

**Transcript of an Interview with Marvin Henchbarger and Laurie Dean Torrell**

Interviews with LGBTQ Elders completed by Keith Gemerek, Box 74

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[ ] = indicate extra information or uncertainties where scribe couldn't decipher what was said

**Keith:** It's November 21, 2004, and I'm at the GLYS, uh, Agency... Do you call it an Agency?

**Marvin:** [in the background] Drop-in—well it's with—Drop-in Center.

**Keith:** —Center, which is Gay and Lesbian Youth Services Center, and I'll let everyone introduce themselves.

**Marvin:** Uh, Marvin Henchbarger, um, lesbian, executive director of Gay and Lesbian Youth Services.

**Laurie:** Laurie Torrell, I'm Marvin's partner, and I'm director of Just Buffalo Literary Center.

**Marvin:** She's a lesbian, too. [laughs]

[laughter in background]

**Jim:** Jim Haynes, and I've been on many of these interviews. I'm doing the interview in place of Madeline Davis who is uh—

**Keith:** And can I just say for the record, this project would not happen without Jim and Don's help.

**Jim:** [modestly] Ohh...

**Keith:** There. It's on tape.

[light chuckles in background]

**Jim:** [sniffles] Okay, we're ready to start now. Okay, now, what we would like the two of you to do is converse with each other, and one of the opening kinds of things that we could have you do is to talk to each other about your becoming aware in your own personal lives about your lesbianism and then about your relationship and how you go to where you are now in gay and lesbian and transsexual liberation. And so you can just sort of converse to each other or...

[short pause]

**Marvin:** Well... [chuckles]

**Jim:** That's a really open-ended question, and so you can tackle it just about any way you want to.

**Marvin:** Well, i-i-in terms of my coming-out, I mean, you know, uh—I was born in 1947 and there weren't, you know, there weren't images, at least not in Niagara County, um, for anything that—that might give me any clue as to why I felt different from other—other students in high school. And I just didn't, you know, I didn't feel like—there was something different. I didn't really feel like doing the dating thing. I knew I was supposed to like guys. [sighs] Um, and, you know, continued to do the—tried to do the hetero—heterosexual dating thing, and it wasn't until I got to um—I went back—I went to the, um, State College of Oswego New York in 1987 that things kind of came to a head for me and I was able to—to put a—to finally be able to put a label on what I was. You know, like, I couldn't say lesbian right away but um, I could say gay woman, and finally got to where I could say lesbian and I was forty, forty-one, when I did that, so I came out late, um. And then in 1998 I left Oswego and came back to Niagara County in part because I—I wanted to rabble while I was there, I wanted to make it a better place for youth that are gay and lesbian, you know, so they didn't have to feel like they were the only one. And then uh, with me coming back it didn't take, what, like less than—less than nine months, and I met you, and so I'll let you tell a little about your story, Laurie.

**Laurie:** [breathes deeply] It is hard to know where to start, [laughs] but I um, was a student—high school student in the 70's and I—I think I really benefited from the women's movement because that was very much, you know—a very strong force at that time—and um, my mom is a librarian and was very open to my reading whatever I wanted and so I always had a lot of books around...*Our Bodies, Ourselves* and you know, feminist literature and stuff and so um you know, I had all this around me, um like Marvin I think I felt some kind of a difference in high school, but uh it mainly came out as—as like with you, not really dating much, having guys as friends but not really getting into dating. Um, I went to college in Brockport, and it was I think that first semester that my best friend Joanie in college came out to me and—or maybe it was the second semester because we were very, very close and I remember when she came out it really hit me hard because I was very jealous because she came out because she was starting a relationship with another housemate of mine. I was extremely jealous, but it also was like, “Oooh, you know, this—this could be a possibility for me too, I guess.” You know, because she—I really could identify with her and it just was that—all of a sudden—that personal connection. So I went home, and um, on one of the breaks I remember I had a long conversation with my mom and said, “Mom, you know I think I might, you know, wanna see women.” And that was very much a part of what was going on in experimenting college, and um we had a women's coalition and different things but—and I did have some relationships with women in college, but I never met someone who I really, really loved, and the women who liked me, you know, I didn't feel the same way about, and so nothing ever really fell into place. I felt open to the possibility, but I just still felt very alone, I guess. And when I graduated from college, came back to Buffalo, started working in the not-for-profit world, um, I met the man who became my husband. He was a poet and I met him and felt a strong connection and um, i-in terms of, in terms of values and things like that. So I was married for, uh, twelve years but something just never was right for me underneath it, and after I would say, three or four years, the issue of bisexuality or being gay uh ended up on the table of our marriage and we ended up, you know, starting to talk more about it because I needed to talk more about it [coughing in background]. Um, ultimately, I met a woman at work who pushed me that much further down my journey

because of the feelings I had for her. And I really had to come to terms, and it was over a period of time with the fact that I needed to be with another woman, I would never be happy being in a marriage, um and that I was, um, gay. So, it-it was towards the end of my marriage that Marvin and I were introduced to each other by a colleague at Planned Parenthood.

