

Oral Memoirs
of
Reverend Margaret E. "Peggy" Howland

An Interview Conducted by

Geoffrey Cravero

December 13, 2016

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories
(RICHS) of Central Florida

University of Central Florida RICHS of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Geoffrey Cravero

Transcriber: Geoffrey Cravero

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

Project Detail

RICHES of Central Florida 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.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Reverend Margaret E. “Peggy” Howland is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on December 13, 2016.

Abstract

An oral history interview of Reverend Margaret E. “Peggy” Howland, a member of the Orlando Gay Chorus and a former Presbyterian minister. The interview was conducted by Geoffrey Cravero at the interviewee’s residence in Orlando, Florida, on December 13th, 2016. Some of the topics covered include becoming one of the first female ministers, fighting for GLBTQ+ rights, joining the Orlando Gay Chorus, her role in the Orlando Gay Chorus, her favorite productions, the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub, women in the chorus, the Orlando Gay Chorus’s response to Pulse tragedy, changing community attitudes on homosexuality, missing out on initial vigils, memorials and outreaches, physical challenges, performing at the first responders breakfast, the long-term consequences of Pulse tragedy, and her closing

remarks.

Reverend Margaret E. “Peggy” Howland

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Geoffrey Cravero
December 13, 2016
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Becoming one of the first female ministers

Cravero Alright. Let’s see. Okay. Let’s see. This is Geoffrey Cravero and I’m conducting an oral history with Reverend Peggy Howland of the Orlando Gay Chorus. The interview is being conducted at the interviewee’s residence in Orlando, Florida, on Tuesday, December 13th, 2016.

Peggy, thanks for speaking with us today. If you would, let’s start by having you state your full name and telling us a little bit about where you’re from.

Howland Well, officially, I’m the Reverend Margaret E. Howland. But I’m called Peggy. Um, I’m a – a New Yorker. Um, was living in New York City and right around there for 54 years before I came down here to Orlando, um, going almost four years now.

Cravero That’s great. What, um – let’s see. What about a little about your family history? What did your parents do?

Howland My father was an attorney. Head of a law firm. And, um, my mother had taught school before she started having her five children [*laughs*]. And, um, we had a very c – comfortable life after three of u – the first three of us were born during the [Great] Depression. And, um, we skimped and saved a lot. And, uh – but then, uh, as my father became, um – got his law degree and became active as a lawyer and a community figure, we – we had a fairly comfortable life.

Cravero And, um, how and when did you become involved in, uh, the church?

Howland Oh. We went to Sunday school from childhood. My, um – my – my father had been an Episcopalian and my mother a Presbyterian. But they decided on a Methodist church that had a big Sunday school. And, uh, we went to Sunday school all the time.

Uh, but as a teenager, I began to become – I think really partly it was the

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i – influence of my Sunday school teachers that I became more interested in the Bible. And I – I think I spent all my life searching for love. And, uh, I – I think – I think my mother wasn't able to show, uh, love in a very overt way. Uh, because I always had the feeling I was trying to get my mother to love me. But God loved me. And I began as a – especially as a teenager, I began to have this overwhelming conviction of the love of God for me and for all people. And, um – and I fell in love with the Bible, uh, and the stories.

And eventually, uh – it was a time when a woman – I mean there were no women ministers. Um, and I didn't even – we were Republicans in our family. And we didn't, uh – we – people talked about women's rights. Equal rights for women. And I didn't know if I was in favor of that because I had been taught by some pretty conservative Christians that, um, women were supposed to be in a different position than men. Course, I don't believe that any more. Uh, I think God loves us all the same. And, uh – and I think it's a misinterpretation of the Bible, uh, to make – and – and – and failing to see the, um, teachings of Jesus¹ and the example of Jesus. It – and – and even the example of St. Paul² and others in the Bible, uh, for whom women, eh – Christianity liberated women and gave them an opportunity to be part of – of this message of – of God's love, uh, for people.

And, um, i – it was – it was slow. I was slow growing into that. But at – at the University of Pennsylvania, uh, where I went to school, uh, I was able to major in the Lands of the Bible. I majored in Oriental Studies. Basically, the Near East. And I studied Ancient, um, Art. And Literature. And History. And Language. And Civilization of Egypt. And Mesopotamia. And Palestine. All the lands, uh, of the Bible. And s – I studied Greek and Hebrew to read the Bible in the original languages. And, uh, it was – it was just, uh – I was just so in love with the Bible and of the message of God's love, uh, for people.

