

Oral Memoirs
of
Debbie Simmons

An Interview Conducted by

Sara Raffel

June 16, 2018

LGBTQ History Museum of Central Florida

LGBTQ History Museum of Central Florida, Inc.

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Sara Raffel

Transcriber: Sara Raffel

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

The LGBTQ History Museum of Central Florida is an organization whose mission is to collect, preserve and exhibit the histories of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities of Central Florida

RICHES is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Debbie Simmons was the co-owner of Shelbie Press and a founder and president of the Metropolitan Business Association (MBA).

Sara Raffel was the Director of Oral Histories for the LGBTQ History Museum of Central Florida.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Debbie Simmons is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 16, 2018.

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Abstract

An oral history interview of Debbie Simmons, the co-owner of Shelbie Press and a founding member of the Metropolitan Business Association (MBA), an organization supporting LGBTQ businesses in Orlando, FL. As MBA president, she also helped found Come Out with Pride and the LGBTQ History Museum of Central Florida. This interview was conducted by Sara Raffel at Shelbie Press in Orlando, Florida, on June 16th, 2018. Some of the topics covered include attending the first gay pride parade in Orlando, founding the Metropolitan Business Association, facilitating a network of allies and inspiring activism, working with the Human Relations Board of the City of Orlando, building an LGBTQ+ community and collaborating with other groups, forming Come Out With Pride, the history of the gay rights movement, preserving the history of the LGBTQ+ community, her favorite memory from work at GLBT History Museum of Central Florida, organizing the first exposition of the Metropolitan Business Association, how the small business community impacted the LGBTQ+ community, omitting references to homosexuality in the organization's name, and goals and challenges for the GLBT Museum of Central Florida and the Metropolitan Business Association.

Debbie Simmons

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Sara Raffel
June 16, 2018
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Raffel Uh, today is Saturday, June 16th, 2018. My name is Sara Raffel and I'm conducting an oral history with Debbie Simmons of Orlando, Florida. The interview is being conducted at Shelbie Press in Orlando, Florida. Uh, so, Debbie, could you please state your name?

Simmons Yes. I'm Debbie Simmons.

Raffel And what brought you to Orlando? And how long have you lived here?

Simmons I moved to Orlando in 1978, uh, shortly after high school. And I, um – my father had moved here in the early 70s. Uh, we had moved from Miami up to Central Florida, but in a more rural area. My mother and that side of my family. And so when I turned 18, I didn't want to stay in the rural, uh, community that I was living in. So Orlando seemed the logical choice to start a new life.

0:00:54

Attending the first gay pride parade in Orlando and founding the Metropolitan Business Association

Raffel And you've mentioned that, uh, your involvement in the first gay pride parade in Orlando in 1991 started your community activism. Can you describe what led up to that and why you first decided to march?

Simmons Yes. Um, in 1990, uh, my partner and I bought a house. And we went through all of the machinations at that time that we had to do in order to buy a house together as a couple. Um, and we had two friends – close friends that invited us to attend the first gay pride parade in Orlando. Um, to say we were nervous is putting it mildly. But we did attend. And four of us – there was[sic] about 100 people at the parade total: participants and, uh, people observing. We were the last four in the parade. And by the time we get to the end of the parade route, what a sigh of relief. Uh, we didn't see any Ku Klux Klan that year. So that really, uh, set the stage for me.

Um, I started getting really interested in the people that had put that together because I thought they were so courageous and I wanted to know them all. And I wanted to do whatever I could to make a change for our community so that it

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would make it easier for all of us to buy a house together. To start a business together. Uh, just to live our lives and not be discriminated against.

Um, so, uh, the next thing that happened is[sic] I started attending meetings at the Center.¹ And, um, the editor of *the Centerfold* newspaper at the Center put a— a blurb in the newspaper and said—it said something to the effect, uh, “If you’re interested in starting a business guild—is it time for Orlando to do that— come to the Center on January 15th, 1992, and let’s talk about it.” So a dozen of us showed up at that meeting. And then, um, from there we started, uh, identifying— fortunately someone had brought bylaws, uh, not to the very first meeting, but from Atlanta and from Tampa. And so we utilized their bylaws to put our own together and to start the Metropolitan Business Association².

Um, things moved, it seems like, at a really fast pace from there. But then when I look back it took a long time. Back then we didn’t have social media. We didn’t have cell phones. So we had to do everything the old fashioned way, which was literally have one-on-one relationships. We spent a lot of time together. Got to know each other. Um, developed the organization. Started having monthly meetings. We met at places. Back then it was a lot different than it is now in that people were really nervous about going into any establishment that was identified with the gay community. Um, but we did have a lot of our meetings at Joy Metropolitan Community Church. We had some meetings at The Center. Um, and so we developed the board of directors and then, um, set our mission in place, filed papers with the state, uh, and, uh, identified the Metropolitan Business Association.

