: Yeah.

LH: It—yeah. It just doesn't work. And I don't know what it will take for—Australia just approved gay marriage. It's like yay! You know other countries, because I read the paper and I always watch the national news. That's my one news source of the day. Other than that, I don't want to know. Five-thirty to six, give me my news; one shot. Not watching CNN all day and I'm done. And it's—it's wonderful. It's great. But then they have laws on their books that we don't have and we're supposed to be the freest of all societies. You know land of the free, home of the brave. But I could lose my job tomorrow if my boss found out I was gay and he's against homosexuals or what—or, or he reads his bible one way when someone else reads their bible another way. You know I won't get into that with those people at that time.

I remember doing a workshop at St. Paul's School of Theology with Keith [Spare] as a matter of fact. Keith invited me to be there. And we had our early session and talking, whatever, and this young Catholic priest was there and he had his self together and so on and so forth. And we took a break and came over and he said, "Nice listening to you Ms. Hopkins." And so on and so on and so forth. And I don't remember we just—he kind of chatted for a little bit and I just kind of looked at him and I said, "So when we go back in, your opinions haven't changed about homosexuality, right?" And he says, "No, because blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And I said, "You know what? I want you to clean your own closet before you start jumping into mine. And I know you understand exactly what I'm saying to you. You clean your closet; don't worry about my closet. I'm handling mine just fine." And I walked away from him. When we came back, and you can ask Keith, his tenor totally changed because someone defied his beliefs. That's why I was there. And sometimes that's what we have to do. You know I've had—I've been places and had people screaming and hollering in my face this close that I'm going to die and go to hell. I just look at them like they've lost their minds. You have your reason for being here; I have my reasons for being here, and with you acting that way, I know automatically I am much more intelligent than you are. And that's what I walk away with. I won't—I won't stoop to your level.

AW: Speaking of—

LH: Fred Phelps?

AW: I was just going to say! [unintelligible 01:54:06] not stoop to the level [unintelligible 01:54:08]. [*Laughing*].

LH: [*Laughing*] Fred Phelps? Oh, yeah. An aside and I wrote it down—Wednesday? What's today? Wednesday there's a sh—the, the Morgan Freeman show, oh, I can't think of it. I was watching it today before you got over here too. The world—*The World of Us*. He's—oh, God—he's narrating the show and he's traveling all over the, all over the world. It's about religion and the name's not in my head right now. But I watched it; it was Wednesday, and it was about diversity and confrontation. And he was in different

countries, whatever, whatever. Then all of a sudden up popped Megan Phelps being interviewed by Morgan Freeman, and I thought, *Well, let's just see what she has to say.* The interview was about how she left the family and left the church, and she's no longer part of that anymore. And I was like let me write that down—got to pass it on so you've got to look it up. Excellent interview with him.

AW: Yeah.

LH: You know this is—why did you leave? You know what was going on? And her beliefs before and whatever, but I remember when I was involved Christopher Street and we were really doing whatever we were doing, we would send out press releases and get one person from *The Star* and maybe one person from one TV show, a news thing. We could not get the press out to save our lives. And then came the angel of mercy, Fred Phelps, because if Fred showed up, all the media showed up. And we just rode in right on Fred's tail.

And I would tell—I said, “Please, no one kill this man. He's the best thing that ever happened to us. Don't hurt anybody in the family; leave the children alone. The media loves Fred; the media will come out for Fred. We're going to be there and we'll get a chance to say what we have to say.” That's what Fred Phelps did for the gay community in Kansas City. We would send out press releases to any and everybody and have two people show up. And hope they'd get there on time. But once Fred started with his signs, I was like thank you, God, for Fred Phelps. Thank you for bringing him into my life because I'm media savvy, and I can deal with Fred.