0:05:35

Fighting for GLBTQ+ rights

Howland

It was a long time before I fully began to understand God's love for everybody. Um, when we were young, uh, we didn't know anything about gay and lesbian. That was, uh – it was – it was so much in the closet. So hidden that you never saw it. And, uh – but as a woman minister – as one of the very first, uh, women – wo – uh, women me – in the ministry in the Presbyterian Church, uh – as we began – as – it was a long time. It was maybe 20 years after I was ordained that women began to be more, uh – it began to be more common for women to be clergy. And, uh, as we would meet in support groups and – and, uh, sharing with one another, it began to be very clear to us – it was in the early seventies that, uh, churches began to get concerned about whether homosexuals were allowed to be ordained. Um, which people thought was,

¹ Also known as Jesus Christ or Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BC – c. AD 30/33).

² Also known as Paul the Apostle and by his native name Saul of Tarsus (c. 5 – c. 67).

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you know – they began to think, *Well, we shouldn't – we should be kind to other people. But ordain them?* Um, and, uh – and nobody ever thought marriage [laughs].

But, uh – but the women clergy began to see that gay people were being treated the same way we had been treated. Um, I mean people – people said very rude and crude things to me about they didn't, you know – they didn't believe – that God was – the Bible was against us. Wi – they didn't believe that – that God would call a woman to be – to preach. But I knew from the very beginning that it wasn't my idea [laughs].

Cravero [laughs].

Howland That it was God's idea. Because I – I really believed that God had led me, uh, in this direction. Uh, so it didn't matter what they said. And – and I, uh, often have thought about the words of, uh, Susan B. Anthony³, who in 1848, was among the women who asked for the right to vote. And they didn't get it until 1920, long after Susan B. Anthony was dead. And she had – she had gone to congress every year of her life, um, ask – asking and working for the right to vote. And she didn't live to see it but she said, "Failure is impossible." And this is what I began to t – tell my gay friends. "Failure is impossible [laughs]."

Uh, even though y – they couldn't see that there would any time be acceptance, um – in the beginning, I used to worry that people would think that I was gay because I knew that the gay clergy – people that I knew were gay weren't – were still in the closet. And I was never – I was never outing them. And they – I knew that they couldn't speak up in public. But I could. And I felt – I began to feel a little angry about it for a while. *Why do I have to do this all the time? People will start thinking I'm gay.* And then it got to the point where I didn't care if they did. And now I think I even consider it a compliment if somebody thinks I'm gay. Because, um – especially – I – I mean the gay people that I've known in the church have been very active through – in the Presbyterian Church nationally in terms of helping to open up, uh, ordination to women. Uh, I was a representative for my Presbytery to testify, um, at our general assembly, where we finally approved the ordination of gay and lesbian and transgender people.

And, um – and also was active – very active in working up in New York State, uh, for, uh, the – the state to approve the, uh, marriage of, uh, gay people. And I can remember just before the final vote of the senate in New York – and I was up there in my clerical collar, uh, at this[sic] senate hearings. And, um, demonstrating. And one of the men who was there – I think it was an Episcopal deacon, uh, said to me that he and his partner were married. They'd been married in Canada and they lived in New York. And I found out then that

³ Susan Brownell Anthony (February 15, 1820 – March 13, 1906).

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there were already 9,000 couples in New York – gay couples who were married legally and recognized by the State of New York because they'd been married somewhere else. Because the state would – would – while they wouldn't allow anybody to be married in New York, they'd let – they'd recognize marriages from elsewhere. And so then, New York State voted, uh, to approve the, uh, marriage of – of gay and lesbian couples.

And, uh, then, shortly after that, I came to Florida and started working on it down here. And when I came to Florida, uh, my friends were appalled that I was leaving. I was kind of appalled, too. But I knew – I knew that I needed to take care of myself. And I was able to find a retirement community that I could come to here that I could afford. And so I said to them a – as I was leaving I would say, "I'm being sent as a missionary to a racist, sexist, homophobic, gun-totin' state." And they would laugh. And I would laugh. But after I got here, I gradually began to realize this was my mission here.