Raffel Alright. And who were some of the people that were on that first board of directors that were instrumental in starting it?

Simmons Well, this is where I get into trouble, like I said, with the names. Um, the first president was Keith Morrison. Uh, I was the vice president. Dorothy Coleman was the treasurer. Mary Brooks was the secretary. Uh, Karen Goode was the programs director. Vicky Meechum was the membership director. Dick Shaw was the, uh— became the vice president when I became the president in ’92. And, uh, Sam Singhouse, Sandy Fink, Tom Dyer. Uh, those were the really—the beginning folks. Um, Mary Brooks, who was the secretary for five years— she and I carried the MBA banner in the 1992 parade. Um, and in that parade there were seven of us from the MBA. Um, and Mike Sipoligo that had put the ad in the paper—that was the editor of *Centerfold* at The Center. Uh, he also walked with us with the banner. Um, Dorothy Coleman, uh, she is still living in Montverde, but she’s quite a bit older than me. She’s in her eighties. And she—I admired her so much when I met her. Her and, um, Dick Scholl. Dick has passed away. Uh, to me they were beacons of hope that—I hoped that by the time I got

¹ The LGBT+ Center Orlando

² Central Florida’s LGBT Chamber of Commerce

into my fifties, sixties, um, that I would s – you know, have the – the life that they had. And, uh, the desire still to make change.

And, um – so, from there we – let's see. This is again where I get into trouble. [laughs] I gotta have some – something to help me go along. So after we walked in the parade, uh, let's see – in the first, uh – in August of '92, we signed a, uh, contract with the Radisson Hotel downtown at Lake Ivanhoe, uh, to hold our meetings for over five years. Our general meetings. And we did that so that we could overcome that hurdle of people being afraid to walk into a gay s – gay establishment. Um, we had those meetings – we structured those to help the community to come out, obviously. We helped, um, them to be more confident in their job. Um, as far as networking with a group of pro – professional people.

0:07:21

Facilitating a network of allies and inspiring activism

Simmons

We worked to develop educational materials for people to start their own businesses or to strengthen their businesses. We hosted, uh, political candidates' forums. We did that early on. Uh, those were some of the more nerve-wracking and difficult meetings. Getting, uh, folks that were campaigning to become an official or those that were in elected o – elected office. Uh, we did, um, work to get the mayor of Orlando, Glenda Hood – at that time, uh – in '94. She had become the mayor in '92, so we are – we were kind of linked together for a number of years while she was the mayor until 2002. Um, we had approached her office, Tom Dyer specifically, who's the – uh, he was the founder – or was the founder of *Watermark* and he's still involved. Uh, but he doesn't own it anymore. Um, he was instrumental in getting Glenda Hood, uh, to attend the – the first meeting. Um, and it was not an easy task because she did everything that she could – I shouldn't be so critical, but looking back, it was a whole different time. And I understand now more than I did then what she was dealing with and why she didn't want to attend our meeting. Um, they had every excuse. Her office and – and she did – for not coming to one of our meetings.

Finally, in '94, she did come to the meeting. And it was explosive in a lot of ways because there was a big interest in our community, uh, so we had big attendance. And often times our candidates' forums and our political events like that – we did have large attendance. Um, she was asked some very direct questions about supporting the gay community and non-discrimination. And she stood right at the podium and said, "I will not be a champion for your cause." And when she said that it was – it – it – right behind that she said, "but I encourage you to get involved in your – in your local government. I encourage you to get on boards. I encourage you to run for elected office." So it wasn't – I heard both sides of what she was saying. A lot of people that were there that night – what they heard was, "I will not champion your cause." And that – that's why I say it was explosive, because it made a lot of people really energized. That okay – well, now we're going to be on the steps of City Hall asking, "Why not?" Because we all pay taxes, too.

So that to me was, um – it was a milestone in what happened with – it was eye opening for the community. It was energizing. And it, um, made us realize that in the very beginning, when we talked about developing our mission and our bylaws, we had talked about using the – the terms, um, the MBA to be a political and economic force. And some people found that a little bit too much. To use the word “force” and to use “political” in there. “Economic”, well, that’s one thing. It’s the Metropolitan Business Association. It’s a business association like any other chamber, but the political side of it – some folks were pretty nervous about it. I was nervous about it, too. I mean, that’s, uh – that’s saying a lot.

Well, it turned out that that’s exactly what the MBA became in short order. Because we were the ones that were going to folks that were running for office or that were in office and saying, “Okay. What we’d like you to do is sign a pledge.” And it was the Human Rights Campaign pledge at the time. It was a couple of sentences that basically just said that they would implement into their policy and procedure that there would be no discrimination against the LGBT community. Gay community. I think it said “gay and lesbian” at that time. Um, and it was a great piece to ask them to sign because it was simple. It wasn’t asking for the world. It was just asking for equality. Uh, and that really, um – with Mayor Hood, uh, in ‘94, there was no way she was going to sign that. She wouldn’t have signed anything like that.

