GLAMA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

PARTICIPANT: David Weeda
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INTERVIEWER: Austin R. Williams

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: David Weeda was born in Leavenworth, Kansas on April 29, 1959. He served on the Kansas City Nuclear Freeze Group, the Kansas City Choice Coalition, the Good Samaritan Project, the Kansas City chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, and co-founded the Human Rights Ordinance Project which later became the Human Rights Project.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Coming out, becoming an activist, the Kansas City Nuclear Freeze Group, the Choice Coalition, the Good Samaritan Project, Provincetown, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP/KC), the Human Rights Ordinance Project (HROP), the Human Rights Project (HRP), HIV/AIDS, All Souls Unitarian Church, Jon D. Barnett's run for city council, the KKK in Independence, MO.

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David Weeda Interview

AW: And welcome everybody. Today is November 27th, 2017. My name is Austin Williams. I am the interviewer. This is part of the GLAMA Oral History Project. And I spell my name A-U-S-T-I-N, W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S. This is the second interview with David Weeda. David, if you could spell your name for the camera.

DW: Thank you, Austin. D-A-V-I-D, W-E-E-D-A.

AW: Okay. The first interview took place back in January of 2017 at your home in Maine. And we are here today at Miller Nichols Library at UMKC's campus. And with this being the second interview, maybe we can just do brief a overview. To start off with:

Could you tell us when you were born and where you were born, and a little bit about your early years and your coming out process as a gay man?

DW: Sure. I was born in Leavenworth, Kansas on April 29th, 1959, the youngest of three children in a middle-class family. A little suburb—at this point, I guess it's about a 40-minute drive from Leavenworth to Kansas City. So Kansas City has always been my regional city.

Growing up in Leavenworth was a great experience in many ways. But we each only know what our own experience is, so we don't have much to judge it by when we're growing up. I thought I was in a wonderful family, and I still think that. Sister two years older, brother 11 years older. Mom and dad were both 38 when I was born. So I was—as they came to call me later—their best little mistake, or big surprise. That was nice having parents that were a little bit older.

It was about junior high age when my friends would see me out in public with my mom and dad and they'd say, 'Oh, are these your grandparents?' I'm not sure how mom and dad liked that. But it was always fun to say, "No, it's mom and dad." Dad and mom lived in the same house that I was born in until they moved out a few years ago. It was very much a home.

I knew at a very young age that I was a gay man, or a gay little boy. I didn't have the definitions or the words, but sexuality is an incredible gift from the star dust that we all came from. And it came upon me quite early that I had a knowledge of who I was and who I would become. And that made for an interesting development in a culture that does all it can to dissuade us from that orientation.

By the time I was in junior high, I was doing all I could to hide what I knew about myself—even though others picked up on it. It was certainly an opportunity for bullying and teasing and all kinds of things that gave me those signals that this was going to be a thing that was going to be tough for the world to accept at times. I was going to have to

figure out my way passing through it. So I'd say I was lucky that I came from a family that made it very easy for me to explore the adventure that life would become, and I came to know that I was part of a natural world that was going to be explored for the rest of my life. And I loved doing that.

In high school, I was focusing on figuring out what I wanted to do after high school. I learned pretty quickly that I was interested enough in music and musically talented enough that I wanted to pursue a music degree in college. There were some things that happened in high school my last—particularly my senior year that led me to really question a lot of social ethics and values. By the time I went to college in the fall of 1977, I was really ready to explore a bigger world than what Leavenworth, Kansas had been for those first 18 years.

College, of course, was a great environment for me to open my mind and open my heart and open my soul to all of the differences that are out there in the world. I realized that I could fit in in a much easier way than I'd ever imagined. I loved studying music. I loved getting involved in campus activities that led me to engage with a real broad diversity of students. I was at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas. Started out as a trumpet and voice double major—music education focus.

When I was not in the classroom with my studies, I was quickly engaged in campus organizations. I got involved with a nuclear freeze group, an anti-war group, a bit of a campus group that was focusing on women's rights, women's choice—pro-life, or excuse me, pro-choice issues. See how we get the vernacular all confused?

AW: [laughing] Yeah. That might be a good time to talk about: while you were in college, your activism was very broad. I suppose there were many issues. If you want to talk about the ways in which that activism and the events in your life led you to Kansas City—

DW: Okay.

AW: Yeah. And how that—

DW: Sure.

AW: …happened.

DW: Well, as I went through my four years in college, I became more and more engaged with social activism and socially aware of situations in the world that caught my interest and caught my excitement about how we could each as individuals have an impact on our communities and our electoral processes—working towards building what I have always thought would be a better world for everybody. So that was great work—to be with other peers and work on women's rights issues, anti-racism, the pro-choice movement. Certainly, we were still very involved in anti-nuclear and anti-war issues.

I graduated from college in 1981 with my music degree, but made the choice to not even pursue my teaching certificate. I knew that I did not want to teach music by the time I did my student teaching, which was okay. Things develop the way they're supposed to in many ways. I was approached by the Director of the Endowment Association at Emporia State to apply for a new position that they had just created, and I got hired for that. So I spent two more years at Emporia working for the Endowment Association. I was called the Treasurer and Director of Annual Giving. For a college graduate, it was great that I got to go out and shop for a brand-new car that they'd purchased for the position. That was my vehicle, and I got to drive all over the state of Kansas putting together community scholarship drives in various communities so that they could send their local students on to Emporia State. So that was a lot of fun.

I got to organize with alums all over Kansas and put together fun programming that would provide some revenue for establishing scholarships for their students. In that process, I also found myself involved with my first real boyfriend. He was teaching music in a small town in Kansas about an hour and a half away from Emporia. So my time for those two years in Kansas was [spent] working for the Endowment Association and traveling around Kansas. My weekends were either spent at his place in the little town 90 minutes away or at my place in Emporia.

Over the first year of working for the Endowment Association, my partner at the time decided he was going to move to Kansas City to pursue his music doctorate at UMKC Conservatory. So I spent the next year, then—the second year of my job in Emporia was back and forth between Kansas City and Emporia pretty much every weekend, figuring out what I wanted to do in order to move to Kansas City to allow me to be with my boyfriend.

I'd always had a real interest in hospitality and cooking and food and perhaps a lodging establishment at some point—I was already thinking along those lines and realized I could come back to Kansas City and go to the Johnson County Community College Program for Hospitality Management. So in 1983, I finished my second year on the job at Emporia State and made the move to Kansas City. Actually, to Overland Park. So I was still staying in Kansas at that point, but enrolled in school.

I also, at that point, realized I wanted to take up the Highland bagpipe, which was an important little part of my past. My Canadian aunt had gotten me motivated to learn to play the pipes after I heard her play when I was five years old. So that was my chance in Kansas City to find a bagpipe teacher, and I did that. Also, one of the first things I did was get involved with the Choice Coalition of Greater Kansas City.

I can remember June of 1983 was a very busy month: I moved to Kansas City, got hooked up with a bagpiping teacher, and started showing up with the Choice Coalition of Greater Kansas City. We were doing Saturday morning counter-protests at Planned Parenthood in front of the clinic. Our role was to act as a foil for the anti-choice protestors who were there really harassing clients as they were making their way into the clinic for various services, of course. It was sort of a national movement to provide a

buffer zone so that those clients could park their cars, get safely into the clinic, and not be harassed and confronted by the anti-choice protestors who were there—I thought, for a very cruel reasons—you know, political reasons, obviously.

And it was a real—I say I cut my teeth in activism on the sidewalks in front of Planned Parenthood because the anti-choice picketers were very hostile and aggressive. They forced me to compose my thoughts in my head about what I was doing, why I was there, and the importance of why I was there. And I realized that the human voice as an activist is crucial if we're going to have good relations and good social change in this culture. Every Saturday morning at Planned Parenthood was really important to me, and I think it was important to the movement and to protecting women's rights at that time. So I met quite a group of individuals on both sides of the issue that—ultimately, I was engaged with all of those individuals for the rest of my time in Kansas City in various capacities. So, we'll get into that.