Many functions I have gone to and Fred and the family have been there. I have always taken the time to cross the street and say thank you for being here. And they look at me like I have lost my mind. The DIFFA dinners down at the hotels, they always showed up. And we're in our regalia and we're going to have a wonderful, wonderful dinner and everything. I would always walk across the street and his daughter's standing there screaming, and she'd see me coming, and I would say, “I'm so glad you guys showed up. Have a wonderful evening.” And walk back across the street. Yeah, because I'm not going away. Gays aren't going away. We know what we're doing, and we know what we're doing is right. But you also have the right to hold that sign that says: God hates fags. Well, the God you know might, but the God I know loves everybody. We are all his children. If you have faith at all, we are all his children. So you have the right to do that, and I have the right to do what I do. Yeah—but, yeah, he was a godsend.

AW: Some other people have put it that way as well, yeah.

LH: [*Laughing*] We need—we needed him.

AW: Yeah. Do you recall any, just before we leave that topic, I guess, any specific place that you were at or any particular memory with the Westboro Baptist Church. I mean, did you ever, I suppose when you spoke to them, did you ever speak to him directly?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. Oh, yes.

AW: Okay.

LH: Yeah. Any place that they were—from when they first started—any function that was a gay function, that I went to all of, I always made sure that I crossed the line and I said, “Hello.” I’ve even shook the man’s hand. They just—they didn’t know what to make of me, especially being Afro-American. And they’re a church. Think about it; yeah, think about that. And just being very gracious, very humble, very nice, and they just—they didn’t know what to think about me. And once—the first time I did it, we were in Westport. We were in Westport for, I’m thinking one of the film festivals. Because they were in a parking lot right out front, and I said I need to go over there and say something. And I don’t remember the group I was with. They said, “Lea, leave those people—no, you know, you don’t need to.” I said, “Yeah, I do. Don’t you think I need to go do that?” And they’re like, “No, you don’t.” Well, that—that was it.

I’m gonna cross the street, go out in the parking lot. “Hi, glad you’re here. Hope you have a wonderful evening. And I know I’ll see you again.” Smile and then walk. And from that point on, I guess they thought: God, here she comes again! Here she comes again! Oh, my God! This is—who is this little crazy woman? I’m going to make sure I’m not going anywhere, and you don’t frighten me, and you don’t scare me. You don’t have that kind of power over my life. You do have the power to do whatever you want to do. But you don’t have that kind of power over my life. How dare you assume that you do? Yeah. I remember—oh, and I told you about, about AIDS and the lecture that I did in...

AW: In Chicago—or at Howard University or—?

LH: Yeah.

AW: Okay.

LH: When they had their thing and I had to do the press conference out in front of the hotel because that’s where we had our big gala event, and they wanted to do it inside. And I said, “No. We have to be out in front of the hotel.” Because this is where I got threats for the first time in my life. I was threatened.

AW: At the Howard University—?

LH: No, not the Howard—this—

AW: Oh, no, no. I’m sorry. Go ahead.

LH: No, no, no, no. Mmm-hmm [*negative*]. This was Memphis, Tennessee. It was Memphis.

AW: And when is this?

LH: This was in 19—oh, my God! When was this?

AW: Well, I knew that you helped to form the first Gay Pride March in Tennessee. Are we talking about this?

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. That's it.

AW: So we're in the '70s.

LH: Yeah, there you go.

AW: Right? Okay.

LH: Yeah, that was it. That was it.

AW: I've got you. All right.

LH: And I was threatened. And I guess I can say it on camera because they said it to me, "If the black bitch shows up, she's dead." I said, "Okay, I guess I better get down there a little sooner than, because I want to make sure they can find me." I took Jason to my mother's house and got on the plane and went down. Said okay, this is—this is where we are and this is what we're doing. We're going to have Gay Pride. The fact that eight—and he's got the pictures [Stuart Hinds]. Have you seen them?

AW: I haven't seen them.