But by the time – I’ll fast forward a little bit – by, um, I believe it was the ‘98 election, uh, she came to our – our meeting. Um, we had scheduled a – a joint appearance with her and Orange County Chairman Linda Chapin at that time. Um, unfortunately, a police officer was shot in the line of duty that day, so Glenda [Hood] had to postpone. Um, so Linda [Chapin] came and we had a great meeting with Linda [Chapin]. Uh, and then shortly thereafter, we rescheduled – rescheduled with Mayor Hood and she came. And I may be mixing this up a little bit, um, because I know she was – I think she had to postpone because of something else. And the night she was coming to the meeting was the night that the police officer was shot. And we were afraid she wasn’t going to show up, but she did, in fact, come. Um, and that night we asked her if she would sign the pledge of nondiscrimination. And, um, she said that she would. So, uh, I called her office – and, again, I might be mixing dates up a little bit. I have to look back at all the paperwork, which I’m going to give to you. Um, she did sign that pledge, but it – it didn’t happen that night. It happened right before the election in March. I had to call her office and pursue the signature. And had – their, uh – her office faxed it like the day before the election or the day of the election. So, it became very, very clear to us then that, okay, now we really do have that clout that we were looking for.

0:13:52

Working with the Human Relations Board of the City of Orlando

Simmons

And we were asked all the time, um, during that process – and then fast forwarding a little bit to 2000 when we were working with Human Relations Board of the City of Orlando and Mayor Hood’s office, uh, trying to get the, uh,

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city code amended to include sexual orientation. Simple thing again, like the pledge. Um, it was – I forget where I was even going with that. There I go [laughs].

Raffel [laughs].

Simmons It was – okay, let's see. So we were getting her to sign the pledge, uh – she was, by 2000, telling us that she was supporting what we were doing, uh, even after we had fought for the rainbow flags to be hung in 1998. That was a huge spectacle and a fiasco. That was another thing that drew the community closer and closer together. Not just the gay community, but all of our allies. I mean, they came out from everywhere.

The same thing happened in 2000 to 2002 when we were holding the – or the downtown develop – or, uh, Human Relations Board was holding the meetings, um, to amend the – the policy. Mayor Hood was acting in public as if she was more supportive than she had been. Um, and then when we pulled the public records – which I had been chosen on the Orlando Anti-Discrimination Committee to be the one to pull the public records – um, found out that she and Commissioner Vargo – Vicky Vargo – were actually working with our adversaries. Um, and they were trying to pack the meetings. Um, and – and they succeeded in – in getting some people flown here and bussed here, um, with the Christian Coalition, um, uh, Family Research Council, Liberty Council, some of those folks, uh, to speak at the hearings when in fact they were telling all of us that you needed to be a resident of the City of Orlando in order to speak. If you had a business in Orlando you could speak. Um, and they were not telling the truth even on their appearance forms, which we found out, too, by pulling the public records. So we found out a lot about who was who and what was happening during those two-year – tho – that two-year period.

0:16:40

Building an LGBTQ+ community and collaborating with other groups

Simmons So, fro – in the '90s, it was really us getting our legs under us, working with the community to build the community, create that strength, the unity, the relationships. Like I said, we didn't have social media so we're talking on the phone. We were meeting in person – a lot of meeting together face-to-face. Um, so a lot of us became friends in addition to working together to make the changes. Um, and in the early 2000s, after going through that two-year battle, um, we were stronger than ever but bruised after listening to all those terrible things that were said by the groups that the adversaries – that had been put together.

Um, so we dusted ourselves off and 2003 to 2004 and 5 we were trying to, um – the MBA, the Metropolitan Business Association wasn't really organizing the parade. We were participants in the parade. Um, and the parade was like it is around the country: the – the pride event where people get together and are able to spend that time together really being out in the street marching for their rights, representing themselves. Um, and our parade had started to fall apart.

And we were seeing in dwindle and dwindle for reasons that we weren't quite sure why. The — the parade had gone through various groups that were organizing it. Um, and then by July of — you know, June/July of 2005, it had completely dissolved. And so we had talked about it over the years because we wanted to do everything that we could to support the parade, but we didn't want to step on the organizers' toes either because we didn't want, you know, to crau — cause dissention. And we didn't want to take it over ourselves. *[laughs]* We didn't want that responsibility.

0:19:05

Forming Come Out with Pride

Simmons

Um, but by the time it fell apart, it was — it had been on our radar long enough, and been on the agenda, that the board of the Metropolitan Business Association finally said, "Okay. Well, let's start a new organization." And that was the way that Come Out with Pride was born. Um, we decided that, okay, June had passed. It had always been a discussion about how hot it is in June. It's always raining. The weather was always brutal at the parade. So let's, um — what can — what other date can we pick? And what can we do between now and the end of the year to actually do a parade?

