

# Rick Miller Transcript

📅 Wed, 4/22 3:55PM ⌚ 1:35:46

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gay, des moines, anita bryant, started, laughs, thought, lesbian, called, iowa, gay bars, knew, group, year, bar, friends, women, organizations, community, sing, met

## SPEAKERS

Hannah Miller, Rick Miller

- 
- H** Hannah Miller 00:06  
Hello, my name is Hannah Miller and I will be having a conversation with Rick Miller for LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa, a project of Grinnell College. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of LGBT-identified people in Iowa. It is Saturday, April 13, 2019 and this is being recorded in Rick's house in Des Moines, Iowa. Hi, Rick.
- R** Rick Miller 00:29  
Hi.
- H** Hannah Miller 00:30  
Can you introduce yourself, please?
- R** Rick Miller 00:31  
My name is Rick and I have been living in this house for almost thirty-five years now. And I just turned seventy last month.
- H** Hannah Miller 00:47  
And where were you born?

R

Rick Miller 00:49

I was born in northwest Iowa in a small community, Sac City, a place of 3,500 people. And that was the only home I knew until I went off to college—UNI [University of Northern Iowa]—when I was eighteen. I got my BA there and then I got—twenty years later, I got an MA at Iowa State in art education.

R

Rick Miller 01:12

I spent most of my time teaching, but I had really strong artistic skills in music and art at a very early age. So my parents let me do that. I also had a really strong interest in history. I loved all kinds of things about history, because it was sort of like storytelling, and I love stories.

R

Rick Miller 01:32

When I was born, my parents were expecting a girl and they didn't get a girl, so they were having trouble deciding on a boy's name. Finally, after two days, they decided on the name Rickie, spelled R-i-c-k-i-e, because my mother saw it in the Des Moines Register, and she thought it was a cute name. So that's how I came by my name. I have a younger brother Randy, who they named Randall, and then I have a younger sister named Reneé. That was the name they had chosen for me, but didn't use—fortunately! (both laugh)

R

Rick Miller 02:10

I, um, had grandparents that I knew and loved as I grew up, and they were important to me and I have tons of stories to tell about them. But mostly, I was a kid that did not care much for sports. I started taking piano at the, uh—in third grade, and I did try out a lot of sports, because a lot of my best friends in the neighborhood were all my age, and we played tackle football in the backyards, we played basketball, we played baseball, and so on, but I never really liked sports very much. Even though I probably would have preferred sports like swimming, ice skating gymnastics, tennis, soccer, all those kinds of—you know, activities where they didn't offer any programs. So I didn't get into any of that as a child.

R

Rick Miller 03:07

But when I was really young, I had an aunt who was my favorite aunt—she was my father's youngest sister—came back from California and I'd known her quite well when she was in high school. And I made—I um, a float for her on my wagon. And I put, "Welcome home, Aunt Nancy," and I covered the rest of it with chicken wire and real-live

flowers. When she came to my house, she was so impressed with that, when she got back to California, she sent me my very own box of pastel chalk. And at that time, nobody had pastel chalk. And I felt very honored that she thought I was artistic enough to have chalk so at that point, I tried—started using the chalk and creating art projects.

R

Rick Miller 04:02

We later moved across to another part of town and one of my earliest experiences was bringing all the little kids—usually pre-school—over to my garage and handing them out paper and chalk and let them do artwork. I didn't realize this was going to be my life calling, but all the children would get chalk all over themselves, and then I just sent them home. (both laugh) So that was an early thing.

R

Rick Miller 04:33

But I was always interested in guys. I always had a best friend—and it was interesting that last night I just heard a friend talk about a girl that he really, really liked in kindergarten, and he could still say her name, he still knew her. And I thought, That was me in kindergarten too, only it was a boy. His name was Tommy Green, and I just loved him. He was my best friend. And I was just heartbroken when his parents moved away the next year, and I didn't have him as my friend anymore. I still look at my kindergarten teacher and look at him and go, Wow, I still like dark-complected guys with really dark hair. (laughs) It started really early.

R

Rick Miller 05:21

So when I was in high school, I realized I was attracted to boys, and this was not going to be good.

H

Hannah Miller 05:32

So about what year was that?

R

Rick Miller 05:35

Oh, probably eleven or twelve. And I just became real shy around boys basically. And I had no trouble being shy around girls girls were no problem. But that was what became of my best friend. My best friend my junior and senior year in high school, was a guy named Lance and he was so shy around girls. He couldn't talk to them at all. Well, I had no problem doing that. So he helped me—he didn't realize it—talking to all the cool-looking

guys, and I helped him with all the cool-looking girls. So it worked out very, very well.