LH: The original pictures he has. The fact that eight young people for the first time in their lives are ready to step out of the closet, put their face in the paper and on television, and they're not backing down. I'm showing up. I wouldn't disappoint them if the plane fell out of the sky. I want to be on the plane and I'm showing up and we're going to have a Gay Pride. Period! And I get down there and they don't have a parade permit. Off the plane. "Lea, we can't have it Sunday." I was supposed to come in Saturday. They called me and said they didn't have a parade permit and my life had been threatened. So I left Friday. I wanted to get there a day ahead of time. No parade permit, huh? Okay. So we can't have it. I said, "Oh, we're having Gay Pride. I didn't fly all the way down here for us not to have Gay Pride." So I called the chief of police, and I said, "My name is Lea Hopkins. I'm sure that at this point that name is familiar to you and we are having Gay Pride Parade on Sunday." And he says, "Well, I'm very sorry, Ms. Hopkins, but they don't have a parade permit. They didn't get their money in on time so it's not going to happen." And I said, "Oh, excuse me. It's going to happen. You can't arrest pedestrians for walking down the street. So we will be walking down the sidewalk. We will go on green and we will stop on red." Click. Eight folks and me. They ended up not having to pay for police protection because the police came—we had to have police. They didn't

have to pay for it. We had three police officers on motorcycles. No parade permit, marched anyway, and had the function after the boat cruise down the Mississippi.

AW: Oh, okay.

LH: Oh, yeah. That was the first year of it. Maybe we had maybe 60 people.

AW: I was going to ask the context of—because I didn't get it reading and we haven't talked about it in this interview yet.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: Why Memphis? I think for someone listening that'll just come out of the blue. Why?

LH: The phone rang and they said for every interview and any travel I've done, the phone rings, I say hello. And they go, "Is this Lea Hopkins?" Yes. "We're from the blah, blah, blah, blah, blah and we'd like for you to blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And I'm like okay.

AW: And this was after the first Pride Fest in Kansas City.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]. Right.

AW: So they were aware of you probably from those—okay.

LH: And it was wonderful. The boat down the Missouri—Mississippi rather—was maybe 60 people. The next year, and I went down for Gay Pride the next year not as a speaker or anything, there was like 150. Now Gay Pride is over 2,000 marching to 3,000, and if you don't have your reservation for the cruise the year before, you don't get to go because there is no more room. And they have two cruise ships now, two ships.

AW: Wow.

LH: Imagine that! They're going to threaten my life and I'm not going to show up? Oh, I'm showing up. And they wanted to do the article for the paper, the interview for the TV, in the hotel. And I said, "No. I'm going to do it in front of the hotel." And the reasoning was we had little families there. We had a husband and a wife and some children. And we had some more husbands and wives and we had children. And I said, "No, we're going to have to do it out front because I want to make sure that those parents can find the homosexuals since they brought their children to see the queers." Because we're the molesters, we're the ones who molest children. But you bring your children to us?

AW: Yeah.

LH: Yeah.

AW: I'm glad you brought that up because—



LH: Yeah.

AW: --in the ordinance testimony, it's for seven hours, I mean hundreds of people.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: In many of the arguments—I think I know how you're going to respond, but just—I'm going to bring up the opposition's arguments and get your thoughts on them. A common argument was the slippery slope argument—first of all it was all about the bedrooms, so you know like what's going on in the bedroom. “If we give rights to homosexuals, then what about pedophiles? What about bestiality? What about, you know, sadomasochists and necrophiliacs?” I mean, these were things that were actually said. Your thoughts on that?

LH: My response to that would be: but this is *only* about the gay community, okay? This is why we're here; this is why we want to be included. If the bestiality people want to get their group together and come down here, that's fine. You all can deal with them when they get themselves together and they come down here. Or the pedophiles when they get their national group and they come down here, then you can deal with them. That has *nothing* to do with us. This is your way of trying to cloud the issue.

AW: Because people would make the association, make the leap that if you are gay or lesbian—

LH: Exactly!

AW: --you are a pedophile.