And so we identified, um, October as National Coming Out Day on October 11th. Uh, National Gay and Lesbian History Month. Um, so it made perfect sense. We thought maybe the weather would be cooler, although that's not proved to be true *[laughs]* since 2005. It seems like it's been hot every year. And we've even dealt with a hurricane. So — but anyway, that was the whole thought process behind it. And from July to — to October, we put the event together. And we had it downtown. Um, we partnered with the students at UCF³ — with the Gay and Lesbian Bisexual Student Union. We thought that putting the business owners and professionals together with the university students, who always had an event at UCF, made perfect sense.

Um, and we partnered with the History Center — Orange County [Regional] History Center — so when the parade was over, everybody landed at the History Center. Uh, the History Center was great. They let us put a[sic], uh, exhibit inside. So all the students got together and the different organizations got together. Everybody made all of their displays and we put the displays up. Um, the first year we did the simple thing of developing a t-shirt that everybody could wear. A bright yellow shirt. Uh, we had "volunteer" on the back. So everybody that came to the event knew these are the people with Come Out with Pride. And that's what we named it. Um, and the first year I believe, um — and again, I don't — I don't have those numbers with me, but we had, uh, several thousand in 2005. 2006, we did the same thing, um, and landed at the History Center. Uh, we did a brunch the first year in 2005 as well. And Mayor Dyer⁴ attended that — Buddy Dyer. Um, that was one of the first times — and Buddy, when he was running for office, came to our functions and actually asked for our

³ University of Central Florida

⁴ John Hugh "Buddy" Dyer (August 7, 1958 -)

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vote. And was very open and accepting of our community. So – but when he spoke at the brunch that day, that was him really coming out himself to the community.

Uh, so by 2006, we did the same thing. Um, we had a larger turnout. 2006. We realized that the parade route needed to be enlarged. But more importantly than that, the History Center venue in the front of the History Center was not conducive for what we were trying to do. Um, so we talked with the city about moving the event to Lake Eola [Park]. Um, and believe it or not, even in 2007 that was not an easy process. Over the years, we had encountered problems with the City of Orlando, the City of Maitland when we were trying to have our first expo with the MBA in 1994. We got the excuse, ironically, from both, about double-booking. There was a double-booking problem with one of the first parades that the MBA didn't have anything to do with, uh, organizing. That was Orlando Regional Pride Parade. Uh, they said they had double-booked. And so that year the parade shifted first to City Hall. Uh, one of the instrumental people on that, um, b – b – board was, uh, Phyllis Murphy and Patty Sheehan. Um, gosh. I should be able to again – to remember all – everybody's names. Uh, there was a core group of people. Eileen Bell, Brian Hubert – De Hubert-Arbagast. He had a long last name. So, anyway – so they had a double-booking there. Couldn't do it. Then we had that happen at the Maitland Civic Center when we tried to have our first Expo. So 2007 [road noise] – hello. 2007 – sorry for the traffic. Uh, [clears throat] when we wanted to move to Lake Eola, it was still – there was still some of that – even though Buddy Dyer was the mayor – there was still some of that unease with the gay community. And there was definitely a – a pushback that they didn't want us to have the even at Lake Eola. But it happened. Long story short, we went through the pro – a – all of the process. Um, of course, renting the space, paying all the various fees. And the fees are amazing.

Uh, I – I don't know what's changed. I've been retired now since 2000, uh, 8. But, um, it seemed as though for a number of years, uh, I did five, six, seven and eight – in eight, I was the logistics director. It seemed as though our group had to pay for the things that other people didn't have to pay for. We had to do things that other groups weren't required to do. Um, such as, uh, selling alcohol in the park. We had to pay for barricading the entire area to the cost of \$10,000. Um, and so there was still some of that, you know, hangover. Um, now 2008 or 2007, I believe that there was, um, 70,000 people. Or that might have been eight. And the last few years there's been over 150,000 people. And that's according to the police department. That wasn't our count. We always relied on whatever th – you know, they said because they're the official law enforcement to determine the numbers so that we weren't inflating the numbers. It became a wildly successful event. And then, to back up to 2005, when we were first forming Come Out With Pride, we had the meetings. Um, what we did was we took, uh, myself and two other MBA members with the GLBSU students, um, and we identified – i – it had always been something that I thought was really important that we maintain our [beeping] own history for our movement. Did you hear that?

Raffel Yeah.

0:27:03 **The history of the gay rights movement**

Simmons *[laughs]* I don't know what that was. Okay. Electronics gone wild. Um, but the— the history of our community. Because of the people that I knew when I got involved in 1991, the people that I met and got to know over the course of those 16, 17 years— um, and I—I knew that they had a history— like Dorothy Coleman and Dick Scholl being so much older than me— that there were those folks that had endured the Stonewall Riots⁵ in '69. Uh, in '78, when Harvey Milk⁶ was murdered in San Francisco, he had formed the first gay business guild there. Um, I knew that there was all of this history here, too, of people that had been part of the movement. And so I thought we needed to develop a history committee to maintain all of that history and to develop it and to get it from those people that were still alive.

