

Oral Memoirs
of
Nicholas Agon Kresky

An Interview Conducted by

Sarah Schneider

November 17, 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

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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 Nicholas Agon Kresky is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on November 17, 2016.

Abstract

An oral history interview of Nicholas Agon Kresky, a member of the Orlando Gay Chorus who serves on the chorus's Music and Artistic Development Committee. The interview was conducted by Sarah Schneider at the University of Central Florida Center for Emerging Media in Orlando, Florida, on November 17th, 2016. Some of the topics covered include joining the Orlando Gay Chorus, his favorite productions, the 2012 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) festival, the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub, the Orlando Gay Chorus's response to the Pulse tragedy, the community response to the Pulse tragedy, pet therapy, the national response to the Pulse tragedy, the 2016 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) festival, support from other gay choruses, the significance of Pulse before and after the tragedy, the role of social

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media in the aftermath of the tragedy, and the long-term consequences of the Pulse tragedy.

Nicholas Agon Kresky

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Sarah Schneider
November 17, 2016
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Joining the Orlando Gay Chorus and favorite productions

Schneider Today is Thursday, November 17th, 2016. My name is Sarah Schneider and I'm conducting an oral history interview with Nick [Nicholas] Agon Kresky of the Orlando Gay Chorus. The interview is being conducted at the UCF¹ Center for Emerging Media in Orlando, Florida.

So thank you for being here today.

Kresky Thank you.

Schneider And can you start off by stating your name for us?

Kresky Sure. My name is Nick Agon Kresky.

Schneider Thank you. And could you start off by telling us where you were born and how long you've lived in Orlando?

Kresky Sure. Um, I was born in Duluth, Minnesota. I grew up in the upper peninsula of Michigan and I moved to Orlando in 2010.

Schneider Great. And what brought you to the Orlando Gay Chorus?

Kresky Um, looking for kind of an outlet. Something different. Um, when I was – when I was younger, growing up in – in Michigan, I was brought to Milwaukee Pride as kind of a celebration of my high school graduation. And I got to see the – I think they were the Brew City Chorus. Um, it was LGBT² chorus over in Milwaukee.

And when I moved to Orlando, I was like, "Orlando's big enough. They should have something." So I went and I Googled it. And sure enough, there they were. Hm.

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² Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender

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Schneider Um, and so can you tell us about some of your favorite productions or performances...

Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...you've done through the chorus.

Kresky Um, my first performance was "Rainbows over Broadway". It was a 2011 spring concert. And I really enjoyed that one because it was just a—a lot of campy fun. Just kind of celeb—celebrating the community. Um, and then I—I'm not a fan of the music from our "Pillow Talk" performance. I like the cohesion and the—we—it had a great storyline. Lots of, um—lots of [inaudible], so—and I—I like a show with good production.

Schneider Mmhmm. Um, and did—I'm not sure if I already—if you already said...

Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...how long have you been a part of the [Orlando] Gay Chorus?

Kresky I've been with the chorus for about five and a half years.

0:02:15 **2012 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses festival**

Schneider Okay. And, um, have you participated in any of the GALA³ events?

Kresky Uh, yeah. I've been in two different GALA events.

Schneider Okay. And, um, where were those located?

Kresky They were both in Denver[, Colorado]. So I think 2012 and 2016 as well.

Schneider Okay. And can you tell me more about the 2012 GALA event and what your experience was like there?

Kresky Sure. Um, in 2012, uh, I had needed a little bit of escape, too. And I'd—I finished relationship[sic] months and months prior. And I'd just kind of started a romantic interest with another chorus member. Um, and then we, uh—yeah. 2012 I guess was just more about learning about the—the gay choral movement. I never knew there was an actual movement. And, um, kind of learning about the sense of community that comes from gay choruses. Mm.

0:03:22 **Mass shooting at Pulse nightclub**

Schneider Um, and so, getting to Pulse. Could...

³ Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses

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Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...you tell me a little bit about how you first heard about the Pulse shooting?

Kresky Sure. Um, my husband, Manny, and I were working on renovations at the house. So we're stuck sleeping downstairs on these little [inaudible] beds. And we started getting f—like random phone calls and text messages. And it's really early in the morning and we were trying to sleep. I had to work in the morning. I'm like, "I'm old and I'm tired [*laughs*]." So I'm checking the messages and everybody's checking to see if we're okay. And I mean instantly, your mind is, "What's—what's going on?" It's—that's when we were going into Facebook and the media. Um, checking CNN.com. You realize that there's an incident at Pulse happening. And then we're having to reassure everybody at three o'clock in the morning that we're okay. Please let us sleep. We did not really know the gravity of the situation 'til much later.

Schneider And, um, what did you do the rest of that Sunday?

Kresky Um, that Sunday I actually had to turn—go into work. Um, and so I got in there, um—it was a[sic] early morning shift. So, of course, you had all those phone calls. And then you're like, "I have to report to work." And I work at a—a local theme park with lots of young people. People that have been out in the clubs all night. So, you know, would they—that's when they started doing body counts. And we're sitting in the break room, getting ready to start our day. And we didn't know who was going to show up and who wasn't.

Schneider Um, and what were your thoughts as sort of the rest of the day unfolded and as—in those few days following Pulse?

Kresky It was completely surreal because when you're out working with guests, you had to ignore that it even happened. It's—that's—you know, escapism is all—is all about the theme park industry. And as a—as a[sic] employee, you have to go out there and escape with them. Nothing bad ever happens at a theme park. And so you had to take that part of your brain and—and switch it off. And you're really walking a fine line of fantasy and reality. Mm.

0:06:03

Orlando Gay Chorus's response to Pulse tragedy

Schneider Um, and so, um, what was the Orlando Gay Chorus's response like in those first few days and—and in weeks following?

Kresky It was—it was insane. You just did—out of—out of nowhere, we started just getting emails and messages as—as members, um, from—from our leadership. And we've got—we've been asked to go in the first—the first night we were asked to do a vigil over at the church [Joy Metropolitan Community Church]. We were asked—um, over at [Joy] MCC. And we were asked not to advertise

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anything about it on social media because we didn't really know really how dangerous the environment was going to be. And so this was – it was all kind of under wraps.

And at that time, it was such a shock for – for myself that I had – had declined the invitation. But then, the following day, when they had decided to go and do the – the performance at, uh, Dr. Phillips Center [for the Performing Arts]. Then I decided, yes. It's about time just to kind of gauge, you know, what – what community am I walking out into [*clears throat*]?

Um, the chorus's response was just incredible though. It was very, uh – it was probably the most recognized I've ever seen us. You know? We – we're – we're all about singing. We're all about going out and having fun with a message. And now, we're expected to take all of these cats and herd them. And tell 'em where to be and how to be. And we – we had just invested in this, um – oh, goodness – Chorus Connection, which is a – a really great app, um, and, uh, kind of organizational software for choruses. And so we were able to just, within an hour or two, respond to a vigil request. And, you know, you all of a sudden have representation. We'd never been that organized [*laughs*] before that [*inaudible*].

Schneider Mm.

Kresky So...

Schneider Mm. And, um, so what was your experience, as a member of the [Orlando] Gay Chorus...

Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...um, participating in vigils and memorial services and other events?

Kresky Um, it was – it was a mixture of trying to find some sort of self-sooving[sic] – self-soothing and trying to project a – a message of caring and wanting to support the greater community. You know? You're, eh – you're, uh – in the end, you're trying to figure out who's actually supporting you. Um, and just kind of coming to a realization that, you know, we were all in it together. We were all supporting each other. Whether it be, you know, a person standing three hundred, four hundred people back. Or, you know, a person standing next to you onstage.

0:09:04 **Community response to Pulse tragedy**

Schneider Um, and what did you think when you, um, participated and – and experienced the reaction of the local community? What did you think about the local reaction?