AW: Okay. Yeah. That's good. Let me make a quick adjustment here [to the camera]. Okay.

DW: Am I talking too fast?

AW: Do you want a drink of water? No, you're fine. You're doing great. Okay. And you brought up two things that—Well, we'll definitely come back to the Planned Parenthood activism. The year that you moved to Kansas City is 1983.

DW: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: And you moved here with your boyfriend at that time. Trying to think of things chronologically: Do you recall when it was that you first heard about what might have been referred to as GRID at the time, or the Gay—

DW: Sure.

AW: …Related Immune Deficiency? What are your earliest memories of what became the AIDS epidemic, and did it fully register at that time that it was going to become as significant as it became? And then, maybe how did your thoughts on it evolve over time? Or just your—

DW: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: …earliest recollections about AIDS.

DW: Sure. Well also, in Kansas City in 1983, I got involved with the Kansas City Nuclear Freeze Group, and that kept me involved with anti-war and anti-nuclear activism. So I was already perched at this moment in my life where I was spending a lot of energy thinking about what my role in society could possibly turn into—in terms of activism, social progress, and social change. I would say that I became aware of what we

ultimately have called HIV or AIDS in 1981—you know, like, right after college graduation.

In little Emporia, Kansas, there's certainly news outlets that were talking about this new disease that they were diagnosing, and in the gay community in Emporia—which was a little community of folks who were organized around mostly social issues, but also just addressing whatever needs might arise in the LGBTQ community at the time. So the talk certainly was: "This is obviously impacting our community globally, and there's going to be a lot of attention paid to it, we hope. And we'll just carefully pay attention to everything we're learning."

I do remember after I had come out to my parents, there was a day when I was visiting in Leavenworth, and my mother was really concerned about wanting to know if I was aware of this new disease. I remember my mom looking at me and saying, "I just hope you're really being careful." And, of course, at that point, my answer was, "I have my boyfriend. I'm as careful as I think I can be or need to be." It was always there from the moment we learned of it. You know, *there's something going on in our world that is going to bring a lot of awareness and a lot of grief.* And that was always there.

So when I moved to Kansas City, my boyfriend and I were both really involved with our schooling, and we didn't really go out into what I would call an organized social gay community much. And then my boyfriend graduated with his doctorate from UMKC and he went on and moved to his first teaching job out of Kansas City—out of Missouri. And we comfortably allowed that to be our separation and we broke up at that point. So I was alone in Kansas City.

I moved into Midtown and decided I wanted to cross the state line and be in the heart of Kansas City. I certainly was becoming more involved in an organized community and going out. And, gosh, there must have been 14 bars in Kansas City at the time. I was never really a bar person, but I certainly had to find a social outlet. I started meeting other gay people and realizing that there was a real destiny for me to get engaged with the community of activism around HIV/AIDS issues.

At the time, the Good Samaritan Project was a really strong organization in Kansas City working as an advocacy group and a resource and response to HIV/AIDS. And they were holding one of their weekends where you go and you could become trained to be a buddy—which would be assigning you to a client who would be needing your support and various ways of advocating for them. So I would go through this training in February of 1988, and that was at—I think it was a Community Christian Church where they had the training.

And during one of those little exercises that they use as an ice-breaker—I remember, we were broken into two circles—one small circle and then a larger circle outside of the small circle. And each circle was walking in the opposite direction. The challenge was to make good meaningful eye contact with every individual as you pass them in those two opposite-going concentric circles. And boy, I think maybe the first time around the

circle, I locked eyes with this other young man, and my first thought was, *Dang, his eyes are just as blue as mine*. [*laughs*] So I made sure we had good eye-contact on the second time around, and by the third time around, I'm sure we were both really connecting on this good eye contact we were having. So I made a point of—when we finished the exercise—making sure we introduced ourselves to each other and had a little visit. And that was Jon Barnett, who ultimately then would become my real activist soul brother in many, many ways. So we met that weekend with the Good Samaritan Project training and struck up a friendship that will take us through many years together and has endured. A wonderful ride. A wonderful adventure.

AW: Okay. Now, we know in 1988, later on, you joined ACT UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power], and maybe before we get there, I should ask you:

Besides joining the Good Samaritan Project, were there any significant moments or particularly impactful moments regarding AIDS, whether it be something on the national level or a personal level? You don't have to provide names or anything. But was there any moment where something kind of hit home that impacted you in a way that made you realize it was becoming more serious?

DW: The media was all over the board on what was happening with HIV/AIDS. So if you're engaged and reading, watching television, listening to the radio—you were hearing stories of various kinds—various levels of support; various levels of fear. All kinds of research topics that were, you know—medical research was happening around the issue. And a lot of denial.

As a gay man, you can't help but think, *This is all going to shake out some way. And we each have to be involved in it so that it shakes out the best way it possibly can.* I realized that with the denial and the oppression and the cultural stigmas that were being attached to HIV/AIDS—as well as the gay community and vice-versa—they were clearly connected. There was no question in my mind that I would be on the road with so many other gay people to become an activist of sorts for our survival.

AW: And I am actually going to interject to just ask—

As someone in the Midwest—in Kansas City—did you think it was just as significant here? Or was there maybe this sense of there being a buffer zone? That it was more prevalent on the east and west coast? For someone watching this—looking back, in your experience, was it different experiencing it in the Midwest than perhaps elsewhere?

DW: Again, we each only have our personal experiences. Mine was that—I don't look at a news story and think, *Well, that's over there in the world.* I look at a news story and say, "How does that happening over there in the world impact my community—wherever I might be?" And you can't detach it.

Also significant for me was the fact that one of my mother's best friends in Leavenworth had a son who came home from San Francisco after he'd been diagnosed with AIDS.

That was, for my family, a moment of realization that this will touch everyone. I knew that my mother's friend was devastated by the fact that their son was coming home to die. And that's exactly how that scenario played out.

After I did the Good Samaritan Project Training in February of '88, a few months later I made the decision to take that entire summer off and go to Cape Cod. I was 29 years old, and I wanted to say that I lived on the ocean before I turned 30. So I took the whole summer and drove out to Provincetown, and had a great summer understanding who I was a lot more. You know, nothing like being a 29-year-old kid from Leavenworth, Kansas who—I say kid—29-year-old man from Leavenworth, Kansas who walks up over the sand dune on Herring Cove Beach and sees naked men spread out on beach towels. And that's like, *Okay, I'm in Provincetown. This is Herring Cove Beach, and I'm going to be here all summer.* So my swimming suit was off within 10 seconds, and I was swimming in that Atlantic Ocean on the beautiful sand beaches of Cape Cod.

Lucky to make my living out there by—it was 1988, and I'd been playing pipes for five years at that point. So I had my bagpipes with me, and I loved the fact that I was earning my living that summer as a busker on the streets of Provincetown, playing my pipes for tourists and folks who would throw some money in the case. It was great wearing a kilt and a tank top and flip flops. Some kind of crazy Cape Cod hat, probably. And the nightlife in Provincetown was great for a gay man. I was meeting people from all over the world, having meaningful conversations all day long with people. You know, they'd stop and comment on my piping, and we'd get into a conversation about where they were from, where I was from, and who we were. That setting is ripe for connecting with people from all over the world who are there for the beauty of Cape Cod and the great reputation for Provincetown being a gay Mecca.

AW: And with it being a gay Mecca—and this might be a conversation for another time—As briefly as we can though, because I don't know if we've really talked about this and your time in Provincetown.

You're meeting people from all over the world, and it's now seven years into the AIDS epidemic—with that as a focal point, specifically that disease, do you recall how that was being discussed at that time with people from all over the country and the world?