Um, and, at—I mean we were part of—in 2005, from m—the MBA from '92 to 2005, the amount of—of change that had happened over those 13 years, it was like a blur when I think about it now. Um, but since the MBA just celebrated its 25th year last year, and the board has asked me over time to, you know, put— put these materials together—I mentioned that I have 20 plastic cartons full of archives from all of the things that happened during the course of MBA in the 16 years that I was the president. Um, I think that this is a, uh—a monumental civil rights movement that is—the African American community's Civil Rights struggle was huge and it—it's still happening now for hundreds of years, whereas the gay community have remained closeted for, you know, years up until '69 when Stonewall happened. That seems like—I know there were other things that happened, but that was a big benchmark. So in looking at—and I hear—I've heard people talk about from '69 to 2015, when the Supreme Court ruled gay marriage as legal, that it's astounding that the gay community did what it did over the course of that short period of time. And I've heard it—heard people reference our activism and how we work together as a community to make those changes happen.

So I thought it was so critical that we maintain that history. That we make sure that we present it not only to get recognition to those people that did all that work and put their lives on the line, but for other movements that are obviously going to be necessary. When you look at the political environment that we're currently in, um, I feel like our—the lessons that we learned in organizing our community are invaluable. And now, uh, with social media, with the internet, with all of these tools that we have with our, uh, immediate access with our phones—cameras, video, all of that—that coupled with the knowledge that the

⁵ A series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the LGBT community against a police raid that took place on June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, New York.

⁶ Harvey Bernard Milk (May 22, 1930 - November 27, 1978)

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community has can really continue to make huge impact on oppression and equal rights for all.

0:31:35

Preserving the history of the LGBTQ+ community

Raffel Can you describe, um, some of the sort of first portions of the history project, and maybe some of the people who were first involved in getting that formed?

Simmons Sure. Um, I do have that, um, on the committee list here. Let's see. That would have been, uh, 2005. Um, the first year I did chair, uh, the history subcommittee. Uh, Charlene Bell. Mary Brooks. Mary Brooks, who was the first secretary of the MBA, she got back involved. She, uh, was the secretary for five years. Um, but we had the meeting at her and her partner's house. Phyllis Murphy. Phyllis and Mary actually met at an MBA meeting I believe in '93. So they've been together for 25 years. Um, Ken Kasmerski. Uh, Patty Sheehan came to one or two of the first meetings. And, uh, Mallory Wells from UCF GLBSU⁷. Um, we met at Mary and Phyllis's house, um, and, um, all agreed about the importance of securing our history. Uh, and shortly after that, I asked Ken if he would be – if h – if would be the, um – the chair of the history project. And so, then he developed the history project from there. Added on, uh, more committee members and they developed, um – was it six or seven? I – 'cause in – in 2005, when we put all of those displays that were put together by everyone in the History Center, it was only for that one day. So that display then became part of the development of the actual – the timeline of the community, and um, developing and working with the community to gather up all of those archives.

And, uh, by 2007, we had – I can't remember in '06 if we had – we had – I think we had the history project back in the History Center if I recall correctly. And it had gotten larger. And I think it was in one of the – the rooms that was, um, a courtroom. It ha – actually had the – you know, the bench and whatnot. I think that's the way that '06 was. And then 2007, we actually had an air conditioned tent at Lake Eola. And the – they put the wall of remembrance of the folks that had passed. They had developed a – a timeline. Um, and they were great. I mean they – they worked that thing all day long. And people were in and out of that tent all day long looking at all those. And I believe that that [*exhales*] really, um, inspired people, too. Because there were people there – I went in and spent some time myself to cool off, um, and to say hello to everybody. But in watching, uh, what I saw was people that had no idea who some of these folks were. Had no idea about the timeline of our movement here.

Um, and then I saw others that were touched because they remembered Jimmy Brock⁸, who was the pastor at Joy MCC⁹, who had passed away. Um, and others. They – they remembered them, and so they were moved. And I – I could see the young people and I've th – I kept thinking about – I always did this whenever I

⁷ University of Central Florida Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Union

⁸ James T. "Jimmy" Brock

⁹ Joy Metropolitan Community Church

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went to Come Out With Pride—think about how I felt in 1991, when I went to that first parade. And that I was scared to death. I was just coming, you know, coming to—I had come out already, but just—I felt like coming into adulthood even though I was 31, you know? Um, starting to, uh—we hadn't started Shelby Press yet. We started it in '92. Uh, the MBA started—or not—or we started Shelby in '93, but we started MBA in '92. But I thought about—I—I still think about, you know, that it's important that we inspire the young people to be confident in who they are and to accept themselves and to live their life to the fullest. And how better for them to get some insight into that than to see the timeline. To see those people that did that work. That made a difference in the lives of all of us—being able to live a healthier, more secure life.