And, um, I – I – I – I couldn't believe at the age of 80, when I came here, I could still sing. Because a lot of my friends were losing their voices. And, um, I – the first Sunday I was here – and I went to the Park Lake Presbyterian Church – uh, they had a notice in the bulletin about the Park Lake Gay-Straight Partnership meeting that next week. And, uh, I was thrilled. Um, and we have this marvelous small group of – of gay and straight people who – we have a partnership and we try to help educate the church, um, and other people about this. And – and last year we had our first marriage in the church of t – uh, two men. Then we had a wonderful celebration. And I – far as I know, we're the only Presbyterian church so far in this Central Florida Presbytery that has had a gay marriage, uh, in the church. And it was a – it was great.

0:13:12

Joining the Orlando Gay Chorus

Um, but I – one of my friends introduced me to someone – we were at a gathering of FAVO. The Faith Arts Village of Orlando, which our church sponsors, uh, in a – in an old converted motel, uh, next door to the church. Um, it's a marvelous, uh, thing. The first Friday of every month. And I was there and I was having – having something to eat sitting outside. And I got introduced to this guy who was a member of the Orlando Gay Chorus. And I said – and, uh, I said, "Oh." I said, "I've gotta find someplace to sing, um, here in Orlando. Because I'm afraid if I don't keep singing, I'll lose the ability to sing. Because so many of my friends my age can't sing anymore." And he says, "You can join the Orlando Gay Chorus." And I said, "You have women?" And they said, "Yes." I said, "Do you have to be gay?" He said, "No.

Cravero [laughs].

Howland Everybody can sing." So that was in the summer. First summer here. And at Christmastime I went to the holiday show that the chorus had at the Plaza

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Live. And I—I bought a—a ticket that cost a little more so I could get in early. And I went and sat in the front row. And I can see on the stage standing on the risers there were some people sitting on the risers, who obviously weren't able to stand. And so they were allowed to sit. And there were people with white hair. And there were young and very old. There were men and women. There were—there were—I already knew there were gay and straight and trans. And black and white. And really, really fat people. And really skinny people [laughs]. And, uh, then I began to—at the end they came—they came down the steps right in front of me and walked out. And I saw them helping a woman down the steps who obviously had cerebral palsy. And I thought, *I can belong to this group.*

And so we had the auditions in January, um, three years ago. And, uh—and I became a member of the chorus. And it's been just amazing. On the—there are two of us that are 83 years old in the chorus. We're the two oldest. And, um, I'm very proud of that [laughs].

Cravero [laughs].

Howland But that's—that's what I found in this community. Uh, a loving, caring, thoughtful, kind, talented group of people of every sort who—who sing. And who work hard. And, uh, they've been so helpful and accepting of me. And in the beginning—in the beginning, I couldn't stand the noise. I was—I—I—there's so much—there—these young people, they—they make a lot of noise [laughs].

Cravero [laughs].

Howland I thought, *I—I don't know if I can last through this.* But I have. And, um, they're so helpful and—and kind. And they're really like a family to me. Um, it's been wonderful. And, uh, especially the last couple years, um, with our new, um, artistic directors. The quality of the chorus—it only be can't—only became a soprano, alto, tenor and bass a couple years before I came here. F—s—it's going on for 26 years now. And there's still some of the original men who founded the chorus in it.

Uh, what courage these men had 26 years ago, uh, to come out. Uh, and that—to me, that's what really has brought about, uh, the—the acceptance, um—full acceptance of people. Uh, it's pretty good here in the Orlando area. Although there's still problems some places. But, um, the—the one thing that has made it possible is the courage of gay and lesbian and trans people, uh, to come out. Uh, straight people being allies, um, is important but—but it's nothing like the courage of these people who know, uh—I remember the first time I went to—in—in 2003, I had become so active with the LGBTQ organizations and the Presbyterian Church, um—in 2003, I went to a—a huge, uh, gathering—a conference called “Witness Our Welcome”. It was held at the

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University of Pennsylvania, which is my – my alma mater. And, um, it was people of all faiths, um, different religions, uh, gay and le – LGBT groups coming together. And I was a little scared to go because I didn't quite know how I would relate to – to gay people, uh, you know, on a wider basis [laughs]. And I remember going – oh – oh, there were people out there with their signs. Their hateful signs. Uh, but I remember they had worship every evening in an Episcopal cathedral, uh, right near the campus. And I remember thinking when I went to those services, *This is the most joyous worship I had ever been part of in my whole life*. Because here were people who knew that God loved them. And they were in a safe place. And they were able to worship with such joy. And, uh, to me, that – that changed everything for me.