DW: Sure. The conversations I was having, either one-on-one or with small groups, were always about, "Why is the government not doing more? What is the denial? How are we going to overcome this?" Also issues of what's safe. What were safe sex practices? You know, how far do you go? How far don't you go? What do relationships mean? What is the significance of saying you're in a relationship but maybe it's an "open" [*air quotes with fingers*] relationship? What does that socially involve, and how are we going to survive this?

You know, I still say that—who knows? I was fatefully very lucky that I knew early on that I would have my own personal levels of engagement, and somehow I have remained—I would say at this point in my life, I'm very lucky to have made it through.

I'm now 58 years old and have remained HIV negative. I'm engaged in meaningful ways with people from all over the world as to how we approach this—the issue of AIDS/HIV.

AW: Okay. We'll stick with the chronology, and maybe we'll backtrack a bit to come back to, for instance, the choice activism. But you could blend that in if you like, as well.

You come back from Provincetown later on in 1988 because you were there during the summer. Correct?

DW: Yes.

AW: And you end up joining Jon Barnett in ACT UP. If you want to talk about your early experiences with ACT UP and maybe how that bled over into other activism, or—

DW: Sure.

AW: Yeah.

DW: I spent the entire summer in Provincetown. I remember, they were having the AIDS Swim on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. Well, Provincetown sort of shuts down after Labor Day. So I had already made my schedule—that I would drive from P-town back to Kansas City on Labor Day—Sunday. But they talked me into staying a little bit late that morning so I could stand in the surf of Cape Cod Bay as the swimmers came swimming in on the AIDS Swim. I said AIDS Run. I meant AIDS Swim. They swam out to the lighthouse across the cove, across the bay, and swam back. So I'm standing there in the surf playing my pipes, wearing my kilt. No shoes or socks, of course. Piped all the swimmers back in. Packed up my pipes. Put my shoes and socks on and drove away from Provincetown on Labor Day, Sunday, heading back to Kansas City.

I got back home to Kansas City and really, pretty quickly, got a phone call from Jon Barnett. He said, "You're back in town. We need to talk. I want to get you involved." He said, "I've started an ACT UP chapter here in Kansas City while you've been gone this summer, and I want you to get involved with me." So it didn't take much for him to convince me that that's where my energy and time could be used. And I got involved right away. We were quickly doing the response to Mark Sweet—?

AW: Sweetland.

DW: Sweetland. Mark Sweetland, right, who had been fired from his job at Circle K?

AW: Telecheck.

DW: Telecheck. [*laughing*]

AW: Yeah.

DW: I'm getting my—

AW: It's all right. Yeah.

DW: Getting my—

AW: There was a Circle K demonstration that took place early in September of 1988, probably right as you were coming back. And then I think the FDA demonstration in October.

DW: Yeah. Hm-hmm [*affirmative*]

AW: World AIDS Day in December. And then in early 1989, Mark Sweetland, I think—ACT UP is focusing toward that—yeah.

DW: So, I'm thinking it was the Circle K demonstration that, perhaps, Jon had already done that when he called me and said, "Let's get organized around some civil disobedience and protesting and see what we can organize in our community." So that was my first introduction to working with ACT UP and Jon and the other folks who were organizing in Kansas City.

AW: And do you recall any of the—well, you had just spoken about Mark Sweetland. And maybe you want to talk through that story as you remember it, and what the importance of it was.

DW: Well, it got good media attention in Kansas City. He was a young man whose father was a medical doctor here in town. So the issue got attention, and it brought more people to ACT UP, actually, who were willing to say, yeah, let's really get organized so that we can respond in a public way. And, you know, the energy of activism feeds on itself. You get more people in the room and suddenly you have more ideas and more connections. I'm very proud of the work that we did as ACT UP Kansas City and how we pulled together a group of individuals who knew that the time was right to start responding publicly and organizing around an issue that obviously was going to be with us for many years.

AW: And what were some of the main goals for ACT UP? As a group, and then what were you hoping to get out of it personally? As you remember it.

DW: Well, the levels of public engagement all lead to the response that there should be a general improvement of how the public is viewing the situation. Let's erase the stigmas. Let's break through the barriers. Let's have situations where people are not in the hospital and being denied access to visits from their partners. Let's talk about drug research. Let's talk about access to drugs. Let's talk about government funding. Let's talk about less government denial. You know, it was very politicized because of the denial of the government—certainly not being denied in fundamentalist circles. So we were constantly battling, you know, the negative responses of what I would just say was the opposition. People that were not only afraid of HIV/AIDS but tying it so closely to

the gay issue and to the notion of gay rights or the opposite—which would be further suppression and oppression of gay people. So what I remember seeing was an awakening of the gay community through the fact that it was suddenly the HIV-affected community. And separation of the issues was impossible for us. Therefore, it became a great way to incorporate both issues into our activism for greater progress, equality, justice, security, and survival.

AW: And we know that on December 6, 1989, you and Jon join Michael Bates with the Human Relations Department in front of the Audit and Operations Committee of the Kansas City Council in order to introduce the idea of an ordinance protecting people with HIV and AIDS. I think it would make it a handicap status.

As you recall, how does the activism with ACT UP eventually culminate in the introduction of an ordinance and what are your recollections of that?

DW: Mike Bates, the Director of Kansas City's Human Relations Department called the ACT UP phone line and suggested that perhaps somebody from ACT UP would come and offer testimony to the Audit and Operations Committee of the City Council that was looking at this resolution, or an ordinance, that had been introduced to them. And you mentioned that you thought it was going to call HIV status a handicap classification. But that's not true at the time. It was initially introduced as just another protected class.

AW: Right.

DW: It was going to be added to the existing Human Rights language which listed all of the class categories to be protected from discrimination.

AW: Right.

DW: So that's what the ordinance was seeking to do. Mike Bates—I mean, in retrospect, but pretty early on too, we were all saying, "Isn't it great that this city—a metropolitan city with a Human Relations Department—is taking the initiative here and has introduced this ordinance to protect HIV status from discrimination." And now they're reaching out to ACT UP Kansas City and saying, "You guys could probably offer some valid testimony to the committee that's looking at this bill [and deciding] whether to pass it on to the full council for a vote." So Jon and I—

I always say we took off our activist drag and put on our political lobbying drag—coats and ties—and went down to City Hall for the committee hearing. And we had both written prepared testimonies, and we offered our testimony to the committee.

Do we want to talk now about the coincidence that on that same day the Audit and Operations Committee was also looking at a noise ordinance that had been introduced which sought to prohibit unnecessary noise of a certain decibel level in residential neighborhoods? And this was a bill that had been introduced by folks who wanted to try to squelch the use of bull horns at the Saturday morning picketing of Planned Parenthood.

The anti-choice picketers often had a bullhorn and were using that as a means of harassing clients and apparently the whole neighborhood—who was saying, "Let's put an ordinance in place that will say that can't be happening. It's too loud."

So the makeup of the crowd in that room was this cadre of citizens who were frequently showing up on Saturday morning at Planned Parenthood to oppose a women's right to choose and these two queer activists from ACT UP Kansas City speaking to the possibility of an ordinance that would protect HIV status from discrimination. So the dynamic was set, and I would say the fuse was lit that day. Because when people walked out of that committee—I don't recall the final outcome on the noise ordinance, but what happened for them in that room that day was suddenly this light bulb in their heads went off saying, *Wow, there's somebody in Kansas City—and apparently from within the city itself—that's proposing we protect HIV status from discrimination.*

And, you know, that's not going to play out well for those people. They were already pretty set on wanting to discriminate and wanting to oppress people with HIV because we're all queer. Right? That's their thinking.