**R** Rick Miller 06:14

Um, I did have—and I know this sounds strange because it was an older guy. He was twenty-one. And he was known by everyone locally. And he met me one night at the movie theater when I was by myself, and, um, he evidently realized that I was gay. So we went out and parked on a gravel road. And I know that sounds like it might have been predatory on his part and probably was, but he actually, probably kept me sane during all that time, because I didn't feel quite so alone. It wasn't just me. And there's at least one other guy that felt the same way as I did.

**H** Hannah Miller 07:00

How old were you?

**R** Rick Miller 07:01

I was probably fifteen.

**H** Hannah Miller 07:03

Okay, so what year would that have been?

**R** Rick Miller 07:05

Nineteen sixty-three.

**H** Hannah Miller 07:09

Okay.

**R** Rick Miller 07:12

So, I went off to college, and I thought, Okay, here's a clean slate. I can be whoever I want to be in college. And first thing that happened was, I started looking at all the good-looking guys in my dormitory (laughs) and picking out my favorites.

R

Rick Miller 07:29

And then, um, one of my dormitory, uh, hall-mates, took me to a fraternity house one night, and just to see what it was like. And I just had this really strange feeling that the two guys in this room were actually together. They were like boyfriends, and the two guys in this room? They were together and they were boyfriends. And then there's these other rooms where there might be eight, you know, in a room or something. And I thought, Well, this is really interesting. So I decided to join that fraternity.

R

Rick Miller 08:05

And years and years later, I ran into the fraternity president—who was president at that time—at a gay bar. And I said, "So was my intuition, right? When I saw these two guys in this room, and these two guys in this room, and so on, were they probably partners at the time?" And he goes, "Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, they were."

R

Rick Miller 08:26

So I started to trust my intuition about these things a lot more from that point on.

H

Hannah Miller 08:33

That was at University of Northern Iowa?

R

Rick Miller 08:36

That was University of Northern Iowa. And when I was a junior there, I finally met a guy that I'd seen around quite a bit. He was a—an African American guy that had been born in Jamaica, raised in London, and he spent his summers in New York, where his sister was an interpreter at the UN [United Nations]. So here's this really worldly guy. And he's a dark-complected guy, which is somebody that I might find attractive. And so he was so sophisticated, and he spoke what he calls, "the Queen's English," to his dying day. He never talked in American English. I swear, he stood in front of a mirror every morning and would say anything he could make it sound more British.

R

Rick Miller 09:26

And my sense of that was, when we would go shopping or anything. I didn't realize it at the time, but later, looking back, I realized, yes, the shopkeepers would always start following him around, wherever we were.

H Hannah Miller 09:41  
And what year was this?

R Rick Miller 09:43  
What?

H Hannah Miller 09:43  
What year was this?

R Rick Miller 09:45  
Probably 1969-70. And he—but as soon as he opened his mouth and started speaking, he was no longer an American Black. He was a foreign person, and somehow that made him okay. And so he would endear himself to anybody and everybody. And he didn't realize until later.

R Rick Miller 10:06  
His name was Sydney Michael Morgan Harrison III, and if you knew him as Sydney, or Syd, you were probably straight. If you knew him as Michael, you were probably gay. So he separated his life that way. So if somebody came up to him and said, "Well, hi, Michael, how are you?" He would know exactly who they were, who they weren't. (laughs)

R Rick Miller 10:31  
So, so he encouraged me to do a lot of sexual experimentation and so on. And we went to bath houses and did all kinds of things in Minneapolis, in New York and other places and met other gay people on the campus. And then I heard and knew of gay professors, but never really got to know anything.

H Hannah Miller 10:59  
So it sounds like there was a lot of gay community life at UNI.

R Rick Miller 11:04  
There was, yeah. It was very discreet, but yeah. There was another guy in my dormitory

that I'd been with when I was a freshman that was also dating a Black guy. And so we were the only two people dating Black guys. (pause)

R

Rick Miller 11:28

I actually continued to date girls when I was in college, and one of them was a hometown girl. And after going to a counselor for some time, I really came out and I was really forced to tell her that I was gay. And when I called her to tell her, I needed to tell her something important. Notice I didn't say, "Ask her something important." I was meant to tell her something important. I think she probably thought I was going to ask her to marry me and instead, I told her I was gay. And there were lots of tears. And we both knew that this was going to change both our lives forever. So she had been my beard, so to speak. She had been with me for all the fraternity events I went to. She was even our fraternity White Rose Queen in the spring. And she was kind of a shy person, so this was just—she was just elated it was such an honor.

R

Rick Miller 12:27

So I know I really hurt her. And I heard last year at her fiftieth class reunion, one of my good friends asked her if she ever saw me, and she's—my friend said, Yes, that she saw me just recently and I was doing well and she said something like, "Well, I just broke her heart." And so she moved on and she's been living in Tulsa ever since she graduated.