LH: Exactly. Exactly. You're clouding the issue. And if you're really worried about pedophilia, I think you need to look closer to home because records have proven, there is data that proves you would be molested by a family member before you'd ever be touched by anybody gay. And number two, if a child was molested say by a male figure, how do you know that person's gay in the first place and not just a pedophile? Hello. Was Uncle Bob gay? No, he wasn't gay. He was Uncle Bob. And 20 years later this young lady is talking about the fact that Uncle Bob molested her every time he came over to dinner on Sundays. And she couldn't tell her mother and father who were right in the house. Yeah. Or the young lady who was molested by Uncle Bob; she's now 25. Uncle Bob's still involved in the family, and she kind of sees Uncle Bob looking at her little sister who's now about nine, and she's going to get a gun and she's going to kill Uncle Bob. And she's going to go to prison for murder for killing Uncle Bob, the pedophile right at your table because nobody was talking. See? It's just—it's, it's insane. It makes no sense whatsoever. None, none.

And we talked about that earlier about the lecture that I did, and I mentioned that AIDS would be the best thing that ever happened to our community. There are parents of these

gay people and we need those parents. When that happened in Kansas City, my first thought was: Where are the parents? Where are the parents of the—of the gay youth? We're doing this for ourselves and generations after us. I know some of these young gays have told their parents they're gay. You know they've got their ducks in a row. We can't get anybody down there en masse. You know, I'm the father of, I'm the mother of. This is my son; this is my daughter. That never happened down there.

AW: Could—for someone listening to this, we talked earlier.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: That statement, "AIDS was the best thing that ever happened to our community."

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: I think that could come wildly out of context for someone that just hears that. Could you—so I'm just thinking about this—could you elaborate on what you meant there?

LH: Yes.

AW: Yeah.

LH: I did a lecture in—God, I get confused. Memphis? Where was it? I did a lecture, and after the—it was a—it was a brainstorming kind of thing where different leaders of different groups in different cities, we all got together to come up with a platform about something. And I was the keynote speaker. And it was after the dinner, and I was talking to them or whatever and so on and so forth, and I said, "I'm going to say this now," and there were about 250, 300 people at the dinner. "I'm going to say this now and you're probably going to think I'm crazy, but I'm going to say it anyway. AIDS will turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to the gay community." And this young man shouted at me and he said, "How dare you say that!" And so on and so on and so forth. And I said, "Sweetheart, I understand how you feel. And I know you're offended by what I said, but just remember that I said it."

And until AIDS, we did not have mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, whatever supporting us. It was never going to happen. But now there was a common goal; there was something that was killing our kids, killing our nephews, killing our husbands, killing whatever. "We've got to do something about this." That was the rallying cry. And when you go, I was in New York for a—for the—in Washington for the AIDS quilt, you know, there were thousands in this march. And I have pictures—thousands, 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 people on the street in Washington, D.C., because of that AIDS quilt. Mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, whatever that had never come to our aid ever, but I'm losing my son. I'm losing my nephew; I'm losing, I'm losing; I'm losing, and I will not take it anymore. And I went to Washington because they had announced that the AIDS quilt had gotten so large that it would never be out in one piece ever again. And I told my partner, Pat, I said, "Make a reservation; I'm going by myself." And it's one of the

best things I ever did. It was the most awesome thing that young man started from a scrap of cloth. Just amazing! And to see these parents walking around, trying to find. The thing that I found amusing was when you get there they give you a book that's about this thick.

AW: Okay.

LH: Yeah. Uh-huh [*affirmative*]. The book is this thick that they give each person when you get there so you can go through—because there's grids and there's this and there's that, and you have to calculate. Okay, I'm here, that's there, whatever. And you see people standing around like we don't know. We don't know; we're lost. We don't know. And these two young men that I met when I was there, we ended up just the three of us being together for the whole thing, we were looking for—I was looking for Leonard Matlovich's quilt. Do you know who Lenny is?

AW: No.

LH: Leonard Matlovich was the first gay man to sue the United States Army.