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Kresky It was extremely overwhelming. It—I—I grew up in a really rural, conservative area that's—I mean I g—I grew up in a time where—or—and in a place where being gay could, you know, send you home in a black bag. Like that was—it was a dangerous time. You don't talk about it. You don't act on it. Um, and then I come into this community, where, you know, the—it was like the second night and we're still trying to figure out how many people and what was going on. And then you have this huge gathering, you know, right on the lawn of the Dr. Phillips Center [for the Performing Arts]. And you look out there and there's—there's no more green space. There were so many people there. It was just—it was so surreal to see that level of support for the LGBT community. And then, you know, the city as a whole. Mm.

0:10:18

Pet therapy

Schneider Um, and what other moments stand out for you, um, in that time period of—of all the vigils and events and things happening? Do any other moments come to mind?

Kresky Um, I think, uh, you notice [*laughs*] I won't say. They had the—they had the, um—at the dogs. They had the, uh—I—I don't know how many times that I—I was in human services for 10 years. And I really s—believed in pet therapy. I loved it. And I knew that in times of crisis, people would come in with these therapy dogs. And, you know, it was just to kind of bring a little soothing and maybe even kind of just ground you, if just for the moment.

And I realized the gravity of the situation. And how much of a—how much of a tragedy on our community it is. Again, this was all surreal. I mean, there was—there was no reality to this. And I realized how bad it was when the therapy dogs were there. And they had traveled miles to get there. And they're walking through the crowd with these dogs. Because this is something I had studied. This is something that I knew. And it felt great because in participating in the—you know, [*inaudible*] on the dog that's there. But, again, to realize the reality of the situation that these dogs were there. Mm.

0:11:55

National response to Pulse tragedy

Schneider Um, did you—what did you think about or experience in terms of the national, maybe the international—but broader...

Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...reactions to the event beyond just the local community?

Kresky Um, can you rephrase the [*inaudible*]?

Schneider Um...

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Kresky Sorry.

Schneider ...what did you think about the reaction of people beyond Orlando to the Pulse shooting?

Kresky Um, I guess as the chorus traveled, we got to maybe s – witness, uh, a very la – a very large – I guess a greater view of that. I mean you he – you see – you see responses on CNN. You see responses on Facebook. You – and you’re – and you’re watching the feeds and whatnot. But, you know, you realize s – support, but you didn’t really feel it until you walked to the car rental desk. And they look at your driver’s license and they say, “Oh. Orlando.” And then they want to talk about it. And they want to – they’re looking for some sense of closure as well. You don’t realize that it hurt our community. It hurt our city. But it also impacted the nation pretty heavily for the couple weeks that it was running in the media.

I think we, even after Denver, um – Manny and I – my husband and I went to, uh, California for a couple of days. And, you know, you couldn’t esc – we were trying to just escape Pulse for a little bit. We’re just gonna go have fun and unwind. But when you hand over your – your driver’s license or they ask you to fill in the visitor’s book and then they say, “Orlando,” or then they want to talk about it, you realize that it comes from a place of genuine warmth and kindness. But it’s, again, very overwhelming. You – you – you realize how big this was.

0:14:05

2016 Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses festival

Schneider Um, and so can you tell me now about the GALA in Denver...

Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...in 2016 – so after Pulse – and what that experience was like?

Kresky Whew. That’s – that’s a lot to tell [*laughs*].

Schneider [*laughs*].

Kresky Um, we – in 2 – and we’re talking about 2012 or 2016?

Schneider Um, 2 – whichever do you like.

Kresky Okay.

Schneider But I...

Kresky Sure.

Schneider ...I was thinking 2016.

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Kresky

So in 2012, you know, we were just—we're the campy little choir with the Mickey [Mouse] ears. And everybody loves to come see Orlando because we bring the fun. And we bring—you know, we bring the little silly with us. And—and, you know, we are—our songs tell a story. It's a very kind of—you get the warm fuzz and you leave.