R

Rick Miller 13:03

I, in the meantime, left school for a year to kind of get my act together, because I was really confused. The Vietnam War was raging and I was going to be called up—I actually went through coming down here to Des Moines for the induction stuff, as far as getting your medicals and things. And at the end of that, while we're standing there in our underwear in a row, they ask a question I wasn't expecting. They said, well, has anybody here seen a psychologist?

R

Rick Miller 13:35

Oh, boy. When I was getting this counseling, they did send me to a psychologist for one session, I thought, Well, okay, I'll raise my hand. So I raised my hand. They took my name and I never was inducted in the service. My brother went later, but he would—he would not go to Vietnam. He went to Europe, and that was how that all worked out.

R

Rick Miller 14:02

So I wasn't even sure if I wanted to be an art teacher anymore, but I went ahead with that and dove into it headfirst and actually find out that I enjoyed working with children's art more than the high school kids. I always thought I would be a high school art teacher. But the elementary program at Newton, where I student taught, was just so delightful. And they made it—I mean, when work is fun, it's not working anymore, and you get paid for it. So I was really excited about that.

R

Rick Miller 14:32

But I always had to keep the fact that I was gay under wraps. And I had developed a relationship with one of my fraternity brothers at this time. And as I was starting my first semester at Newton High School, he was finishing his last semester at UNI and then came and joined me. So we were together, and um—

H

Hannah Miller 14:55

Were you out to most of your family members and other people in your life at this point?

R

Rick Miller 15:01

Yes and no. In 1972, I came out to my brother, because he kept asking me, well—and maybe it's later, maybe '75. Yes, I came out to my parents in '72 when I was home during that time, and it did not go well at all. I mean, my parents were ready to self-destruct over it. So I basically lied and told them, I would not be that way anymore. And it just disappeared as if it had never happened before.

R

Rick Miller 15:33

In the meantime, I met guys through the bath house in Minneapolis that were from Iowa. And one of them was a very handsome guy, and I really liked him and he called me and wanted to date. So I lined it up, but I was working and I told him, "Don't come before 5:30pm, because I won't be ready."

R

Rick Miller 15:56

Well, he came before 5:30pm and my mother ran and got the door. So he left, because I wasn't there, and when I got home, my mother said, "Well, there was a guy that came—stopped by to pick you up." And I said, "Oh, yeah, we're going up to Lake Okoboji for the

weekend. I know him from school." And she said, "Well, he was really handsome."

R

Rick Miller 16:19

Now, you have to understand there were two guys at the bathhouse that I gave my phone number to and I didn't know which of the two guys it was. So I, I wasn't quite sure who was going to be at the door. (both laugh) And so when I did, I was delightful. And my mother later said, "Oh, that really handsome guy's here for you again." And I thought, Mom! She never called any of the guys I ever ran around with handsome before!

R

Rick Miller 16:46

But he was good-looking—And he was a year older than me. And we—on our way to Lake Okoboji, we stopped at Storm Lake. And we're having a small argument, just as friends might, over who was older, I said, I was older, and he said, No, he was older. So he pulls out his—his driver's license. And when I look at it, I said, "Oh my gosh, are you David's brother?" And he just turned white and he said, "Yes." Because it was the first time I'd seen his last name.

R

Rick Miller 17:26

Well, David was a person in another fraternity that I ran around with quite a bit at UNI. And David was like, oh, he was a BMOC—Big man on campus. Everybody knew David. He was on the wrestling team. He dated girls everywhere. And he would be like the person that on skid night would be the emcee, staying with one of my fraternity brothers. And, you know, that kind of person, that high-profile kind of person. And he said, "Oh, you can't ever tell him that you know me, because I don't want him to know anything's up."

R

Rick Miller 18:04

So that summer, I didn't realize we were having a really torrid affair. We were meeting all over the place, including his home. I met his boyfriend's mother, his sister. I slept in David's bed, because he wasn't there. I wore David's robe and his pajamas. But then I went back to school in the fall, and when I was around, David, I had to be careful not to slip up and say, "Well, how's your mom?" or "What's your sister doing?" Or, "Gee, I really like that blue robe you have." (laughs)

R

Rick Miller 18:37

So, anyway, later on, we met for a little liaison at my apartment at UNI. It was on a Friday

afternoon and nobody was around. And so, we're having fun, when all of a sudden, the apartment door opens, and there's not supposed to be anybody home. And of all things, whoever my roommate was at the time, they walked straight to my bedroom door and tried to open it. And thank goodness it was locked. And they're trying to get in the door and I'm thinking, Who does that? Why would you do that? What's this about? You know.