0:36:57

Favorite memory from work at GLBT History Museum of Central Florida

Raffel And do you have a favorite memory from your work with the history museum?

Simmons [*meowing*] Um, and that was Louie giving his two cents.

Raffel [*laughs*].

Simmons Our kitty cat. Um, my favorite part of—of being involved with the beginning stages of the history project was seeing someone like Ken. Ken Kazmerski, who's a little older than me, knowing his history and how he had worked with the students at UCF and Gay and Lesbian Bisexual Student Union. Um, and Phyllis and Mary. Phyllis Murphy and Mary Brooks. Um, knowing Mary and working with her side-by-side. Knowing Phyllis and her work on Orlando Regional Pride with the first few parades. Um, come back, uh,—it—together with the young people from UCF. To me, it wa—it—it's—I—that's what I've always thought. Um, and now there were a couple of people I will say that couldn't see that. Couldn't see that the—the wisdom of bringing the young people in. Because what are they—what are they going to contribute? And the majority of us though kept saying, "This is to encourage and to inspire future leaders. Because they need us and we need them."

So, to me, that was—that—it was that and it was, um, knowing that—that they were serious about remembering. Remembering how we got to 2005. What the community had endured here and what happened. When I went to the March on Washington in 1993 and 2000—uh, especially 2000—there was[sic] even newspaper articles written in the [*Orlando*] *Sentinel*. Um, one of 'em I had on my—had framed in my den for a while—um, said well, you know, [*meowing*] most people are staying home and why—why go to a March on Washington again in 2000? We—those of us that got together and went—knew that it was going to reenergize us. It was gonna recharge our batteries. Excuse me. Bye bye. [*laughing*] It was to—for us to be re-inspired and recharged.

So Come Out with Pride and the history project. And having a festival and a parade and bringing young and older and old, um, gay and straight and bi and trans and every ethnic—everybo—bringing everybody together that's still alive

to remember those that aren't with us anymore. That's what the history project did for me in 2007 with the tent. Walking around and looking and everything. That's what I re—I thought about—is all those people, many of whom I knew. I knew them. And they were inspirational for me. And so, I was so happy that everybody that walked through there got to see that. Everybody experienced it differently based on their—their own life. Who they are and whatnot. But that's—that was the—the—the real moving part I guess for me.

0:41:07

Organizing the first exposition of the Metropolitan Business Association

Raffel

And just to kind of go backwards a little bit, you mentioned I think briefly the first, uh, expo that the MBA held. Can you tell me a little bit more about what—sort of what led to that and the—and the difficulties you had finding space?

Simmons

Um, in, uh, 1994, at—at a—I believe it was a—it might have been '93—Sandy Fink had come on to the board. She was a veterinarian. Um, and she had—let's see. She was the networking chair in May of '93. And then the membership director in December of '93 to May of '98. I remember when we were at a board meeting and, um, she and the networking and expo committee she put together—or I don't think she put the committee together yet. She started talking about it. Um, and I didn't know that our community was ready to have an expo of all of the—the businesses. I knew we had identified, uh, people that had businesses in the community. We had—we had identified some, uh, allies in the community. Not big corporations, but people that wanted to be part of our association. But when she said that we should do a business expo, uh, some of us were like, "Wow." You know? "Are we really ready for that?"

And so, she was—put together a structure. Um, put together a committee, and—Louie [*laughs*]. By, um—by the time we got—we had several board meetings, talking about doing an expo. We were all on board. Uh, because they—they were ready to go. But where to have the event? So they identified the Maitland Civic Center on Lake Louie. And it was a—a great place. It still is. Um, and we, uh, signed the contract. We were ready to go. And it was—we'd already advertised. We had already printed our first, um, uh, uh—it became the buyers' guide or the membership directory. Nut, uh, uh, an expo directory of, you know, who was going to be there and whatnot. Um, we had a map. And then we had everybody listed in there. Um, and Maitland Civic Center said that we couldn't do it because they had a double booking.

So, um, Sandy went to civil court. And we were just talking about it leading up to the 25th anniversary of the MBA. And, uh, she reminded us, and reminded me especially, about her going to court. And she was nervous because she said, you know—she wasn't really out, out. And there she was in civil court and she said it was the first time she'd uttered "gay and lesbian" in public. In a courtroom, no less. And she said the place gasped. She said she could feel it. Um, but because the contract was signed before the other contract—they were just pulling that double-booking thing to try to stop it. Once they—I guess some people decided, "Oh, it's a gay and lesbian business association. No. We can't do that in

Maitland. We're not gonna have that." Um, but, we won. And so, we had our event.