And now I have [laughs] – I have gay friends that are Jewish. That are Wiccan. That are any religion or no religion. And they're all wonderful. And I even have friend that are drag queens [laughs].

Cravero [laughs].

Howland Which is kind of fun [laughs].

0:20:54

Role in the Orlando Gay Chorus and favorite productions

Cravero Do you have, um – well, can you talk a little about what role you have in the chorus? And maybe, um, talk about, uh, one of your favorite early productions before, um, the Pulse tragedy. And we'll talk a little bit about post afterwards.

Howland Um, [sighs].

Cravero [clears throat].

Howland Well, I'm a soprano. I have been an alto all my life. But I've sung in – I've sung in choirs. Um, and for years I've been an alto. And, uh, after I retired from full-time pastoral ministry, um, back in 1998, um – 18 years ago now – uh, I found – I didn't – I didn't sing in a choir or anything for a while. But I had been participating in a – in a church near where I lived in White Plains, New York. And, uh, they had a group that was getting ready to go to Africa – to Kenya to sing. And, uh, they wanted to sing back to the, uh – the Kenyans, when you come, they always sing for you. They sing and dance. And so we wanted to sing back to them. And so we – we practiced for a year. And I got into this group to go to Kenya for three weeks.

And, um, I guess I was singing soprano 'cause that's kind of what they needed. And after I came back from Kenya I decided to join the church choir. And they needed sopranos. And so I became a soprano. And I had never been able to sing that high before. But I tr – we had a marvelous soprano soloist. And I would imitate her. I would try to sing like – like she did. And I was having a

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marvelous time.

So when I came here and I au – I auditioned for the Orlando Gay Chorus, um, they dec – they thought, *Yes. You're a soprano. We'll make you a soprano 2.* 'Cause we have soprano 1 and 2, alto 1 and 2, et cetera. And, uh, so I sing soprano and when we s – divide I sing the low soprano part. And every once in a while, I get to sing the high part, too.

Cravero [laughs].

Howland And I can sing higher notes than I ever could before. And I'm 83. And it amazes me. We even had a, uh – we – we have these cabarets every once in a while. And twice now, I've sung a solo in one of our cabarets. The first year I sang "I Could Have Danced All Night" from *My Fair Lady*.⁴ And, uh, then last year – in fact, it was the night before the Pulse. On June 11th [2016], we had this cabaret at the Orlando Museum of Art. And I sang "We Kiss in a Shadow" from, uh, *The King and I*.⁵ And – as a solo. And ah – it was just wonderful because I – here I was at my age singing solos. And I'm even working on one for the next time.

0:24:21 **Mass shooting at Pulse nightclub**

Howland Um, but after the – after the concert – and the thing is, I was able to do it because the people in the chorus were so affirming. And telling me how great it sounded. So I – so I didn't have to be scared any more. I didn't have to be nervous any more.

And, uh, that night I had a friend come with me to the Museum of Art. And after it was over, we were hungry. And we were looking for a pizza place. And we didn't, uh – we thought, *Where – where's a place that's open that's – that we can get to?* And finally, we decided to go down to – we went down South Orange Avenue past the Pulse to McDonald's and had hamburgers. And this is – this is just a couple hours before the thing happened. And so at midnight, we're coming back past the Pulse back to home here. And I – I couldn't believe it the next morning when I – when I woke up and looked at my phone. And people were saying – and my friends were saying, "Are you safe?" "Are you safe?" "I'm safe. Are you safe?" And, um – and that's why every single morning since then – every morning when I wake up I – I – I – I remember the Pulse. And think about that morning for six months now.

0:26:12 **Role in the Orlando Gay Chorus and favorite productions (continued)**

Howland I was telling you how I got into the chorus. And, uh, it's – it's been a marvelous

⁴ Musical based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

⁵ Musical based on Margaret Landon's *Anna and the King of Siam*.

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experience. I never in my life ever before memorized all these songs. And then we have choralography they call it, where we – we, you know, do motions and things and – while we’re singing [*laughs*] all in concert together. Uh, and our productions are not just – i – we’re not just standing there singing like a choir. We’re participating in many different ways. Um, and it’s a real great show and production.