So we walked out of that hearing room, and Mike Bates was great. He came up and thanked Jon and me, and said that he felt that the testimony we offered would be very beneficial for the committee to come to their decision to pass the ordinance on to the full council for a vote. And my recollection is—and perhaps I've got an activist memory that's creating and embellishing a little bit—but I thought Mike was rather nonchalant when he said, "What would you guys think about going ahead now and putting sexual orientation as a protected class category into this same ordinance and see if Kansas City is ready to go ahead and put gay rights in place?"—Non-discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Well, my memory is that Jon and I kind of looked at each other and said, "Oh, yeah. We think that's a good idea. That, that's a great idea, Mike. Let's go for gay rights in Kansas City. Little did I know what we were saying when we said that." You know, Jon and I were elated that this was coming from within city. The city department was furthering this notion—addressing non-discrimination based on sexual orientation at the same time that we would be introducing the HIV status protection.

So Jon and I left City Hall, and our wheels were turning—thinking, imagining, devising, planning. Knowing we had to—

Let's go back a little because Mike—when we said, "Yes, we would be interested in this—" Mike immediately said, "It can't happen unless we educate the community and mobilize the community in support—energize people to work towards this and follow it along through the process of the committee hearings, the city council vote, and the aftermath." You know, how do we implement something like this and keep the civil engagement positive rather than negative? We all knew what could happen during this sort of a legislative attempt.

AW: At that moment, in mid-December (1989) going into January of 1990—in order to educate, in order to organize, to do all the things you just listed, you form a new organization. What was that organization? And how did you and Jon go about doing that?

DW: I think we went home from City Hall on the day that we testified for the Audit and Operations Committee and immediately put our heads together and came up with a list of other good folks in town who we knew would be interested in this idea of forming a core group of activists and people who would be willing to have meetings and put together a process to—

We already knew that we had a council member who was ready to introduce the HIV portion of the ordinance and had also told Mike that if it was going to go forward that we would have sexual orientation included as well. That she would be willing to represent that and sponsor that. And that was Katheryn Shields.

So we had a meeting pretty early on. I haven't tried to run through the list of names at that meeting, but I bet it's somewhere. Maybe in the first interview that we did, I spoke about that. But we sat up in the Law Offices of Slough, Connealy, Irwin, and Madden—the hippie law firm up above the Corner Restaurant—and went around the circle and talked about how we felt about this idea and if we were all willing to commit some time and energy to pursuing gay rights and HIV status protection in Kansas City. So the wheels were turning. The process was in place.

We were meeting—certainly meeting with Katheryn Shields, meeting with Mike Bates, and determining what the process for community engagement could be, knowing that we would have to educate the community, and get them involved. It led to the forming of what we, at that time, called an affinity group of ACT UP Kansas City. And we called it the Human Rights Ordinance Project—as I say, an affinity group of ACT UP. So we operated under the ACT UP umbrella for a few months, and we were pursuing this whole path of getting the ordinance introduced to the City Council.

AW: That maybe a perfect way to talk about—The ordinance is officially introduced in April of 1990. And just weeks before that, in March of 1990, there is a demonstration at a Catholic Church in Kansas City—I believe the Church of the Immaculate Conception?

DW: The Cathedral.

AW: The Cathedral.

DW: It's the diocesan seat.

AW: And you also just mentioned affinity groups—that you were acting under ACT UP's umbrella. But then, at some point you, you were no longer with ACT UP. And from us talking about this particular event in the past, we know that so many things come together

at this event: There is choice activism. There is AIDS activism. There are affinity groups, and something that happens that upsets you—

DW: Sure.

AW: …that day. And if you would like to walk us through how that demonstration came to be, and what happened that day, and what impact, maybe, it had on you?

DW: Well, with ACT UP, we were constantly creating ways to do something public because that was our goal—The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—and you unleash power by publicly doing things that will get attention. The media was our friend. We wanted media.

At that point, I was on the Board of Directors of the Greater Kansas City Choice Coalition—or the Choice Coalition of Greater Kansas City. And they, of course, knew that I was very involved with ACT UP. They knew that I had done this City Hall thing and that we're working towards gay rights as well as HIV status protection. And we decided we would do a combined—kind of a joint demonstration—sort of modeled after what they (ACT UP/New York) had already done in New York City at St. Patrick's Cathedral where they demonstrated on a Sunday morning against the Vatican's positions on sexual orientation and women's choice. What we would like to have seen is a better response to HIV/AIDS by the church.

So we combined the whole idea of choice activists and AIDS activists and gay rights activists all coming together for this demonstration at what we called the "Cathedral of the Immaculate Deception." I remember Marc Hine made a great long banner with those letters painted on it—Cathedral of the Immaculate Deception. We put together fake money that outlined our position on the Vatican's position on the issues that were important to us. And we were trying to give those fake dollar bills to the congregants as they arrived to go into church that morning.

It was a lot to explain in a hurry but, you know—they were certainly seeing what turned out to be over 100 people protesting and kind of ringing around the front entrance of the cathedral with a big banner and lots of signs and posters and flags. And we wanted them to drop those fake bills into the collection plate rather than real money to have an impact on the church—when they counted the collection plate—to see all of these little reminders from their own parishioners that we had had an impact on them by being there.

I met with—this is crazy. I met with the bishop before the demonstration because our position was: we didn't want it to make it a really negative demonstration. Which, I don't know if that makes sense to say it that way. I didn't want there to be any surprises as to what we were going to do. I didn't want them to think that we were going to be harming the building in any way or, you know, hurting—There was not going to be any violence—we hoped, certainly.

And one of the ideas that I had come up with was that we would have the list of our grievances with the Catholic Church. I guess there's a little bit of drama in me. I wanted to actually approach the front door of the church, a la Martin Luther and the Diet of Worms. And I remember that I said this to the bishop: I said, "I will not be hammering anything. I will have a hammer in my hand and I will be reading each of our grievances with the Catholic Church. And when I finish reading it, I will strike the fake nail as if I were nailing this to the door of the church." And I can still remember the bishop looking at me and saying, "Are you crazy?" He said, "If you approach the door of my church on a Sunday morning, I will have you all arrested so fast." So I left that meeting with the bishop thinking—*All right, I guess if I don't want to be arrested, I won't be faux nailing anything to the church door. So I'll cancel that part of my little demonstration.*

But we went ahead and had a great demonstration. I had secured Judith Walker-Riggs, who was the minister at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church. She was also on the Board with me at the Choice Coalition. So I approached her about being our keynote speaker at the demonstration. She graciously took the task. And at the event, at the demonstration, the parishioners were all inside. We were having the press conference—I think we scheduled that for right at noon—and Judith was giving her remarks to the crowd.

All of a sudden, there's this commotion. And we had a lot of media there. I'm sure all three networks, probably, at the time were there with their cameras. And there was commotion down the block on the corner in front of the church. And I'm there with Judith listening to her speech. And all of us there listening turned and looked, and there is a small cluster of people burning a Vatican flag—not part of the planned demonstration from my perspective as the representative from ACT UP who was working with the Choice Coalition to pull off this demonstration. We had planned really thoroughly as to what our signage would say, how the demonstration would play out, the sorts of things that were going to happen—and there had certainly been no mention of, "Well, let's burn a Vatican flag."

So that's where the whole affinity group of ACT UP came into question that very night. Because after the demonstration, we had our weekly ACT UP meeting on Sunday night. And I had a few hours between the demonstration and the meeting that night to process my own involvement in the demonstration, as well as any future involvement with ACT UP and my dual work as an activist. I was now so involved with the notion of the gay rights movement and still very involved with the Choice Coalition of Greater Kansas City—which, of course, was very upset that the demonstration turned into—

The sound bite and the graphic image on the news that night was the burning of the Vatican flag. High drama. The cameras loved it. I was afraid that our message had been lost. Because they focused on—If I can remember, the soundbite that I heard on the news was, "A small group of activists burned a Vatican flag in front of the Catholic Cathedral this morning." I don't think they spent very much time talking about the real issues that we were presenting and why we were there. It became a very dramatic visual film soundbite for the news to carry. So at the next Choice Coalition meeting there was a lot

of discussion about "Well, how did this happen? Why did this happen?" We had planned for months how we were going to run this demonstration and what was going to be happening. And yet, here it was, some activists from ACT UP—one of the groups that we were tying in with for this.