**Marvin:** Who—who was a sorority sister back at college, ironically enough.

**Laurie:** It—yeah, it was—it was very ironic because she had come back to Niagara County wanting to rabble rouse—

**Jim:** [chuckles in background]

**Laurie:** —And I had made the commitment to rabble rouse within Planned Parenthood because, um, I'd had this relationship with this woman who was a work colleague, and it had ended, and it had left me very, very grief stricken. I was still married, and just felt like, if I can't live, you know, the kind of life, that I-I wish I could, I'm gonna channel that into activism—I'm at least gonna be a visible advocate in this county because that love was housed inside me by then. I finally knew what it was like to actually love another woman in that way, and I-I knew it-it had to find expression somehow. [coughing in background] So, um I was looking at grant funding to try to do some—there were a lot of non-HIV-you-must-be-bisexual-transgendered grant funds coming down the pike, and so I was looking for a way to start a coalition, and Marvin and I went and had lunch and I said, "Would you, you know, volunteer to help me with this?" And she said, "Yeah!" And so we started working together, formed the Niagara County Coalition for Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered Wellness and Health. We had uh—a conference for healthcare providers that first year that featured Leslie Feinberg as our keynote, and we had about 150 healthcare providers come out for it. And friends—many people who have gone on to be longtime friends—including Camille, was part of that, um, and we just got closer and closer through doing this work together, so we met in April of that year—

**Marvin:** It was April-April 30<sup>th</sup> 1999 I-I-I count that as our—

[laughter erupts between Laurie and Jim in the background]

**Marvin:** —I count that as our-our-our like...one of our anniversaries.

**Laurie:** It's definitely one of them. [laughs]

**Marvin:** Yes, right.

**Laurie:** So by that following—it was al—just under a year—that following March, um, my husband left and we started a-a real life together, and it wasn't the easiest process I wouldn't say but it—it was definitely destiny unfolding. I had the feeling throughout the whole process that, um, I was very thankful that my destiny would not let go of me. It just would not let go of me even though for a long time I didn't see how it was gonna work out or how it was gonna unfold in a way that, you know, would work. Um, my feet just—just kept walking in the direction I needed to go, and once we were, you know, together, we were just—we-we were just together. We were just working on stuff together—

**Marvin:** Well, and a—and a piece of getting to know each other better was at uh Mike Maraca, the current board president of GLYS, asked—talked to Laurie about doing focus groups for GLYS, and um, you know, you asked me to do those with you and, [pauses briefly] so...

**Laurie:** One thing led to the next! [chuckles]

**Marvin:** And that certainly, you know. That was—that was—that was time together that we might not have had otherwise.

**Laurie:** That's right.

**Marvin:** I mean, that ultimately is what got me to GLYS because they were about to lose their director, and you know I asked—told them I would help them out for a while. I told them I would help them out for a while part time—

**Laurie:** [chuckles]

**Marvin:**— [inaudible] three days and I think I was like, “Excuse me, but this is full time.” But, uh—

**Jim:** I'd like to have you talk more about that Marvin, and I know that you are the, uh, executive director of GLYS or whatever we call you [stammering]—

[Laurie and Marvin laugh]

**Jim:** —And that you have worked very hard for this organization during the past...How many years? I've counted it out—

**Marvin:** About four and a half.

**Jim:**—About four and a half years. And Laurie has been working with our youth, uh, quite a bit. She—you-you deal with their creative aspects [faltering]. Uh, I'd like to have you discuss how you became, the uh, CEO of GLYS and then the—how your relationship uh, has evolved in terms of your work with GLYS and sort of what you see as the future of GLYS.

**Marvin:** Well, [sighs] as I've mentioned it was Fall '99 that, um, the board asked Laurie to-to do the focus groups, and you know so we did those together through the Fall and put together, you know, a report, but—but there was a lot of stuff going on for GLYS at that point that I think—that led to the—to the focus groups in the first place. The fact that, you know, they-they had lost a grant that they were shoring with another agency, that they [clears throat] had one of their state—state grants pulled out from under them and, um, you know, and Sam Pointe stepped into the breach and got us linked with the Empire State Pride Agenda, uh, Foundation...GLBT Health and Human Services Network, um, so that when I—when I did come in, there was actually money here once we got it flowing. Um, but anyways I, you know, I was—h-h-had that link with GLYS and—and so I don't even remember whether Laurie said or how I found out that—that [stammering] the director for the first seventeen years, one of the founders, was, um, [clears throat] was-was-was thinking of leaving and at—and at that point I was um—I mean I have a background in education, basically I am an educator, and at that point I was working um—I'm