This year—this time when we went, we didn't—we didn't even have to sing to—to get accolades. To get warmth through, um—the first day, we were—we were invited to a singalong with a couple of the choruses. And we're basically just kind of backup. Right [*laughs*]? It was walking in, uh, doing—doing our lines and then leave. And the crowd didn't let us leave. The crowd—cr—crowd wouldn't even let the concert start. Because we were—we're the last people to walk into the hall. Nobody announced us. They just saw our shirts. And there was an immediate standing ovation. Just because we were walking [*cries*] by. Just because we were walking to the hall.

You could, um—I mean you could see—just our presence, you could see people crying. You could see them holding each other. And it's hard—it—initially, it was hard because we were the group that was invoking tears. But then you realize we were the group that was [*clears throat*]—we were the group that was invoking solidarity. [*sniffs*] There were—there were banners everywhere that says[sic], you know, “We Stand with Orlando,” “Orlando Strong.” Um, you know, these are probably from people that may have never even been to our city. And there they are standing with us. All supporting us because, you know, their brothers and sisters were attacked.

It was—we—we performed three different times when really we're—initially s—we were supposed to only perform once. We were supposed to perform this cheesy little montage that we pulled over from our—our spring show. And it just—within moments of—of the incident, we realized we had to go ch—completely change the whole set. And pull from wherever we could to create something that was, uh, you know—that was heartfelt. That would maybe bring about some sort of healing.

Um, w—we had—so we had our invitation for the first night. Then we did our performance. Um, and again, the—the—these performances are timed, so the minute you hit the stage, you have x amount of minutes to perform and get off. They moved our set to the end 'cause they knew they couldn't time us. They knew that just by walking on the stage we would have to wait for the applause to end. And it was right. We walked in. There was standing room only. We've never had that before [*laughs*]. I mean we—the—the amount of—of support and warmth that outpoured was just incredible. And then—then there we were again, um, for, my goodness—it was En—was it “Engendered Species”? I can't even remember. There were so many [*laughs*].

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And, again, it was just our presence that just kept on bringing the crowds of people wanting to feel like they were a part of – of us. And I – and I really hope that, you know, we were able to make that happen for them. That we were able to help them find some kind of closure or some sort of healing as well. Mmhmm.

0:18:38 Support from other gay choruses

Schneider And how did people ac – interact with you from the other choruses on a personal level outside of the actual performance when you met people?

Kresky Sure. The – the first night, I was afraid to even wear my Orlando shirt because I knew people would want to talk to us about it. And I personally wasn't ready. I did not want to – I did not want to be Orlando. I just wanted to be a GALA singer. And then you run out – you run out of clothes. No. I'm kidding [laughs]. No. Um, I – it just – I saw some of the other chorus members wearing their shirts. Realized it was going to be okay to wear mine. But as soon as I put it on, like random people would hug you. Even people that weren't even going to the GALA conference, they're just, you know, on the – the bus with you, trying to get somewhere downtown, want to hug you. And it was – it was – it was wild. I'm a hugger. Um, I – I'm not opposed to human touch. But, oh, my goodness [laughs]. It was – it was a lot [sniffs].

0:19:49 Significance of Pulse before and after tragedy

Schneider Um, and I'm also wondering if Pulse as a site meant anything...

Kresky Mmhmm.

Schneider ...to you before the shooting. And, um, what, if anything, it represents for you now.

Kresky Um, before the shooting, it was a place where the kids go. And I – I'm really not that old. I'm, um, in my mid-thirties. Uh, but the crowd that attended Pulse was, you know, a younger crowd. A trendier crowd. Maybe a thinner crowd [laughs].

Schneider [laughs].

Kresky But, you know, they were, um – they – it wasn't usually – it wasn't typically a place that I would – I would go to. It wasn't – it wasn't my home bar I guess. Um, I knew of it. I drove by it. It looked like a great, you know, fun place. And I got – there were times where I – I intended to go and visit just because it was something different. But I don't know. I felt like I would be a little out of place.