And so, backing up now to the meeting that night; the discussion was all around, "Well, what are the parameters within which an affinity group of ACT UP can operate without getting full group approval for how things are going to happen publicly?" So it was a heated discussion, and I would say for a few more weeks, Jon and I both were engaged in this process of trying to come to some balance. And I ended up at that point, and I think Jon did too—we made the decision that we had to divest our energy from ACT UP and put it more towards working on the HIV ordinance and the gay rights ordinance.

So that was, sort of, an upheaval and change in the path. But I will say that Jon and I both knew that the participation of ACT UP was crucial. We weren't in any way abandoning the group's purposes or causes, but we needed to figure out how to let the Human Rights Ordinance Project become its own entity with a very focused political agenda. And we'd work with ACT UP in any way possible for their role as a community based, social activism—high civil disobedience even—response mechanism, as we went down this path together.

AW: Okay. Let's take a quick break at this moment, just as far as—I'll pause this.

[recording pauses]
[recording resumes]

AW: Okay, we're back. And before we left, we were talking about the demonstration that took place just weeks before the ordinance was introduced. And if you could tell us a little bit about once the ordinance was introduced, or right before it was introduced—

We have talked about in the past, a document that says that Katheryn Shields approached the group (the Human Rights Ordinance Project), and said that she could probably sell the majority of it (Ordinance 65430). But there was one key component that wasn't going to fly with the rest of the city council member—or many of the city council members. And that was regarding transgendered individuals. If you could talk us through the introduction of the ordinance and the compromises which had to be made.

DW: Now, you may know better than I do, Austin. But before we start doing this filming part—I know we're filming, but—I was under the impression, if my memory is correct, is that we did include—that the definition of sexual orientation included transgender.

AW: As I understand it—

DW: The first time it was introduced and that Katheryn got feedback from the committee, even, that they wouldn't pass it out of committee.

AW: Yes. As I remember it—And so, for someone listening—[we have] the researcher and then the participant trying to—I know that on April 10th or the 12th [1990], somewhere right around there, is when it's introduced. And the official introduction does not include—

DW: Okay.

AW: …trans individuals. But it was just before. So I think for months the Human Rights Ordinance Project was pushing for the introduction—

DW: Right.

AW: …of an ordinance with sexual orientation.

DW: Yeah. And if I recall, we took the language from the Seattle ordinance.

AW: I remember there being a debate—I saw in the sources, for instance, [a debate] between sexual orientation verses sexual preference.

DW: Yeah.

AW: And I think it's fair to say that wording—and getting the wording right and what it included—was obviously very important to getting this introduced. But do you recall though, when Katheryn Shields came to the group and said, we can't include—

DW: Right. I think—

AW: …transvestites or transsexuals.

DW: Since you've just lined out the chronology for me better to remind me that it was ultimately introduced minus transgender—As we were preparing for the introduction of an ordinance, we knew that we had to come up with language, definitions, what the simple gist of the ordinance would be in terms of what we were trying to accomplish. So we were looking at other cities that had already passed HIV status and gay rights ordinances.

And, of course, we were working very closely with Katheryn Shields and Mayor Berkley, who had signed on as a co-sponsor—or was prepared to sign on as a co-sponsor. The language that we were using I believe may have come from Seattle, Washington's recently passed municipal ordinance. And the definition we used for sexual orientation was going to be an individual's perceived or actual heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender status, or transsexual identity. That was what we initially were proposing to Katheryn Shields. She, I think, probably had conversations with her fellow council members. And we had lots of meetings with Katheryn, of course, and this one in particular was down at City Hall with a core group of the Human Rights Ordinance Project people.

Katheryn came into the room, and I remember very solemnly she said, you know, I'm sorry to say that the way you're presenting the definition of sexual orientation will not fly with the council, and particularly not the committee members that will be looking at this in committee. She said, "It's just not going to work for them to have sexual orientation include transgender individuals." So, that was a tough call. We had some transgender people on our committee who had been working very hard and knew that we were all focused together on making a broad definition that would include everybody.

For me, personally, that was a tough decision to have to make; realizing that the group was going to make the decision to do that instead of soldiering forward and seeing if we couldn't have this public debate in the eyes of the media and everybody else as to why its important to include everybody. Looking back now, all I can say is we were all caught up in what was happening. And perhaps Kansas City was not ready. As we later learned, they weren't even ready yet for sexual orientation of any kind. But at that moment, that was a tough day for all of us who were working so hard to try to put together a really good and inclusive ordinance or law.

AW: So, it sounds as though Katheryn Shields—in that moment, and the group as a whole—was trying to anticipate arguments that were going to be made against this ordinance. And as it gets introduced, there are weeks of testimony in front of the Finance Committee in which—I'm going to just go through a few of the oppositions' arguments, and then get your response to how it was you responded to these key arguments they were making. And just your thoughts on that:

So many people testified, for example, about the "slippery slope"—that if you give homosexuals rights, well then, what about pedophiles? What about bestiality? What about necrophiliacs?

And there was also an argument that—it maybe didn't sound as ludicrous as those first ones—about "special rights" in general. Why should one group of people have special rights?

How is it that you as a group countered all those charges?

DW: I think it's always good to remember that at the point where we were doing the work we were doing; we weren't inventing the wheel. In fact, we weren't even reinventing the wheel. We were just trying to take a wheel that had already worked in other places and put it on our axles here in Kansas City.

We knew going into this that you're going to have a community of opposition. In fact, I already mentioned that we saw some of those faces of the opposition in the Finance and Audit Committee hearing that Jon and I attended back in December. They were tipped off that day, and they started organizing; getting ready to oppose whatever sort of an ordinance we were going to come up with. So we knew that there would be the opposition showing up at the committee hearings. We could look at any other records of

metropolitan areas in the country that had addressed this issue and read through transcripts and see the kinds of arguments that were being made. It's a national argument, of course. You hear it all the time: "Well, if you give the homosexuals their rights, what's next? They're going to come and want rights to have, you know—bestiality is going to be a protected category. They want to be able to have sex with their dogs. You know, why should they get a special right? Why should they be specially singled out?"

And, of course, the fastest and easiest argument on that one is, "Well, we're not being singled out." Our ordinance clearly defined sexual orientation as heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality—as we ended up having to take transgender out. So to say that we were trying to get special rights, we were simply saying, "No. We're trying to define what the phrase 'sexual orientation' means and that it covers heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals." I always like to say, "No. The opposition is really wanting special rights. They want the special right to discriminate against individuals in our culture that they choose to find unsavory."

The other distinction we tried to make was that bestiality is a behavior; it's not a sexual orientation—and clearly not part of the definition of sexual orientation in the ordinance. Pedophilia is a behavior. It's a criminal behavior. There are already laws in place that punish individuals who perpetrate pedophilia. We had our arguments in place because—certainly everything's from my perspective in this interview—but we were on the correct side of the issue. We had the rational, thoughtful arguments against their charges.

AW: And were you optimistic, even cautiously? I mean—

DW: [coughs]

AW: …on May 10th, 1990, it (Ordinance 65430) gets voted back to committee. And there's TV testimony from you that day. You have tears in your eyes, and you're saying—you know, a lot of people were saying—"We'll be back." But were you prepared for it to be sent back to committee? Or were you hopeful that it was actually going to pass?