trying to think was I...Oh I was at Wegman's by that point—I was at—I was at Wegman's—let's see...week—Friday and Saturday nights from 11 to 7 stocking the pet food aisle so I'd have weekends, you know, the weekdays free to be able to do stuff for the coalition. And I uh called somebody on the board, I can't even remember who, and said, "Ya know, if—if Mark leaves then I would-would help out with um, you know, you know temporarily—you know, trying to keep things going." And um, and that was [clears throat]—that was I think in either late March or early April, um, in 2000. And um, I'd say it didn't—it didn't take long before it became clear that it wasn't a part-time job, and so um the board hired me as the interim director, and then in 2001 that summer, did a—did a-a search, and I applied for the position. And um, I remember that somebody on the-the executive board that was doing the interviewing, asked me, since I kept insisting that I was going to stay in Niagara County [clears throat] and I didn't wanna do my work in Buffalo, what it was that was keeping me with GLYS. And the thing I remember telling him was that—that the kids have hooked me. You know, we just have some [inaudible] youth down here. So, um...and-and GLYS at one time from [clears throat] 1983 until September 2000, it was a part-time agency, uh primarily counseling based, mmm..umm

**Laurie:** Say something about the youth development focus that you did.

**Marvin:** Well but then—but then whenever—whenever I came in in May of 2000, we continued what had been going on. I was lucky enough to have a couple of volunteers who kept things going [clears throat] until September when we opened the doors and went, you know, well full time. The agency isn't open, the doors aren't open, you know, 40 hours a week but just you know, but we're [stammering] increased the number of hours to 30 hours a week from 9 hours a week and-and-and got away from the counseling 'cause kind of my feeling was, couple of thoughts. One is that just because our young people are gay or lesbian or bi or trans doesn't mean that there's—there's an issue that requires counseling. Or, if it does it doesn't mean it has to be their sexual orientation or-or at that point I was thinking sexual orientation. If I had—was where I would be now, I would say their sexual orientation and gender identity, [clears throat] but I wasn't there then. Um, and because my background is college student development, and I'm an educator I thought well, you know, I'll steal some of what I did in the resident halls in Oswego. So we um, you know, we have a referral therapist you know, Louis is capable of seeing—Lou Meran, who is a longtime member of the community. Uh, took us a couple years to get him into a role that we were comfortable with, but we don't, you know, we don't view our youth as—they're not flawed. You know, we don't need to-to rely on the counseling and—and so we try to, you know, we've tried to provide a lot of other opportunities for them to replace some of what they might not be getting in school or at home or the places that—

**Laurie:** And what was your first great link?

**Marvin:** My first great link...Oh! Well, okay there were two [inaudible] things that happened, and-and—but you weren't there. Why do you look so excited?

**Laurie:** I was at the writer in residence hall.

**Marvin:** That's what I mean, but you weren't—

**Laurie:** [undistinguishable response]

**Marvin:** That's true, okay.

**Laurie:** [chuckles] I wasn't there?

**Marvin:** Well, so, there was some money left at the end of 2000. It was—it was just before Thanksgiving, and I kept thinking I wanted to have a writer in residence project, so Laurie—so Just Buffalo Literary Center, where Laurie is now the executive director, was a place where I could connect with that. So Laurie gave me two names, one of which was Sherrie Robins—What was the other one?

**Laurie:** [mumbling quietly] I don't remember—

**Marvin:** Sue... Sue...

**Laurie:** [muffled] Well—

**Marvin:** [overlapping] Anyways—

**Laurie:** [muffled]...the person, the one that we didn't hire. [laughs heartily]

**Marvin:** [speaking over Laurie's laughter] Oh, Okay, so anyways, so um, I remember calling the—Ed Taylor, the then director of Just Buffalo who said you know, “You—you can't do this it's—it's like—it's like the end of November and you wanna do this during December and there's—now you don't have the money and blah blah blah.” And I kind of insisted, and so we ended up with—with Sherrie Robins who is a local poet, um, here just about every day, during December of 2000. And it was—it was so popular with the—with the youth that, you know, we ended up publishing an anthology of the things that they'd written during that month. And we put Sherrie um initially through Just Buffalo, [referencing Laurie] again you still weren't there [clears throat] but-but had Sherrie on-on board for the next year 2001 on a contract with Just Buffalo that brought her down a couple times a year—or a couple times a month. And then we started to do coffee houses down here in the—in the hallway for our occasional Friday nights and then, Sherrie—Sherrie's now a consultant with us. We have a contract with her where she comes down a couple times a month, um. A lot of her work in the school she comes across with, you know, youth that are gay and lesbian [clears throat] can link them to GLYS.

**Laurie:** And the coffee houses—

**Marvin:** [interjecting] [clears throat] That's right...

**Laurie:** —Have just been incredible!

**Marvin:** [talking over Laurie] That's right. Yup.

**Laurie:** You know to draw 20, 30, 40—

**Marvin:** Or more youth. Yup.

**Laurie:** —Or more, [Marvin clears throat] you know, youth and friends now to these coffee houses is absolutely incredible.