And, uh, I guess I’m really grateful to the Disney people who came to Orlando and helped make Orlando the kind of area where, uh, the arts and all the different kinds of production and everything, uh, were really, uh, i – it was just a place that would attract, uh, creative, uh, wonderful people. And it’s such a place of music and art her in – in Orlando. And i – it’s – it’s just so wonderful how the chorus has become a part of that in the city. The – the chor – the concerts we just had this past weekend, *Glad Tidings* over at the Plaza Live, we were sold out both nights. And people said it was the best show ever.

0:27:58

Women in the chorus

Howland

And one of the things that’s happened, uh, since – since I’ve been here it’s been happening, but it started before I came here. The Orlando Gay Chorus never was just men. Women came. Lesbians came and wanted to be part of it. And they weren’t really – I don’t think they were really welcomed at first, but they insisted. And – but for 25 – for – well, 20, maybe 22, 23 years, it was an – a TTBB⁶: just the tenor and bass, uh, chorus. It was a – it was a men’s chorus that had some women in it, who were singing with men’s voices. They were singing tenor parts. We – we even had a woman who was a bass. And, um, just a couple years before I came here, it became soprano, alto, tenor and bass.

And, um, s – it’s been harder getting as many women in. Uh, and the difference has been y – you know what gay men’s choruses sound like. I remember the first time I hear – I’ve heard gay men’s choruses in different cities. And they have this strong men’s sound. And – which is wonderful. But, um, with the soprano and alto being added to it, uh, and with our – with the current director we have, James [A.] Rode, and Harold Wright, who is his assistant, they are working for something other than the loud gay men’s voice. Instead, uh, it’s much more – the music is much more nuanced. We sing softly. Uh, we sing expressively. Uh, we sing tenderly. Uh, as well as loud [*laughs*]. We – we do all kinds of – of singing.

And, uh, the chorus has grown in its maturity musically within the last few years. Uh, and I’ve seen it happen. Because I think the first year I was here, we were still a gay men’s chorus in tone. Uh, and, um – and we’re – we’re becoming more – more nuanced. But – but in the last – the last year, even my friends – my musical friends say to me, “Wow. You’re so much better. You’re

⁶ A four-part men’s chorus. Its configuration is Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Bass 1, Bass 2.

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fabulous.” And I think it’s – it’s really because of the leadership and direction that we’ve had that’s helped us all to find our voices.

And we have al – we have – we have some men altos and women tenors. And – and, uh, uh, it’s been a – a wonderful experience. I’m not sure I remember what I’m supposed to be answering.

Cravero Oh, I – I think you covered it.

Howland Okay.

0:31:04 **Orlando Gay Chorus’s response to Pulse tragedy**

Cravero And plenty [*laughs*]. Well, you did mention, um, when you first heard about Pulse that morning. Could you talk a little bit about, um, what you did that Sunday: the day after the tragedy? And...

Howland Well, it was the day of the tragedy.

Cravero Right.

Howland I mean it happened – it started at two minutes after two that morning. And at five o’clock, they were still – I don’t if they were really starting to really get the people out of there. I mean the bodies were still in there. And, um, we – we got a call, um, I – I don’t know – we – we just have this amazing communication [*laughs*] now with our cellphones. And, um, I heard that we were to be at the, um – the church. The, um, Metropolitan Community Church. The Joy Metropolitan Community Church, uh, which you may know is basically a gay and lesbian organiz – uh, church. Uh, and we were to be there for a service at six o’clock. And I guess we were supposed to be there at five. Uh, and to come in our, uh – in one of our wardrobe things that we wear. And, uh – and sing. And I guess they were waiting to see how many of us showed up and who showed up as to exactly what we would sing. And we didn’t have an accompanist. So some of it was gonna be things that were acapella.

Um, and, um, I had – I had a flat tire on the way there. I – I – I must have hit the curb or something. And I had a flat tire. But thankfully, people in the house fixed the ti – they changed my tire for me. And I got to the church in time. And there was standing room only at the Metropolitan Community Church. Um, there – there were people outside. They broadcast[sic] the service to the outside. And now this – this had happened two o’clock in the morning. That day at six o’clock at this service, there were Metropolitan Community Church pastors from all over Florida. From Tallahassee. And Sarasota. And Miami, who were there for that service. I mean they just came right away. And some of our members had been standing out in lines trying to give blood that afternoon. As there were people – people were standing in line for eight hours

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that day to give blood. And – and – and then a lot of them came back the next day and gave blood.