DW: Once we got the definition in place and had all the wording for the ordinance, of course, Katheryn Shields and Mayor Berkley introduced it, and it went to the committee hearings. Those first committee hearings were such an eye opener for all of us. As I said, we knew what we were up for and what was going to be happening. But that's quite different from walking into the chambers of the City Council and seeing a packed house—you know, 500 people in the crowd. I don't know what the delineation was, those in favor of or those opposed to the ordinance, but we had our camp, certainly. The testimony unfolded, and hour after hour after hour you listen to noble, thoughtful, compassionate testimony coming from the perspective of this being an ordinance that will make Kansas City better, verses the hateful vitriol, the irrationality, and the grotesque imagery that was talked about. The notion that this would put Kansas City on the road to hell, basically, is what the opposition tried to convey in their testimony. And it was hard for a lot of people that were—You know, we had encouraged the crowd to show up to

support the ordnance. So we did have a full house. And a lot of people, I think, for the first time as allies or as gay and lesbian bisexual people realized what the public position might be. So it was very moving testimony for, I think, did we do two weeks on the first introduction?

AW: It actually goes—

DW: [coughs]

AW: …three weeks.

DW: Excuse me. So, we did—

AW: So, yeah.

DW: I think it was—

AW: It was in April and debated all throughout into, I think, yeah.

DW: [coughs]

AW: May 2nd or 3rd it gets voted to the full council, and the next week it gets voted back to committee; in theory, to have more testimony. But, of course, no more testimony ever takes place. And it's essentially killed.

But when it's sent back to committee that day, the news would frequently play this clip of Carl Hippensteel getting up and chanting, "Human rights now. Human rights now."

DW: Right.

AW: I mean, however you want to talk about it. But—

DW: Okay.

AW: …just, you have to—It's a big defeat. And you have to regroup or either give up. I mean, was there any point that you thought about giving up?

DW: So, after we did, we did three weeks of public testimony in committee. And all three weeks were emotionally charged. People on both sides of the issue that were coming out because they'd heard testimony the week before. Suddenly, they've got new people they're bringing in, and we were bringing in new people, of course, too. And all of that testimony is taped, I hope. I think we have records of that.

The ordinance was passed out of committee. It went to a full council vote. And we were doing our best during all of this time to work with city council members and lobby them to understand what this organization was about and hopefully get their vote. We went

into the vote on May 10th with the notion that it was going to pass. We had our votes lined up. We counted our votes, as they say, the day of—we got to City Hall in time to meet with all of our yes votes before the council meeting, just to make sure they were still comfortable with the bill and with their committed yes vote. So we had the rug pulled out from under us when we lost. I think we lost two of the votes that we were counting on. So it went down in defeat; that first effort by the council to vote for it.

AW: Do you recall the two individuals who you thought were going to vote?

DW: Bobby Hernandez.

AW: Okay.

DW: And—oh, I'm sorry.

AW: No, you're fine. Let me say this. Because I'm trying not to lead, but the next week members of ACT UP—I don't know if you were there or not. I don't think so—showed up and taunted the council. This is where Mark Chaney—

DW: Oh, I was there.

AW: You were there? Oh, okay. Do you recall what I'm talking about? That the next week ACT UP comes back. And also, we haven't talked about, for instance, Mark Chaney yet, for someone who's not around to talk about—

DW: Right.

AW: …his own experience. But he does something quite dramatic on that day. What was ACT UP mad about? What was their thought process? And did they take it out on any particular individuals, or—

DW: Do you think I could have a cough drop in my mouth while we're doing this?

AW: Oh, yeah. Yes. Sure.

DW: I don't want to garble my—

AW: No, you're fine.

DW: …delivery.

AW: Well, let's go ahead and we'll take a quick break.

[recording pauses]
[recording resumes]

AW: Okay. We took a quick break for David to have a cough drop. And when we broke, we were talking about the way in which the ordinance was sent back to committee. And the supporters—well, I guess, how did you feel that day and how was it that you regrouped from that moment?

DW: When it came time for the council to do their full vote, we were, of course, sitting there with a lot of stress and anxiety and hope that we had the votes lined up, which we felt we had before the meeting had started. And as they went around the circle and called out their votes, we were really devastated—We lost three votes: Bobby Hernandez, Emanuel Cleaver, and one of the sponsors of the bill, Mayor Dick Berkley. So that was a real surprise to us. Devastating in many ways.

The council chambers erupted, of course. The opposition was cheering. Those of us there on behalf of the ordinance and advocating for it were very upset. We exited the council chambers out into the hallways, and I didn't know what my first response needed to be. TV cameras were there, of course, and we were getting opportunities to give sound bites. I was more concerned with getting the crowd somehow engaged in the process of where do we go from here and what we can do.

Part of me, I remember, I thought, *I wish I could have the megaphone right now and somehow get the whole crowd to sing, "If I had a Hammer" or "Blowing in the Wind"—or something.* You know? Always looking for the musical moment of how we could tie activism together with the greater human cause and what this day might mean for us. But I chose to call Judith Walker-Riggs at All Souls Unitarian Church and say, "Judith, we just lost the ordinance. They sent it back to committee." And she immediately said, "Do you still have a crowd there at City Hall?" I said, "Yeah, a huge crowd." She said, "Get up on the steps and announce"—so, I climbed up on the stairs and I said, "I just spoke with Judith Walker-Riggs over at All Soul's Unitarian Church. She's invited us all to come over and debrief as a group, to talk about this, and see where we go next and how we're prepared to fight for this." So, we did.

I would say there were easily 200 or more people that showed up at the Hall there at All Soul's Unitarian Church. Judith spoke to the crowd from the perspective of this process is always known to be lengthy. There are turns in the road that you don't expect. You can't give up the fight. Don't be discouraged. She gave a beautiful rousing welcome to us. And we continued that afternoon just sharing our personal feelings and, sort of, debriefing, as she had said. I knew that day that we were in this for the long haul.

There was a lot of work to do. We obviously had to recoup those votes and figure out a way to go through the process. I think they call it Rule 28 that allows an ordinance to be reintroduced. I think the 28 comes from the amount of days you have in the committee for them to tweak it or change it in a way that they think it will be supported if they reintroduce it as a full vote for the council. So we immediately started that campaign. You know, invoke Rule 28. Go with the Rule 28 rule and bring this back to council, or bring this ordinance back out of committee for a full vote.

The very next week, at the city council meeting, some ACT UP folks were present and really called out Emanuel Cleaver because he had been one of our solid votes and was one of the three that voted against it to send it back to committee. There was a harsh exchange. Mark Chaney, very dramatically, had a vile of blood. He pronounced this was HIV positive blood, and he said 'The City Council has blood on its hands.' And he broke that vile of blood. And I think he put his hand in the blood and put a handprint on the window of the door into the council chambers. It was hugely dramatic and emotional—on the news, of course, that night. I was in the council hall. Jon was there. Lots of us were there, you know, to witness this. And it certainly brought more public attention to the issue and in many ways mobilized a stronger community of support. It probably mobilized more opposition, as well. So we were on this path of conflict that was going to take us into the summer.

AW: Let's talk about two things real quick. One thing that we've talked about in the past; if you could just tell us, at All Soul's Unitarian Church that day, you had told me in the past about when Katheryn Shields showed up.

DW: Yeah.

AW: What was the response from the crowd?

DW: Katheryn showed up at the church, as well. And the crowd, of course, went wild. It was like a hero's welcome. She had had a baby in recent weeks. So she had her baby with her. And the crowd response was one of, you know, "Thank you so much for what you've done and tried to do today, and know that we are in debt to you for having done what you've done so far. But we are with you to keep this going." So Katheryn saw the crowd response as being very encouraging to fight for this and to keep the fight going and to succeed.

AW: Do you remember the Mother's Day rally, as well?

DW: Absolutely. I think—So, that was the 10th, right?

AW: The day it was sent back to committee.

DW: Yeah.