**Marvin:** Yeah, we do them in the community. We did the first one I think in—Was it 2001? Over at Spot Coffee, and we had about 65 people there, including three young people from Iroquois High School—which is part of the reason for taking the coffee house open mikes out of GLYS anyways, was so that youth who couldn't get here for some reason, you know, their parents think, "Okay it's cold. Go do a—go do a coffee house open mike." You know, that-that's a positive thing, you know. They might not think it was so hot if they thought the kids were coming to do a, you know, a *gay* coffee house but...

**Laurie:** [chuckles]

**Marvin:** But it-it—but that [stammering] that was something that the youth needed, to be around other—they needed to be around other-other kids that were gay or lesbian, you know, bi or trans. So, [brief pause] Um... [clears throat] I'm trying to think in terms of—you know so we've changed the focus to youth development. Um, things that I kind of en—hope to, you know—w-w-we've put much more of an emphasis on, in the last year or so, on education. We had a lot of young people graduate from high school in June and went on to school, and I'd like to think that part of that was, for some of them maybe not all, but being comfortable with who they are in terms of their sexual orientation, um, allowed them to, you know, t-to do that. Um, we have started to really encourage the college experience, um starting to put together [inaudible] down here with a lot of college you know—you know, materials. And also, we just recently uh—Tom Hammond, the sister of Tom Hammond, who was one of the founders of GLYS and I think Tom died in—Jeez 19...[stammering] uh—it's been a while I can't remember—It's been quite a number of years, but anyways, Tom's sister just recently, um, sent us a check for 500 dollars for the 2005 Tom Hammond Memorial Scholarship for GLYS youth and she's gonna do that for as long as she can, so it's one more—one more way for us to put the emphasis on that. [Sighs] And another thing that would be neat to have down here is a formalized, um, volunteer program. And my—my ultimate dream would be to have some of the volunteer work that our youth do be with more life experienced members of the community—

**Laurie:** Mm, mm.

**Marvin:** —You know, like they have uh, you know, so let's say—we-we'll pick on, you know Don Licht and Jim Haynes, two of our founders and board members, and let's say they decided that they uh, you know, had some work that they wanted done out in the yard, but they were feeling like they didn't—they didn't want to go out and do it themselves—

**Laurie:** Oh, how about us!? [bursts into laughter]

**Marvin:** —How about us! Okay good.

**Laurie:** They can come start with our house!

**Marvin:** With mowing the lawn.

**Laurie:** [laughs heartily]

**Marvin:** But you know, they had them—but they had them, you know, get out there w-with the—[stammering] with other members of the community that have more experience, just to remind them that they have a culture and to keep a link between, you know, t-t-the past and—and the present and the future. Um, you know, and then at some point we have to find a way to get out into the burbs, even if its only sort of monthly meetings, but a way to get to youth that can't get here, from out in you know, in the—in the outer reaches of Erie County and-and then in Niagara County but—

**Laurie:** And your website has been uh, an important piece of what you've done, too.

**Marvin:** —Yeah, yeah...That—that was also started in um, in the fall of-of 2000 that we started—an-and was recently we've started to—to revamp it and make it better but—and one of the neat things that I think is about the [stammering] that's here on the website, is that Lou Marane, our referral therapist, umm...Like initially we thought he would come down here a couple times a month so that the youth that wanted to talk to a counselor could, but there's a really stigma to that. "Oh, you're going off with Lou, you're going out for counseling." So it took us a couple years, but now what Lou does is he'll come down every so often a-and do a peer support group, help Shelly Marabella, the long time peer support facilitator, help her do the group on topics that, you know, maybe are-are favorites of his so that the youth get to know him. If somebody wants to talk to him we connect them, and then, you know, the young pers—here this is Lou's, you know, name and number, connect with him, you know, leave it up to them. Um, but he also does this thing called the info page on the website where he can—we'll get questions from the youth, or if he doesn't get questions we come up with our own. And so, and—[stammering] the material that he does—like each month he does a different topic uh, like you know, things about coming out, [inaudible] to be gay youth, what to do about religious guilt, um you know things on—[stammering] things on transsexualism...um just a whole ton of things, um labeling, but all those things are archived so that when you look on the—when you look at the current topic—which I think this month is on internal homophobia—you can go back into the-into the previous columns that he's done so that that information is available for young people who can't get here, and it's-and it's interesting. The website gets—we get a lot of hits from a lot of other places in the country—

**Laurie:** [overlapping] Yeah, I was just going to say that it breaks down the barrier, you know, the geographic barrier and some of the others—

**Marvin:** [in the background, clearing throat] Mhm.

**Laurie:** —Because when Marvin pulls the report a lot of times on the weekend, you know, when we're looking—doing-doing this and that for work, but she'll pull the reports and see people, you know, going to the site at, you know, all hours of the night—

**Marvin:** Mhm.

**Laurie:** —And from all geographic points around the region and beyond the region, so it's really a great resource, I think.