Afterward, it just became, you know, just a – a living memorial. It just – it sits there and it – it, um – it almost reminds – it almost makes – it's kind of a mark of this overcoming silly divisions that are even in our own community. In the LGBT community. You know? We create our little cliques. Our little groups. And you

realize that, you know, we're all dealing with the same struggles. And we're all dressed in the same flesh. And to drive by the building anymore is sh—you know? The first time, it was horrific. You know? I s—I tried to—days—days upon days just avoiding streets to get around it and not having to pass it. But then the first time I passed it, you know, reality sank in that, yep, this is the place. And now, the building itself is almost like a—almost like a mausoleum. It's—it—it's hard to look at it. It's hard to drive by it.

Um, you know, I—we—we had coworkers from our company that—that had passed away in the tragedy. Um, and it just, you know—it really brings it home every time. You know? How much—how much hatred can really impact a community. And how much destruction can happen because of it. You know? It's—it's no longer, you know, the place that you might go on a Saturday. It's now the site of the worst, you know, massacre in modern American history.

0:22:43

Role of social media in aftermath of tragedy

Schneider Um, and did social media play any part in your, um, reaction to your experience with the aftermath of the shooting?

Kresky Um, social media became kind of an outlet to form your thoughts. You know? And we—you're able to edit the words that you're typing. You're able to process things as you're putting it out. So it almost becomes a live journal. Um, it was nice to see the support from others. Um, it also gave an opportunity to—to educate people. Pardon me. Um, you know, they immediately, as with any other, um—as with any other public shooting, you start having these discussions about gun control legislation. And you start having discussions about mental health. You i—it—it runs the whole gamut. And social media just came—became kind of a place to—a safe place to have those kinds of discussions. Mm.

0:23:54

Long-term consequences of Pulse tragedy

Schneider Um, and do have any thoughts about what the long-term consequences might be for the Orlando gay community or for the broader Orlando community or what you might hope the long-term impact of the shooting would be?

Kresky Um, the long-term consequences. Initially, I was afraid that we would be stuck going back into our little boxes. Um, and maybe being less out. Um, being less true to ourselves. Uh, obviously, it seems like the—the exact opposite has happened. You know? And [*laughs*] you see this meme, you know, "You just pissed off the gay community. Watch out." That kind of [*laughs*]—we get stuff done. Um, and sure enough I—I strongly believe that I—it's my hope that for our city, we develop a—a tolerance for each other. Um, it's—it's a big enough city to get lost in. But it's small enough to know people. And so, really hoping that this gives us a chance to reach out and get to know people that you normally

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wouldn't—you normally wouldn't associate with. You normally wouldn't talk with.

Um, on a broader scale, you know, I—I don't know how realistic it is, but I really do hope that we begin to fund, you know, better mental health treatment. We begin to look at, um, more sane gun legislation. You know? It's—if 49 isn't enough, then, you know, what is?

0:25:45

Closing remarks

Schneider Um, and what other reflections have you had about the Pulse shooting or about your involvement in the [Orlando] Gay Chorus or anything else that you've been thinking about that we haven't talked about?

Kresky Mm. Let's see. Um, don't forget h—how your actions affect others. You know? Uh, whether it's, you know, considering—considering acting out on such a grand scale, uh, as the shooter did, or if it is, you know, just wanting to lash out at somebody, don't—don't forget, you know, how—how your actions affect other people. Step outside of the box. Step outside of the tunnel vision. And that's—I hope that that's one of our lasting legacies.

Schneider Um, is there anything else we didn't talk about that you'd like to say or share?

Kresky Um, not that I can think of. You know [*laughs*]? Thank you.

Schneider Okay. Well, thank you so much. We really...

Kresky I appreciate it.

Schneider ...appreciate you talking with us.

End of Interview