Um, we – there wasn't room for us all to sit down in the church. Uh, so a lot of the chorus members were standing along the side. And we sang two numbers that we didn't need to have, um accompaniment for. W – we sang – and these were songs that we had just sung in our concert, uh, that – that spring, just a short time before. It was "True Colors" and "You'll Never Walk Alone". And those two songs we sang a hundred times after that. Uh, we started having from that day – and – and the very next night was, uh – in the evening was this candlelight vigil with 6,000 people there at the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center⁷ in front of it. Between City Hall and there I could still see that huge, huge crowd of people. And the experience of – of being there.

And at one point, as it was getting dark, they – they began to toll the bells. They began to toll the bell 49 times. And each time they would read the name of someone who had died. And – and there was a man standing next to me. He heard one of the names and he just collapsed. And his friends picked him up and held him. And, uh, people were lighting their candles and listening to the bells and to the – and to the names being – being read. It – there – there were – this – th – there was a woman – there was a woman there who was one of the ministers at the Mother Emanuel Church⁸ in Charleston, [South Carolina], where they had the – where nine people had been killed by a gunman just a year before. And this was just – i – it was just a little before – I think that very week they were having a first anniversary. And she came down here to be with us. And the, um – there was also a prayer given by a Muslim imam.

And what I saw that day, the very day after this happened, was – were three things. I saw love. I saw solidarity. And I saw unity. And that's what they were talking about: "Orlando United". "Orlando Strong". And it – it was such a moving thing to be part of an experience and see a city that just came together over this. And – and that day when it happened. On that Sunday. I – I've always said that I'm a New Yorker. And I'm proud to be a New Yorker. I'm a Yankee fan. Uh, but I was proud to be an Orlandoan that day. And I – and I – given me such a sense of being part of this community, that is united and strong. And loving and supportive.

0:37:58

Changing community attitudes on homosexuality

Howland

And – and I know that there's people here who, uh, still want to, uh, ridicule and condemn gay people. But, uh – but I think there's less of them. And I think people are opening up. One of the a – amazing things that's happened, because

⁷ Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts

⁸ Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church

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I live here in this retirement community, just last night a woman said to me, “You know, I have a daughter who’s gay.” I have another friend – at – the people – because they knew here that I’ve been singing with the Orlando Gay Chorus, there were people who said to me – I remember one woman in tears who said to me, “My granddaughter’s gay. I’m so worried for her.” Because when they realize that – that this attack at the Pulse, uh, hit home to gay people.

And – and, of course, I sing with the Orlando Gay Chorus. We went the following month in July – the beginning of July – only three weeks later – out to Denver, Colorado, for the GALA Festival. The Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. And we had choruses from all over the world. Mainly from the United States, but other places, too. And, um, people there were – were hugging and kissing us [*laughs*] all the time. They would say – they would see that we were from Orlando and they’d say, “May I hug you?”

Um, but all around the world people felt this. The same way as my friend whose granddaughter was gay here. And other people who live here who have gay family members who are, uh – who just fear for them, uh, because of this. Uh, and it brought back all the – the tender, um, uh, heart-wrenching, uh, experiences that people have had. And, of course, now with the new president-elect⁹, um, making, uh, bigotry seem more powerful, um, people are feel – feeling the same thing again.

But I – I am so proud of – of the gay community here. And I’m proud, uh, to be considered part of it as an ally. And to be totally accepted, uh, by them. And it’s given me – there were – in the beginning of living here, uh, at what I call here “the Old Folks Home”, I – I was – I did not often wear my t-shirts that say “Orlando Gay Chorus” on them. Uh, because I didn’t want to offend people. But I don’t care anymore. And, uh, I want them to be – if it offends them, fine. We’ll talk about it. And, uh, I want to – I really think I’ve become known here, uh, as – as, uh – as somebody who’s a member of the Orlando Gay Chorus. And, um, I’ve met employees here who are gay. Um, people still are pretty much in the closet. Uh, anybody who’s gay here at this old folks home. But, um – and I’m not outing anybody, but I’m outing myself as an ally. And if they think I’m gay, that’s fine, too. That’s alright.