**Jim:** Laurie would you expand a little bit more on your relationship to GLYS?



**Laurie:** [clears throat] Well as Marvin said, I, um...I knew of GLYS prior to our focus group work, certainly. Um, I'd gone to some of the events, the—the events prior to the current incarnation of the gay allia—

**Marvin:** And we have a picture of you at Delaware Park at the June event looking about 14.

**Laurie:** [laughs, Marvin clears throat in the background] —That sounds right. So I had gone to some of the events, but my real involvement, um, I would say started with Mike Maraca calling and asking me to do these focus groups, and it was such uh, an interesting, unlikely occurrence really because I'm not an expert in focus groups by any means, but we had just gone through a-a lengthy process at Planned Parenthood of doing focus groups, and I worked there at that time and Mike knew of that. Um, and we were talking about it, and so I'd learned quite a bit about how they were done just going through this-this long process. And he approached me, and at that time Marvin and I were doing all this work together, and I just sort of had the feeling that she—she would kinda do whatever project I cooked up—

**Marvin:** [talking over Laurie] That's right, [inaudible] That's right.

**Laurie:** —My accomplice [laughs]. So I—I knew she would help me with it. And it really was an interesting process to get to go through because we got someone to come and film it and, you know, Marvin's really good at that kind of thing, so she ended up really taking the lead on sort of facilitating the conversations. We met a lot of the young people, I did my piece, you know I-I uh, had some questions and things that I wanted to, um, be able to address, and we just went through this whole process, and it got us I think very invested initially in the organization just though meeting the different people, the constituents, and-and especially the young people. But, after that, [clears throat] you know as Marvin said, when she decided to get involved with the organization, um, you know wherever she goes, I go-I go too, and vice versa. And I think the fact that we both have, um, this kind of work, this not-for-profit work, is so-so important to us. It actually is a really good thing, you know, we talk a lot about how the fact that we both do kind of parallel kinds of work. Um, she helps me a lot with Just Buffalo projects that come up and, you know, events and different things. And I love having a link with GLYS, um, but the writer that we brought in and doing the coffee houses was such a wonderful thing. At first, I would bring my guitar and play, you know, play guitar—

**Marvin:** [talking over Laurie] You were the early emcee for all those...

**Laurie:** —The early emcee, and then transitioned out of that. But the links that were forged even at those early coffee houses with Sam and some of the other young—young people has been so, so meaningful to me. Um, I never felt a real easy connection with teenagers I wouldn't say. You know, I was always, um, the kid that hung out with adults or would take care of the younger children or whatever, and it was really though Marvin—she—she opened that door for me to, you know, appreciate teenagers, you know, and-and their tremendous creativity and just the—the vitality and—and it's just been a wonderful connection for me. And I think you do have a sense after you come out that y-you wanna make those connections. You wanna help make it easier somehow or at least, uh, more supportive, you know, more—more role models around young people so they see all the different things. And I think my perspective is just a little bit different coming in as a mother, you know. someone who was married and has two teenagers that I'm

raising and, um, those kinds of things. I think the kids need to see all our different kinds of experiences and hear us talk as, uh, happy, gay people. [laughs]

**Marvin:** [laughs]

**Jim:** Okay, I'd like to have you expand on the whole business of—you both have been working with teenagers, and, uh, in GLYS. Now, do you see a difference in the attitude of the more modern teenager, uh, as opposed to the teenager of maybe 10 or 15 years ago or when you were teenagers?

**Laurie:** [quietly] That's a tough question.

**Marvin:** Overall, no. It fascinates me that in this day and age, of television and having 900 channels to pick from, with the movies that are out there, the topics that are covered in tv and movies, media, computers—especially computers—that you talk to these young people and their-their-their initial thought is, “I’m the only one.” Now, how can that be? You know? It’s just—so, and that’s the same feeling I had. You know, back when I was first even, you know, and I was much older then trying—but thinking about, you know, am I the only one that feels this way? Um, I think that young people may come out earlier. Umm...[long pause] There’s also a phenomenon where—these days where some young people are kind of taking on labels, I don’t know—I guess because they think it’s cool which is-is sort of detrimental to youth that are really gay, lesbian, bi, and trans. But I think that many of the issues are the same. And yeah, there are young people that come out earlier, and if they’re lucky they’ve got, you know, support in school or support in families [inaudible murmur], um, to help them through. But at the drop-in center—I w—I’m [stuttering] I’mna’ put the numbers 75%. It might be a little less, but let’s say 75% of the youth that we see are African American or Latino [clears throat] or-or maybe perhaps, you know, mixed racially. And for those young people...[long pause] They may—to be gay or lesbian in-in- in their community because of the link. I mean in the Black community, the Latino community, the Hispanic communities, the church is such a, a big part of-of the—of the—of the family [stuttering]—of the family, and what’d they do? They go to church together, okay. And those churches, though, are often the same ones that are the most—the most anti-gay in their message, so that, you know, they’re going to church and hearing that message, that message obviously is going home with them because their parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and stuff are hearing the same message and so—so that for many of those young people and some of them might come out and [incoherent word fumbling] just take whatever goes on, but it’s tough, you know, for those young people. They come down here so that they can be safe and be who they are, you know, work their way, you know, toward maybe being comfortable with who they are and being more open about it at home, and some do, you know, some do come out at home while they’re here and-and-and some don’t. Um, but I mean I guess, you know, when I think—when I think though about all the—when I think about the media and I think that-that so many of our young people still think they’re the only one, you know, overall, I can’t say I think things have changed a lot, and plus the environment right now...[short pause] how—it’s different. But think about the 1950s with, you know, what was in Joe McCarthy...[short pause] Um, I mean granted it’s different, but it’s not totally unlike this-this shit that’s going on now with Bush, you know and this-this, you know, this-this religious right, you know, very anti-gay, you know, anti-anything, you know, this different kind of approach. So, I