0:44:55

How the small business community impacted the LGBTQ+ community

Simmons

We had 89 vendors at that expo. And that was a – that was another big turning point for the professionals and the business centers in this community. Um, people started to recognize that we – back then, we didn't have corporate support. So the small businesses – we were the backbone of the community. We were the ones that funded, um, things, um, uh, paid the membership dues, paid extra money, sponsored different things to make things happen. Um, and that we were the ones that were – were going to work together to even build it larger. To build our business structure larger. To encourage professionals that were contemplating starting their own business or practice to do so. And they did.

Um, uh, a number of people – now not going back that far, but, um, there are some that have – have formed, uh, in the last 20 years instead of the last 25 years. Uh, but Tom Dyer, um, at *Watermark* – he's an attorney. And he was working for another practice. And it wasn't – and don't quote me on this, but it wasn't long before Tom started his own law practice. Um, and I believe he started *Watermark* in, uh, '94. And so, he – he – I heard him talk about that recently. About, you know, seeing what was happening in other big cities and newspapers and this and that. And he thought that Orlando could really do with having its own newspaper. Plus, he dealt with the – the political scene here, like I had said, with Glenda Hood. And knew that we weren't getting the coverage. Um, we weren't getting the representation that we should. Uh, a – something as simple as Mary Brooks, who I have mentioned a couple of times – that was the secretary. She w – worked at the *Orlando Sentinel*. She was a reporter. And at that time, we couldn't even have our, uh, partners' names listed in our obituaries. I mean it was just things like that. Everywhere we turned we had, um, discrimination.

So, yep. '94, we had 89 vendors. And then we had six business expos. Um, and that kind of hand-in-hand worked with what we wound up doing with Come Out with Pride in having the festival in the park. The festival in the park is really a business expo. It's where we b – we brought the politicians together with the non-profits with the large corporations and with the small business centers in the MBA. So we had developed that experience in order to put together that part of Come Out with Pride.

0:48:11

Omitting references to homosexuality in the organization's name

Raffel

And was the discrimination in the community – was that one of the reasons that, uh, you didn't put LGBT or i – in the name of the business...

Simmons

Yes.

Raffel

...association?

LGBTQ History Museum of Central Florida

Simmons Yes. And we had talked a lot about it. Um, it wasn't as if we were hiding who we were, but we were trying to again, um, protect those that wanted to come to our functions that were advert – advertised at the Radisson, The Metropolitan Business Association. Well, that's not saying it's a gay and lesbian function. Um, and there were a number of times that we had functions there that, um – I'll never forget one night that we were having a function there that John Butler Booke, who is a – was – I don't know if he's still alive – a – a minister pastor in Apopka. Uh, he was one of the biggest voices against us in the '98 controversy to hang the rainbow flags. Uh, he came to everything and anything. Well, they were having a separate event at the Radisson. And some people that were coming to our event were on that elevator with him. And he didn't know who they were. They knew who he was. And I remember them coming in. And I can't tell you even who it was specifically. But came in and said, "Oh, my gosh. You're not going to believe who I just saw in the elevator. John Butler Booke is here."

And so that was just reaffirmation for us, you know, that those five and a half years or so that we were at the Radisson, that was a period of time where we built strength and confidence and encouragement for the community to, you know, come out and to be more confident in being themselves. Being authentic. Uh, but when we, uh, talked about the name of the MBA – I believe we were at Metropolitan Community Church, and Sam Singhouse and Marcy Singhouse's, uh, sister-law – Sam was instrumental in those very – in the very beginning. He owned the big bang club downtown Orlando. A – and he and Marcy were always there. And Sam Singhouse is Miss See – Miss Sammy. Everybody knows Miss Sammy. Um, and we were talking about the name. And Marcy was the one that actually wound up coming up with the Metropolitan Business Association. And, um, it – I mean everybody was like, "Yes, that's it!" And so it stuck. And we never changed that. Um, the logo changed a few times over the years, but it was still, um, the Association. That's what we were is all – you know, we – like I said in the beginning, uh, we – we developed relationships with one another that lasted for years and years. And sometimes lifetimes. Like Mary and Phyllis. Um, whether it be a – a – a marriage, which now we're allowed to actually have marriage, um, or just a lifelong friendship.

0:51:42

Goals and challenges for the GLBT Museum of Central Florida, the Metropolitan Business Association and the LGBTQ+ Community

Raffel And what do you see as some of the maybe next steps or next big goals for organizations like the MBA and the LGBTQ History Museum?

Simmons Well, um, I'm really glad that the – the History Museum is continuing and evolving and growing. And, um, as far as the MBA goes, I know that they're really working on, um, corporate diversity and making sure that with the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber, uh, that you have certification. And that – there's that association. That group of large businesses that will buy from – recognize a gay and lesbian, trans – a tran – LGBTQ business as someone that

they want to buy from. So they're working on that. I know that they're, uh, focused on, uh, transgender and gender equality. That's very important.