0:41:57

Missing out on initial vigils, memorials and outreaches

Cravero

Um, [*clears throat*] as you, uh – well, you were speaking about some of the vigils. As you reflect on some of your experiences with the vigils, um – well, how many did you participate in afterwards? And is there anything that – that particularly stands out to you from those?

⁹ Donald John Trump (June 14, 1946 -)

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Howland Well, I probably have participated in 20 or 30 of them. We've had 50 or 60. Uh, some, uh – we have four ensembles in the chorus. And some of the – some of the vigils have been done by ensembles because they were the easiest ones to get together. Uh, a lot of them have come just at a few moments notices. Um, I, uh, was – I participated – I had to leave town for 10 days, uh, at the end of June. In between the time the Pulse happened and the GALA Festival out in Denver. Uh, I went to Portland, Oregon, where the Presbyterian Church General Assembly was meeting. And, uh, I'm a very active, uh, participant in, um, uh, working with the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and other organizations. And with the, uh – the LGBTQ organizations as well out there. Uh, and so I spent a lot of my time telling people out there about, uh, Orlando. So I missed a bunch of the, uh, important outreaches that we had. The memorials. The vigils.

Um, there have been so many of – different kinds. Some of them were fundraising. We sang "True Colors" and – and, uh, "When you walk through the storm."¹⁰ We sang both of those, uh, a great deal. And some other songs as well. Some of us – p – people just carried their – their shirts. We had our Billboard shirts that we usually sing in. And whatever the wardrobe was gonna be people just carried it in their cars so that they'd be available at a moment's notice.

0:44:23

Physical challenges

Howland And I'm – you know, I'm handicapped. I'm – I'm elderly. I use a walker and a cane. And I'm – the – PJ Galas Finster is our, um, stage manager for all kinds of things. And he would always make sure wherever we sang that there was a way – there were people to help me up steps if I had to get up steps. Uh, there was a place I could sit or I would sit in my walker seat. Uh, we – they always arranged to include me in it. And, uh, it was a lot of effort many times to get a parking place and to be able to move, uh, to where we were supposed to sing [*door closes*]. Uh, it was a tremendous effort for me to keep walking, uh, when I – when I didn't feel like walking. And, um, because I am physically challenged. But, uh, eh, they – the people in the chorus have done so much to help include me.

0:45:31

First responders breakfast

Um, some of the things – we had a thing out at, um – at UCF¹¹. It was – I think it was the School of Social Work. Maybe there were two different schools together that had a memorial service after people came back to school in – in September. And that was moving. To hear people tell the stories. We sang, um, over at the [Orange County] Convention Center, uh, on International Drive for

¹⁰ "You'll Never Walk Alone"

¹¹ University of Central Florida

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a first responders breakfast. Um, oh, I had to walk a mile to get to that. Um, the Convention Center's so huge. I had a terrible time. I couldn't even find the place. And then when I found it, I had to walk forever inside the building to get to where we were singing.

But then, to be there, uh – the singing – we were gr – we were so grateful that we were able to be there and sing. And give some su – support to them. But then, to hear the stories that were told of what these first responders did for which they were being honored. They were giving out awards that day. Uh, and a bunch of them were for people who were at the Pulse. Uh, and to hear what they went through in, um – and what they did, uh, to, uh – at a danger to themselves. And, um, there was one police – I – I don't know that he was honored f – for this, but one of the police, uh, responders has – the last I heard, he was still suffering from PTSD¹² from all that he saw – that he just can't – that he – he – he dreams about it at night. He can't get it out of his mind. He's been unable to work.

Um, people don't realize – a – and – and the stories the doctors – th – the doct – the doctor who had the bloody shoes that he's never given up and never cleaned. The bloody shoes while he was operating on people. Um, there were so many things that we heard from other people. And, um, I don't – I don't – tell – tell me – tell me, have I answered...

Cravero Oh, absolutely.

Howland [laughs].

Cravero Yeah. You've – you've covered questions I would – I didn't even have to ask [laughs].

0:48:18 **Long-term consequences of Pulse tragedy**

Cravero Um, what would you, uh, hope that some of the long-term consequences would be for not only the Orlando gay community, but maybe for the larger city or even the, you know, larger society as a whole, uh, from – from this tragedy?