AW: And then, I think that Sunday, just a few—

DW: And we had already—

AW: …days later.

DW: Yes. We had already scheduled—I think I was actually already scheduled to give a sermon at All Soul's on Sunday after that May 10th vote. So that would have been Mother's Day, Sunday. And I think we announced—because Judith was right there, of

course, and I knew I was giving the sermon at the church that weekend. So I think I talked with HROP—Human Rights Ordinance Project—people, and we basically said, "Let's have a rally, a Mother's Day rally, for Human Rights, right at Mill Creek Park. Just an easy walk down from All Souls." So those of us that might be going to the church—and I would be doing a sermon there—I knew we could get down to Mill Creek by—I think we called it for 12:30 in the afternoon to give people from all over town time to get there if they go to any other church services or anything. And we had a Mother's Day rally for human rights. It was well-attended, really beautiful. My parents were there from Leavenworth because they were coming anyway to hear me give my sermon at the church.

AW: And you had just spoken about a charged-up ACT UP and the supporters, but also the opposition. And it's in the midst of this testimony that a group of opponents form a group named FIRED UP. What did FIRED UP stand for? And what were your earliest recollections of that group?

DW: Hm-hmm. [affirmative] As all of this unfolds, and I've already mentioned that, you know, when Jon and I spoke at the Audit and Operations Committee way back in December of '89, there were characters in the audience that day from the opposition because they were there for the bullhorn ordinance for Planned Parenthood noise disturbance charges. Some of those names I think I should mention so we can keep characters in place here: Regina Dinwiddie, Karen Ogelsby, Connie Cierpiot. I think Karen and Connie were the two that were really the motivating energy behind the group FIRED UP, which they formed in complete response to ACT UP—which is, of course, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. They proudly came up with their name for their group which was FIRED UP—to act in response to ACT UP and to HROP, the Human Rights Ordinance Project—and FIRED UP stood for Freedom Involves Responsibly Exposing Decadence and Upholding Principle. So that was their group. They were operating under that moniker.

AW: Did you have a nickname?

DW: Of course, we had a great nickname. I will give credit where it's due. John Conner, a good friend who was in ACT UP—I don't know how long it took him to think of this. But his version of FIRED UP was Fundamentally Irrational Religiously Enraged Demons Urging Prejudice. So that was a quick inside joke for all of us—that every time we saw FIRED UP, we knew that that's what it stood for. Those Fundamentally Irrational Religiously Enraged Demons Urging Prejudice. So the stage was set. We had FIRED UP verses HROP verses ACT UP.

AW: And throughout the rest of that year, late in the year, the AIDS portion of the ordinance does get introduced and passed. And actually, it was introduced by Emanuel Cleaver. And Dan Cofran, I believe, introduces a resolution—it doesn't really have any teeth—to protect city employees from—

DW: Right.

AW: …discrimination and sexual orientation. At around that same time, you drop the O from HROP.

DW: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: And let's talk about it in that sense. The Human Rights Ordinance Project evolves into the Human Rights Project. Why?

DW: So we were at the point where we're really lobbying to invoke the Rule 28 to bring the ordinance back. There was huge public awareness at this point between the blood issue with Mark Chaney's vile of blood at City Hall, and good press around the ordinance not passing and being sent back to committee. So there was a lot of attention on the issue.

The supporters on City Council were all eager to be on the right side of the issue—to let their support be known publicly because they saw that as something very advantageous to the political side of this. So I don't know exactly the process—if the committee decided that they could send it back to city council and get a full vote to support the HIV status inclusion and take sexual orientation out for the time being or at least for that particular ordinance. So that's what ended up happening, I do believe—they took sexual orientation off the bill, sent it back to the city council for a full vote and it passed.

So the Council was ready to vote to protect individuals with HIV from discrimination in Kansas City. Dan Cofran came forward and said that he thought it would work to do it, at that point, as a resolution that would protect city employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation. And his rationale was that maybe we could do this step by step piecemeal. Let's go ahead and show publicly that the city council is ready to protect city employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation, and that could be a helpful step for the next process of a full ordinance.

AW: And actually, another thing happens right at that time which is a two-term limit gets put on city council members, which means there's going to be a lot of turnover in the upcoming election. And that probably effects Jon [Barnett's] run for city council. And let's talk about all of that in a second.

Could you briefly talk about why you dropped the O? What was the meaning behind it becoming the Human Rights Project?

DW: Given the fact that the city council was ready to vote and did vote on including HIV status—and we realized we had months of work ahead of us to try to get sexual orientation introduced now as a separate ordinance or something to pursue gay rights in Kansas City—it became clear that we were no longer just the one-show or one-event group. The Human Rights Ordinance Project was a little too specific. Because we just got one ordinance passed. Let's call it the Human Rights Project. So we took the O out and just became HRP, the Human Rights Project, knowing that we had a full agenda ahead of us that would take us into a lot more work towards the whole broad general

concept of equality, justice, and safety for LGBTQ people. So there was a little shift in our mission. We broadened the mission, broadened the task, and went to work. And, of course, by then Jon and I were paid employees of the Human Rights Project. We were working with a salary to do gay rights advocacy in Kansas City.

AW: Okay. There's a couple things I want to ask you about, and ironically, your voice is getting stronger. So, that's a good thing.

DW: Oh, the cough drop.

AW: Yeah. The decision to have Jon [Barnett] run for City Council; how'd that come about and what was the importance of that election? And when it came to screening candidates, the Human Rights Project, and that local election where Emanuel Cleaver is running for mayor against Bob Lewellen—Joanne Collins was also in that mayoral race to begin with—and then you have your own [city council] candidate in Jon Barnett.

What were some of the things that were you trying to make happen on the local level in that election of 1991?

DW: So the fall of 1990 is important in that we realized that we were becoming very politically involved in Kansas City. The whole process of organizing and mobilizing the gay community around the possibility of gay rights and the fact that we had already achieved HIV status protection—we suddenly had a very engaged electorate within the gay community. They were ready to do whatever it took to have their voice have some power. And we organized around all of the campaigns and the notion of screening candidates.

The Kansas City Green Party came to Jon and me one day at the office with this notion that they wanted one of us to run for city council as a Green, but also as an openly-gay council candidate. They were already mounting a mayoral candidate as a Green Party member and they thought it would be good timing to keep a good focus on the ordinance and to bring recognition to the Green Party for embracing this idea. So Jon and I talked it over. We talked with our Board. And I recall Dee Barry, the woman from the Kansas City Greens, the way she presented it to us was, "We don't care which one of you runs for office, but the other one will be able to work at the Green Party campaign headquarters on the campaign and get a lot of support that way. So you guys will both be present in a big way during this campaign."

Well, Jon ends up being—the decision for him was that he would be the candidate. So we mount this candidacy for Jon Barnett to run as an at-large candidate from from the Sixth District [note: it was actually the second district]—his neighborhood, where he lived—as an openly-gay Green candidate for Kansas City City Council. It was a fabulous decision on our part. It put the issue in every public debate—to have an openly-gay candidate on all of the forums where he spoke as a candidate to be able to say that one of the issues that he's really working on is to pass this gay rights ordinance in Kansas City. It was great.

We put together a platform that was very much in line with the Green Party and built a real campaign. We did all kinds of advertising, radio advertising, yard signs—We also, of course, mobilized all of our HRP volunteers to work for Jon's campaign. We knew this was something that would be a really public campaign for an openly-gay candidate. The outcome was a wonderful public response. We printed sample ballots and started handing them out on election day so that you would see the Human Rights Project sample ballot. We did candidate screenings to come up with endorsed candidates, and that led to such a response at the polls that I'm sure at one point, in some election cycle, *The Kansas City Star* said that the Human Rights Project ballot was the most successful and most popular ballot being handed out at the polls that morning on election day. Now, I think that 1990 was also been a presidential caucusing year?