think that that—that in some, you know, I think that that—that—that’s hard on youth. You know, so...

**Jim:** But you have so many groups now in schools. When I was growing up, there were— [stuttering, incoherent] I didn’t even know there was such a thing as a homosexual. I knew that I was attracted to boys and that was about it, but uh, but now with their uh in-in the last program of the-of the GLYS gala you had a whole page full of listing of schools—

**Marvin:** [interjecting] Right, probably—probably seven or eight schools [incoherent mumbling] Gay Straight Alliances or diversity clubs. Although when you think about the number of school districts or the number of high schools that really isn’t a lot, but at least it’s a beginning. And in some areas of the country there are—there are more GSA’s um available, but that we have—but even if we have the number that we have now is-is-is better than it was before February 2000 when there weren’t any. Um, but...[long pause] One of the groups when we talk about youth in schools—

[loud, indistinct noises emerge from the background and cut Marvin off]

**Jim:** [fumbling] Sorry, sorry. My fault. There.

**Laurie:** Little trouble. [laughs heartily]

**Marvin:** Is it...Is it...

**Jim:** Thank goodness we can edit.

**Marvin:** There we go.

**Laurie:** [chuckles]

**Marvin:** Um, is it—that it depends where a young person’s going to school as to, you know, how-how safe it might be. I mean, you know, if we have a safe contact in the school to be able to connect, you know, that person with that—that’s great. Um, in some schools they can be out and they—they may not take a lot of abuse, but another group that gets—that gets—takes a lot of harassment are young people who are perceived as being gay, lesbian, bi, or trans. You know, they get—they get as much harassment from-from teachers as well as youth as the kids who-who actually, you know, are. So, you know, yeah there are things in schools that are there now that—that were not once upon a time that helps in some ways, but it’s not—it’s not universal.

**Laurie:** And I think another facet is the educators themselves. I know we were talking about youth, but I always feel the need to-to put that out there—

**Marvin:** [over Laurie] Mhm.

**Laurie:** —Because that was one of our big impulses in wanting to start a coalition in Niagara County was that once we were more involved in the community, and we’d go to parties, you know, see people socially. We saw how many of the gay and lesbian people in the community were educators or involved in schools or guidance counselors, and yet they were completely

invisible to the students because they were not out. Many educators, you know, have been very, very fearful and hesitant to come out. And I think that also adds to making it difficult for kids, you know, to not see that. I was very happy to hear there's an educators' group that's formed because I think that it's gonna take a lot of support. Everybody has something to lose, you know, even at the schools that are more gay friendly. Like, I'm thinking of our friend Mary, has been an advocate for change within one of the suburban schools when she actually told me about a staff meeting where she was trying to advocate, and the kinds of repressive, you know, forces that work against that. You know, "What are the parents going to think?" and "We don't want that here" and these kinds of things. You just don't wanna forget what a long way we still have to go. You know, some things are better, but we have a heck of a long way to go. And sometimes my window into the world is my two teenagers, my own two teenagers [Marvin chuckles in the background], and seeing, you know, how they behave with their friends, and the fact that we have all the same conversations, you know, when they say, "Oh that's so gay" you know, and I shoot 'em the look. [Marvin chuckles] And you know, we talk a-and stuff, but you know, just because, you know, I'm gay and overtime they've really opened their mind more to that notion, they still behave like typical teenagers and—and I think it is difficult for many teens still—

**Jim:** But there's a lot of peer pressure.

**Laurie:** 'Lot of peer pressure, that's what it is. 'Lot of group behavior and peer pressure.

**Marvin:** But [stammering] as much—as much as we're talking about the kinds of...[short pause] things the—You know the unpleasant things that young people have—may experience when they come out, they-they don't all, or they, you know, or they—I don't know. I mean, the young people that come down here are-are just, you know, they're phenomenal. Um, you know [fumbling over words] whether they can be out of school or not, we get 'em down here and-and they just [stammering]—it amazes me the talents they have the skills they have, you know, I mean they're not—I mean I don't think of them as all these poor gay youth because they're not. You know, they just—there's just so many, you know, so many things that they can do, that they—that they do do. Um, and it's just, I guess [stuttering and fumbling over words]....The poor society, the poor community here in Buffalo that won't allow these young people to be who they are all the time because they-they deny—they deny our community, everything that they have to offer, when they-when they do that. So, you know, I don't-I don't feel like it's, "Oh, our poor kids"—