AW: Yes! In fact, did you have him for your third Pride Parade as the grand marshal?

LH: Yes, we did.

AW: Okay.

LH: And there's a picture. As Lenny said, they gave me a medal for killing one man and discharged me for loving another. And he is in Arlington National Cemetery. He is there. It took him 10 years, 10 or 11 years. He says, "I'm not"—that's why I loved him—"I'm not giving up the fight. I served my country; that's where I deserve to be buried." So I'm looking for Lenny's quilts because I know other people loved him other than me, and the two guys that I'm with, they're looking for one they made for a friend of theirs. So we're walking around and we see this older man and woman, and they're just standing there with this book. And I told Seth I said, "We need to go over there." So the three of us walked over and the mother looked up and I said, "You look like you guys need some help." And she said, "We can't find my son's quilt." I said don't worry; we will help you find it. And we got in the book and did the thing, whatever, and "I think we're over there." And we walked them to their son's quilt. I'm always put where I'm supposed to be for a reason. Yeah.

I went to see if anyone loved Lenny like I did. That's not why I was there; I was to help this mother [*tears up*] find her child and father. Yeah. Awesome. And the AIDS quilt was in Kansas City three times. I have pictures; you'll see them; they're in the books. And I made sure that Jason went every year whenever the quilt was here, I made sure that he went so he could understand what was going on because I know that he and his friends were talking about it. Young people were talking about it. You know and maybe Uncle Bob died or was sick or he's in the hospital, but nobody will tell me what—what's wrong

with Uncle Bob, you know. And I was like, no. I'm taking mine; I don't know if you're going to take yours, but I'm taking mine.

And when Jason graduated, he had a party here at the house, a swimming party. And all the kids came to the party. This house—there were at least 35 something—35, 40 kids here. So I'm thinking *I'm going to do something special*. I collect matches, and I had this big brandy snifter full of matches from different cities, different restaurants, different whatever. So I *thought I know what I'm going to do. This is going to be the centerpiece of the table that's outside*. So I went to a skin shop and I bought condoms. I remember walking in and this man looked at me and he said, "May I help you." And I say, "I need condoms." And he said, "Condoms." And I said, "I want one of every condom you sell. I want one of every one you sell." And he looked at me and he said okay. One of those, one of those, one of those [*pointing like shopping*] whatever. Is it—I don't care what they—I want one of every condom you sell. So I left with a bag of condoms. I took the matches and the condoms and I mixed them together and that was sitting in the middle of the table when the kids were here. And they swam and got ready to eat and I walked out the back door. And this was Jason; I walked out the door and he went, "Okay. Mom's coming." [*Laughs*]. And I said short and sweet, "I do not know if in your home you discuss AIDS, but in my home we do. The centerpiece in that table, you see the matches? There are condoms in there; use them because later on as you go into life, and I find out that any of my kids has AIDS, I will track you down and I will kill you." And I turned and I walked back in the house.

AW: [*Laughing*] That'll stick with you.

LH: Yep, that was it.

AW: Wow!

LH: And they just laughed and the party went on or whatever. But you're not—you're not going to leave my space uninformed, period. You're not.

AW: Right.

LH: Yeah.

AW: Geez. There's so much more to talk about. I 'm also—okay, let's see; yeah, it's gotten—it's gotten a bit darker in here. I'm trying to figure out if this is a good—if we want to—we've gone over two hours, which is great. There's 12 minutes left on this [video] card.

LH: Hm-hmm [*affirmative*].

AW: We can immediately change cards, though. I'm trying to figure out—one of the—we're going to take a quick break.

LH: Okay.

[recording pauses]

AW: Back on and all right. I think we've just agreed that we've gone over two hours and this is a good jumping off point so, again, this is November 19—where are we? 19<sup>th</sup>?

LH: 19<sup>th</sup>.

AW: 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017, with Lea Hopkins, part of the GLAMA Oral History Project. Lea, thank you very much.

LH: Thank you.