Um, it's—I know we—we've talked about this. Um, in 2015, when the Supreme Court ruled gay marriage legal¹⁰, um, we had—that was in June of 2015—there was this sense of elation. Um, and I remember people saying—asking me and saying to me, “Do we really have a need for the Metropolitan Business Association and, um, the History Museum?” Of course. I mean, yeah. That's gonna go on as long as people are alive to develop—to continue to develop all those archives. Um, but is it really needed anymore now that we have, you know, gay marriage? It's legal. Well, it's a lot more than that. It's, um, uh, transgender. It's gender equality. It's—uh, you can still be fired from your job if you're gay. Um, and we knew that there were—I knew, and I'm sure that most people knew, that there would be a backlash.

Um, but still there's that sense of elation. I remember it was just three years ago, um, that everybody was—eh, I was going around getting every newspaper I could get. I was online looking at everything. Reading everything. Recording everything that I could during that. So amazing. And Prop 8¹¹. And the fact that it was David Boies and—what's his name? Theodore, uh—it's gonna—and I—he was a con—he was the conservative that, um, represented Bush¹² after the 2000 election. Olsen. Ted Olsen. Ted Olsen and David Boies. That they were the—the lawyers worked together. The conservative and the liberal. Um, and Prop 8 was overturned in California.

All these things happened. And people were elated. And, my gosh, for us to just have—I mean, a lot of terrible things have hap—had happened between 2015 and 2016, with these mass killings and shootings. Um, but when Pulse¹³ happened in 2016 in June, um, it was—I—I still have a hard time even articulating how I feel about it. Um, I couldn't even talk about it because I knew the—the—the impact that it had had on—i—i—it squashed immediately that feeling of elation. Yes. It was a huge victory. But—that we—we achieved gay marriage. But, my gosh, what a gut punch. And have all of those people murdered. Um, regardless of the murderer's motives, it was in a gay nightclub, um, owned by Barbara [Poma], a heterosexual. Um, to give Pulse and life to her brother's life. Um, you know, it—I mean the way it—it—it's just all come together, to me it's a—it's a—a reminder that the work is never finished. That it's important.

I mean, I've been trying myself for the last ten years. I've been retired from my—my, uh, volunteer work and focused just on working for a living. Uh, sometimes

¹⁰ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. ____ (2015).

¹¹ Proposition 8 was a California ballot proposition and state constitutional amendment passed in November 2008, that forbade recognition of same-sex marriages in the state.

¹² George Walker Bush (1946-)

¹³ On June 12, 2016, 49 people were killed and 53 were wounded in a mass shooting inside Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

I wonder how I worked 40 hours plus at work and 40-plus hours with the Metropolitan Business Association. Again, this goes to the age thing. I was telling you earlier, um. Uh, I've been trying to figure out what – what I can do now to participate. I don't – I still haven't been able to really – like I said, I can't even articulate how I feel and it's been two years since Pulse. Um, when the anniversary rolled around last year, um, it – very somber with everybody that I know. Um, and I thought this year would be, you know, a little bit – not easier – but a little bit better. But it's not. Um, and I can't even fathom what the families are going through.

Um, we have a – a young person that has come to work with us. Uh, she's 26 and, um, she's heterosexual. Not that that's really relevant. But it is because she was impacted. And she asked me about posting on Shelby Press, uh, on Facebook – on our page – something about Pulse. And she had put together some – some language, um, and – just us all here trying to talk about it. And talk with her about it. It's just, um – like I said, it's hard to talk about it. Cause I just don't even know what to say. And I – I feel like putting something on social media now like, uh, the thing now that the students from Parkland¹⁴ have made very clear. Um, we call BS on thoughts and prayers. Because that's not – that's not gonna do it.

So, yeah. It's important. It's important for all of the organizations. For the Metropolitan Business Association. For the History Museum. For Come out with Pride. For the Center. For, uh, Parents and, uh, Friends – PFLAG – uh, for GLBSU at UCF. For everybody to continue doing their work. And to never think, no matter what – what – how many steps we make forward, that we should ever let our guard down. And that we be out there representing our community and thinking about going back to what I had said earlier about our struggle for our civil rights. That the Constitution affords us those rights, as it affords every citizen of this country. Um, that our struggle is, and will continue to be, a model for the rest of the community to say, "Yes we can." Love that about Barack Obama. Yes we can. Yes we will. And y – y – you might kick us down, but we're gonna stand up again. And we will not let hate win. Ever.

Raffel Thank you so much. If you had nothing to add. That's all my questions.

Simmons I know we skated all over it.

Raffel That was great.

Simmons [laughs].

Raffel That was perfect [laughs].

¹⁴ On February 14, 2018, a gunman opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing seventeen students and staff members and injuring seventeen others.

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Simmons I mean I—I didn't even, uh...

Raffel [*laughs*].

Simmons Wow. Thank you so much.

Raffel Thank you, Debbie.

End of Interview