**Laurie:** [over Marvin] No, no. Not at all.

**Marvin:** —You know, and especially—especially with— regards to, you know—in terms of GLYS, because you mentioned the role modeling and-and-and David Cantaffa who's been a staff member down here since-since last spring, I think. And he—and he got here because he wanted to do his dissertation, uh his doctoral dissertation at UB, on-on GLYS, but—but not going at it in the—in the negative sort of approach that often happens in research. He wanted to look at it as, what about those places that are different than high schools, that-that are not hetero-sexist, you know, bashed [inaudible]. And um, and so in doing the first part of his research, th-uh—the discussion groups on what the kids take from media, you know, it was really kind of neat to see them talk about the—One of the things they like about being—about having GLYS here is that

they get to see people that aren't just a stereotypes that they see on, you know, television and in the movies. Like you said, they get to see people who are gay, lesbian, bi, trans, who are, you know, single and relationships, relationships for short term, for long term, that have careers and jobs that they like, that have families, and just, you know, that—that have managed to make their way in the world and that that kind of, you know, that-that's—They need to see that.

**Laurie:** Well, and you're—and you're right, that you know, we talk about role modeling which implies older people, you know, being visible for younger people, but it's—it's very much a two-way connection. You know, because the young people are—are our connection to our own community, too. The vitality and the poetry and the creativity and the programing, and, you know, the—the umm photographer that J. R. brought in. You know, these are all new experiences and new things that I wouldn't have the opportunity to be connected with if it weren't for, you know, being connected to a larger community. So, it's very much a two-way street.

**Marvin:** [stuttering] Let me get back to your [stuttering] the photographer [incoherent word fumbling] That was kind of a neat thing because—

**Laurie:** [in background, overlapping with Marvin] Really...

**Marvin:** —We brought her in in July, umm, and there were—there was like several different agencies of sponsors that are not just GLYS and the other one—the other sponsors was um, the Pride Center of Western New York with Just Buffalo, um...

**Laurie:** CEPA.

**Marvin:** [Repeating] CEPA. Umm, MOCHA, and Planned Parenthood of Buffalo and Erie County. And that was kind of a neat thing. I think it's a neat thing whenever you have several different agencies with a lot of different focuses that can bring somebody in on a topic like that 'cause it's just—I think it sends a lot of messages, you know, to our...

**Jim:** Okay, there's one final discussion I would like to have the two of you enter into. And I'm just a little bit afraid to—to—

[Marvin and Laurie burst into loud, boisterous laughter]

**Marvin:** [through laughter] Yes, Jim...

**Jim:** —Anticipatory laughter. But, we've just come through an election uh, for national, uh, politics. How do you see this election as affecting the gay and lesbian youth, and transsexuals and all those various alphabetical entities, and also, um, do you have any uh, idea about gay marriage that you would like to express?

[No one answers, long pause]

**Jim:** You can go either way—direction. Up, down, sideways.

**Marvin:** Well in terms of the election, I have to admit that...it's... depressing as hell. Not just for me as-as a lesbian and somebody who works here at GLYS, but just for the country as a whole because it isn't just, you know, issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. What we're looking at women's rights and we're looking at, you know, all kinds of things that, you know, that-that—that the administration would, you know, would like to do away with. And-and-and this-this-this failure to keep the church and the state separated, I find it be frightening. And as much as—You know, at one point I thought, “You know, I think...I think that I can go crawl in a hole and pull the dirt in after me.” [Laurie lightly chuckles] You know, you look at the civil rights movements that came before us, and they struggled with the same kinds of crap, and they kept at it, and they managed to turn things around. And I guess I'd like to think as a community, if we don't just sit back and just assume that things are as they are and they can't be changed, that we can continue to make strides. Um... I guess that's my first thought when I think of the election.

**Laurie:** Yeah, no I would—I would agree with all of that. I always look to Gandhi for some reason, you know, as an example of the power of the people, you know, the will of the people for independence and freedom and how powerful that is from a very grassroots level. And I just try to take that as a h—you know, that's my hope is that we have to just keep, you know, working for what we believe in. But it's terrifying, absolutely terrifying, it's so many, many, many, many ways, and I find myself getting really angry. I'm in a uh—it's not a book group, it's like a little dinner group with just my grandma and mother and two other women. And one of the women there is, um, straight and was arguing—She voted actually for Bush. And—