AW: Oh, caucusing.

DW: Or, would not, '92 would have been—

AW: '92 is when—yeah.

DW: '92. Okay.

AW: Right. Yeah.

DW: So that first election cycle with Jon on the ballot was very successful in a lot of ways.

AW: Do you recall something that was happening that exact same month? It wasn't just Kansas City—

You appear in front of the Independence City Council about a hate crime statistic bill that was being introduced. And there was apparently, because we also have film of this—actually, I don't know if you spoke in front of them or not, or if others did—

DW: At Independence—

AW: Yeah.

DW: …on the KKK thing?

AW: Yes. And so—

DW: Yes. Oh, yeah.

AW: …KKK. That's right. Okay. You did speak. So throughout all this time, there's also discussion taking place about hate crimes.

DW: Right.

AW: And the issue in Independence seemed to be whether or not to include sexual orientation as part of hate crimes.

DW: Yes.

AW: And the KKK apparently shows up. And could you speak to why was the issue of hate crimes important in the context of everything that was happening? And what happened with the KKK?

DW: So as all of this is playing out, and we are working hard to figure out how we're going to get sexual orientation reintroduced with an ordinance and get gay rights in Kansas City, sort of out of the blue one morning we are given a cassette tape. Somebody brought it to Jon and me at the office. And we—actually, it may have happened that we saw a very small article in *The Kansas City Star* that said "Hate calls are being made to students in Independence," I believe.

The short article mentioned that there was a phone tape being presented to school-aged children talking about—It was really grotesque. It was likening homosexuality to, you know, satanism. And talking about how blacks and gays would be hanging from the trees in Independence. Just full of horrible hate. And I'm pretty sure we have that tape. It's transcribed somewhere in the library. So, of course, Jon and I took that issue right away to other agencies in town that would want to fight this—Oh, they identified—The caller said that they were with the Independence Branch of the KKK or the Grand Knights of the KKK from Independence, Missouri. So, we had that.

We called *The Kansas City Star* and got a little news story about it. But in the first article in *The Kansas City Star*, it was portrayed as a racist recording. Now, if you listen to the recording, if I recall, we sort of broke it down and said, "Well, about 10 percent of it was racism. The other 90 percent was very, very clearly homophobia and gay bashing and HIV bashing." So, this was focused much more on the queer community and HIV than it was on racism, but *The Kansas City Star* portrayed it as that. So we wanted to set the record straight and get mobilized about how we're going to fight this kind of KKK hatred that's surfacing.

At about the same time, I think, Independence has decided that they're going to respond by introducing a hate crimes statistics ordinance in their Independence City Council. So obviously, we want to go and defend that. We hear rumors that one of the council members in Independence, Penny Bennett, is in favor of the ordinance but she wants to take sexual orientation out of the language of their hate crimes statistic ordinance—for reasons we will soon find out. But, of course, from the political standpoint, we knew that all this hatred that was surfacing was homophobia. And to take sexual orientation out of their hate crimes bill would be like no response at all. So we mobilized. We found as many of our HRP volunteers that lived in Independence or were born in Independence, and could go over to the Independence Council meeting and offer testimony and support

of not only the ordinance but the complete ordinance. [We would say] "Please leave sexual orientation in-tact as one of the protected categories."

Members of the KKK show up at that meeting. And they're outside of the Independence City Hall, you know, Ku-Kluxing or whatever they call it with their signs and hate speech. We go in for the meeting, and Penny Bennett makes her proposal to strike sexual orientation from the language. [coughs] A debate ensues within the council, and they listen to the testimony from so many of us that are there, and they actually end up voting not to vote—to table the whole thing.

Those of us watching are seeing the fear among the Council and want them to do the right thing which would be to pass the whole thing with sexual orientation included. But they didn't have the courage to do that with the KKK outside and with plenty of people from Independence in there saying, "No special rights." Why include sexual orientation?

So that's a side battle to what we're doing in Kansas City with the gay rights ordinance battle. But one that certainly pulls in a lot of media; pulls in much more support for our work, brings new volunteers into the mix, and continues the work that we're doing which is focused so broadly, as I said earlier. We're trying to address every little brush fire that turns up in the community around LGBTQ issues.

AW: And we had gone into that saying that Jon—it was happening right as his primary run was occurring. And he did not get elected to the city council. But was it still a victory, and if so, in what ways?

DW: As we mounted Jon's campaign, as I said, we were putting him in every public forum we could find, and doing everything to get awareness out there that there was an openly-gay candidate running for city council. We went up to the mall in North Kansas City when they had a candidate day during the campaign. And—

Oh. An interesting side bar here is, of course, that after Jon filed as a candidate, Regina Dinwiddie filed as a candidate as well—Regina Dinwiddie from the Planned Parenthood sidewalk picketing. She's had given testimony numerous times in city hall in opposition to our ordinances. So we have an anti-gay candidate running for city council, as well. Not in the same race that Jon's in. She's in a different district. So she's running as an in-district candidate from her district.

But she's there this day at the North Kansas City Mall. Jon and I showed up to get a table set up to represent his campaign, and Regina's got the bullhorn—just like she has at Planned Parenthood—and she saw Jon and me walking in and over the bullhorn to the mall full of people out there in the concourse where we're setting up our tables, she announces, "Oh, ladies and gentlemen, here comes Jon Barnett, the openly-gay candidate for city council. Oh, Jon, please, please don't kiss any babies today. Please don't give any babies AIDS today." So that's the kind of campaign tactics that Regina was apparently willing to use to give some negative campaigning to Jon's campaign. But that

was a moment, certainly, for Jon and me to look at each other and think, *Wow, what are we into? What's going on here?* Many, many cases like that.

So Jon has the election. Out of six candidates in the primary for his position, he took fourth place—a good showing for an openly-gay candidate with a very open campaign. The work we did was mobilizing enough people to vote for him, that we looked at the campaign voter turnout, the voter results, and we were able to really color code a map.

The goal was to have his run at-large so that we could see [the results] throughout the entire city. Because all of the city votes on the at-large candidates. So you can see where there were any pockets of support. And Tim Van Zandt, an HRP volunteer who started putting all this together, came to us and basically said, "You know, we could really focus on some neighborhoods and we could do really well at the upcoming caucusing," which was 1991 for the 1992 presidential races. So from Jon's campaign, we gleaned enough neighborhood voter information that we put together areas in the city where we knew we had enough supportive voters. They could go into their caucus and, as we said, "Let's sweep the caucuses. Let's get as many LGBTQ or queer-allied people at their caucuses to get elected to go to the State Convention as a delegate."

So we suddenly got kind of involved in the national political scene by going into our caucuses. And I remember by then Jon Barnett and I were living together with his partner and John Conner; the four of us had a great old house together as a communal living setting—great party house. So we just kind of threw it open—"Everybody that goes to your caucus tonight, when your caucus ends, come back to our house here and let's have a big party and find out how many of us got elected to delegates." And the outcome was great. One after another, people were pouring through the door at our house saying, "I'm a Delegate to the State Convention." "I'm a Delegate to the State Convention." I was elected as a Delegate to the State Convention for Paul Tsongas. I was supporting Paul Tsongas for president that year. So—

AW: What year would that have been?

DW: 1991. Right? Caucus is in '91. Because vote would have been in '92.

AW: Okay. Oh. Nice.

DW: Yeah.

AW: Yeah. Okay. I want to take a quick break, and let you put the cough drop back in your mouth real quick.

[recording pauses]
[recording resumes]

AW: Okay. We're back from the break. David has somewhat lost his voice. And we want to go through some more sources before we continue on with the chronology. So, for today,

November 27th, 2017, we're going to call this interview to a close. And David, I appreciate your time.

DW: Thanks, Austin. It's been great talking with you again.

[End of audio]