Howland Well, I hope people will be kindler[sic] – kinder and gentler. I – I have been so impressed with the spirit that Orlando has had. I mean I just k – keep seeing this "Orlando Strong", or y – or – course being right down here in Downtown South, where it all happened, um – eh, the – the signs all over the place about "Orlando Strong".

I mean even – even I wore – I was wearing a Pulse shirt yesterday. I wore my

¹² Post-traumatic stress disorder

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Pulse shirt for the – for the, um, six-month anniversary. And an old woman [laughs] said to me, “Oh. Can – are those still available? Do you think I could get one?” And – and I – I wear t-shirts all the time around here. I’m probably the o – only what that does. I mean occasionally other people wear t-shirts. But I happen to love t-shirts. And – and so I’m very comfortable in them. So I don’t dress up every day. I wear t-shirts. I love t-shirts. And, um, so I have all my t-shirts for solidarity. Uh, and I guess maybe people are able to respond to me because of that.

But, um, I just – I’m impressed. And I’ve seen a spirit in Orlando. I mean even the fact that this past weekend at our concerts that we had of the Orlando Gay Chorus – our holiday concert, um – it – the – it was packed. Full – full house. Both – both times. And there’s – the people who are going out of their way to stand up for the community and for the gay community and for inclusion – people are becoming prouder of who they are. And prouder of their support and solidarity and unity.

And, uh, I think even some of the ultra-conservative Bible Belt people, um, are growing in their understanding. And – and realizing – eh, eh – some of my friends here, um – here at the old folks home ha – were so shocked when they heard about the Pulse. That these young people needed a safe place to be. It was a safe place for them. And they were kind of shocked and chagrined that young people would need a safe place. But – but we have it here. We have the Zebra Coalition¹³ and the Hope and Help Center [of Central Florida].¹⁴ Uh, all the different groups here in Orlando that are working for – helping people that have – they’re homeless because they’re gay. And I – I think people are coming together more. I – I hate to have to say that a terrible thing like this has been responsible for it, but I think the response of the community is – is strengthening who we are. And I – I hope it can extend more to the rest of the country.

0:52:27

Closing remarks

Cravero

I think you’ve covered all of the questions I had for you. Is there any, uh, other final thoughts or anything else you’d like to add that we haven’t discussed yet?

Howland

I think – I think that even though I’m at a stage in my life where things are becoming much more physically difficult for me, um, that the courage that this has given to me, um, is something that I’m grateful for. Uh, and I – I hope I can – I hope I can continue doing as much as I can, uh, for as long as I can. Um, but I – I – I can at least say things and write things. Just today, there came out in the email – I happened to be on the development committee of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship – that I’ve been an active, uh, participant in, uh,

¹³ A network of organizations which provide services to LGBTQ+ youth ages 13-24.

¹⁴ An organization that provides support for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in Central Florida.

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on the serving on the national committee and, uh—for 48 years. Um, we have an advent appeal for funds, uh, eh, in the month before Christmas. And we were doing emails every few says, uh, this month. And I wrote the one last week that came out today in the email. And I wrote it about gun violence.

That's another thing that I see happening. I see the gay community really getting behind the whole, um, end gen[sic] vi—uh, gun violence movement. And for my—for my little, uh, story that I wrote for the email that came out this morning, um, I told them how every morning I wake up thinking about the Pulse. And if I wake up every morning thinking about that, what is going through the minds of the families, uh, from Charleston[, South Carolina], from Sandy Hook [Elementary School]? These families that lost those precious children. Um, how many people throughout our country are, uh, experiencing these flashbacks, these memories that tug at their hearts? Um, eh, that will never leave them their whole lives of what has happened to them. Uh, and how we all have to, uh, get into this—it—it's absolutely necessary that we get rid of these assault rifles and that we—we work hard on gun violence. And making sure that—that this—that i—it's—it's happening every single day in this country. And we have to do something about it.

And I'm—I'm—I'm happy that, uh, the gay community, that's a strong community and has a lot to—to, uh—a lot of power and a lot of voice now, um, will—will get into this battle, too, to end gun violence.

Cravero Peggy, thank you so much for sharing your experiences and thoughts with us today. Um, this has been Geoffrey Cravero with Peggy Howland on Tuesday, December 13th, 2016.

Howland Thank you.

End of Interview