**Marvin:** Who was this?

**Laurie:** —Derrie...

**Marvin:** Ohh!

**Laurie:** [continuing] I was mortified, but she-she was going through the issues that she, you know, felt—justified the vote, and she said, “You know, things take time. You don't—Some of these other issues take time. Look at all the strides that've been made, you know, with gay—gay issues and blah blah blah.” And I said, “Derrie [scoffs], you know, if you couldn't have legal protection for the relationship that you want, if you didn't have the rights, you know, that—that you take for granted, you know, maybe you wouldn't feel so patient about all of this.” I mean, it just feels so personal. It feels so personal to be denied basic protections, basic rights and-and to see how the erosion process, you know, is [inaudible] you know, pieces being slipped into pending bills to deny reproductive rights and to deny gay rights and our freedom. So, it's-it'-it's horrifying. You know, we've talked about marriage, the marriage issue, and I think um, for us, the driving force has been wanting to celebrate while my grandmother and Marvin's mom could be with us. I mean that's one of the-the, you know, most important things to us rather than anything outside of that is just having these people that we love so much to be witness and present for us. Um, even on top of that, you start wanting to have the legal protections whatever you can—retirement or whatever it is. It doesn't feel right to be denied those things, and so, you know, we'd like to be able to claim those.

**Marvin:** And I think that part of continuing the battle is-is maintaining visibility. You know, we went yesterday to uh, the hugeeeeeeeeeee water dealership [Laurie chuckles softly in background] on Grand Island to take a look—Well actually they were offering free turkeys if you took a test drive and so—

**Laurie:** [erupts into lively laughter]

**Marvin:** We were—we were turkey hunting yesterday for Thanksgiving, so we thought we would go do that. Plus, Laurie's car—the check engine light came on on the way over, so it was a good thing to do. And we walked in, and-and-and the sales guy came over to us—

**Laurie:** [continues to chuckle in the background]

**Marvin:** and I said, “This is Laurie, and hi my name is Marvin. And just so that you know, okay, my name is Marvin, but I'm a woman, and I'm a lesbian, and we're a lesbian couple.”

**Laurie:** [chuckles heartily]

**Marvin:** And some people would probably say, “Why the hell does it matter?” Well, it matters because I don't want to be confused as a—as a short, you know, short man—

**Laurie:** [chuckles heartily, interrupting Marvin]

**Marvin:** —With a tall, stunning woman and have them think we're heterosexuals because we're not. You know, [stuttering] you and I are in a good position that we can be out. Neither of our jobs, you know, is dependent on our being closeted. We have families that-that-that are accepting, and so dammit, if we're out there, they need to know we're there. And we spend money and-and, you know, and-and-and whatever. So, um, so I think that—I think that's part of where that came from too is this desire not to be invisible—

**Laurie:** [softly] Yeah.

**Marvin:** —and I think that we need to continue that, you know, i-i-in order to make sure people know were here.

**Jim:** Okay, we're about out of time, and I thank you very much for your interview. I think that it was a really good one. You'll notice that—

**Marvin:** You didn't ask us about the hibachi, though.

**Jim:** The hibachi.

**Marvin:** The hibachi that—that we call...I call the hibachi that sort of that—that—

**Laurie:** It's like the grill.

**Marvin:** —The massage thing they say, the massage item that sort of has this microphone-like sort of appearance.

**Jim:** [in the background] Oh.

**Marvin:** I-it's a Hitachi, but we call it the hibachi, and more periodically we'll sing "My Funny Valentine" into it.

**Jim:** Hmm...

[short pause followed by inaudible clamoring. Jim, Laurie, and Marvin are speaking over one another energetically]

**Marvin:** [loudly in the background] Sex toys...[Marvin laughs boisterously]

**Jim:** [lightheartedly] that's for another—

**Laurie:** [laughing] That's for another interview!

**Jim:** —That's—that's the X-rated version.

[Marvin, Laurie, and Jim continue exuberant laughter]

**Laurie:** That'll be that uh, unedited.

**Jim:** Yes, that's—that's the next chapter.

[Laurie laughs contagiously]

**Jim:** Oh—

**Laurie:** [recovering from laughter] Thank you.

**Jim:** Are we—we just about used up all of the thing on this—

Interview ends

Keywords: Empire State Pride Agenda Foundation, Just Buffalo Literary Center, Gay Lesbian Youth Services, GLYS, Pride Center of Western New York, CEPA, MOCHA, Planned Parenthood of Buffalo and Erie County, Tom Hammond Memorial Scholarship, Niagara County Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered Wellness and Health

Key names: Tom Hammond, Leslie Feinberg, Ed Taylor\*, Mike Maraca\*, Sam Pointe\*, Lou Meran\*, Shelly Marabella, David Cantaffa

\*Indicates that names of organizations/people that I could not verify or spellcheck on my own.



### Summary

In this interview, partners Laurie Torrell (executive director of Just Buffalo Literary Center) and Marvin Henschbarger (CEO of Gay and Lesbian Youth Services) discuss their coming-out journey, relationship, and work. While Marvin recounts her experience as a gay woman who identified as a lesbian later in life, Laurie discusses how marriage with her ex-husband pushed her to realize her gay identity. Finding each other through work with GLYS, Laurie and Marvin reveal how they founded the Niagara County Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered Wellness and Health and GLYS's shifting focus on youth development. Marvin reveals that the experience of today's teens isn't all that different, and both spill their take on the political climate surrounding gay rights and the struggle with maintaining visibility.