R

Rick Miller 19:13

But, my friend ran right for the closet and hid. And as soon as my roommate got in the shower, I went over and I open the closet door and I started laughing, because it was just a little bit too ironic that he ran back in the closet, you know? (both laugh)

R

Rick Miller 19:35

So, I'm thinking, Oh, boy.

R

Rick Miller 19:40

I didn't realize then, but that was basically the end of our relationship. He wrote me a couple more times. But he—he was actually a public school teacher too, or became one, and he had to be very careful. He was in the high school and he went onto a rather interesting career. He got three master's degrees. He worked at the School for the Deaf and he did such an amazing program with the wrestlers there that at the state wrestling meet, they gave him an honorary award, and got a standing ovation from everyone in Vets Auditorium (Veterans Memorial Auditorium) for his work with deaf young men.

R

Rick Miller 20:22

So he went on to do great things. He went to Minneapolis and he met a guy who was HIV positive and he took care of him until he died. And then he came here to Des Moines and he wanted to become the director of the HIV program here at Central Iowa AIDS Project, and he didn't get the job. And he went into such deep depression over all of that, that ultimately, he has now been diagnosed with severe depression and he hasn't worked since he was probably fifty years old.

R

Rick Miller 21:00

So that was the story of my first love. And my second one was then this fraternity brother. And that ended in 1978, when he found, in my opinion, a younger version of me. He found a fraternity brother, and from the other fraternity, who was an art major. And what was

strange about that situation is—we didn't realize at the time, but he had broken up three other couples before us. See, he almost had this psychopathic nature evidently to break up couples. And they didn't stay together very long, I think—a year, maybe a year and a half. And that guy still remains one of my best friends to this day. I just talked to him this morning on the phone, so. (pause)

R

Rick Miller 21:54

I then moved to Des Moines to be with my two best friends, Bob and Wayne. They were people that I met when we—when my fraternity brother and I were trying to meet people in Des Moines. We'd come into the bars. It was very difficult, because at the time, the local people were very cliquish about what—who they would talk to. And they just basically wouldn't talk to out-of-towners. They knew who the out-of-towners were. And so after a while, the out-of-towners—we started kind of making our own group and started interacting—guys from Marshalltown and Ames and Newton and you know, and suddenly, the Des Moines people wanted to know who we were. So then everything kind of broke down.

H

Hannah Miller 22:41

So did you meet all of these other people at bars here?

R

Rick Miller 22:45

Yes.

H

Hannah Miller 22:45

Okay, and—

R

Rick Miller 22:45

Then we started—

H

Hannah Miller 22:46

What year did you move to Des Moines?



Rick Miller 22:48

I moved here in 1980. But we were partying here from 1975 on.



Hannah Miller 22:53

Okay.



Rick Miller 22:54

So, um, I remember one of my friends—Joe (unintelligible). We were at a bar called the City Disco Park. It was a big disco bar. And he walked by me and I said, "That's one." And later on in the evening, he walked by me and I said, "That's two." And later on, he walked by and I said, "That's three." And he says, "What do you mean three?" I said, "You walked by me three times, and you've never even spoken to me." (laughs) He thought that was such a clever line that he tried to use it on somebody else, and it didn't work at all. (laughs)



Rick Miller 23:33

So you never know. But he's a good friend of mine. And I see him every month. So, um, he moved to Dallas and lived there for like, at least twenty-five years and then moved back here. A lot of gay men have done that.



Rick Miller 23:51

But so everything broke down and we started partying together. And there was nothing—there was no higher holiday among the gay community than Halloween at that time. If we were kind of the leaders in making Halloween an adult thing, because before that it was considered just purely a children's thing. And I can show you pictures of the just most fantastic, creative people that came dressed for these parties. And they were often held in Sherman Hill, because Sherman Hill was considered kind of the gay ghetto here in Des Moines at the time.



Rick Miller 24:25

There was a lot of gentrification going on, because a lot of the beautiful, large homes that had been turned into apartment complexes after World War II to cover all these newly married, young couples were now being turned back into the original states. And then they got—became a heritage area so it's a national historic spot now. This was like the

rich area of town at one time on Sherman Hill. That's where the youngers (??) lived and where all the wealthy class lived. Hoyt Sherman would be one of those Hoyt Sherman Place.

**R** Rick Miller 25:05  
So that all led to a large group of basically college-educated people that were kind of running around together and many of them were joining gay and lesbian organizations. And I shouldn't say "organizations," because there's basically one. In 1980 and 19—y the late '70s something happened here, Des Moines that was just explosive. And that was the arrival of Anita Bryant.

**H** Hannah Miller 25:34  
Were you here for her?

**R** Rick Miller 25:36  
I was not here. I was in rehab (??) at the time.

**H** Hannah Miller 25:38  
Okay. So how did you hear about it?

**R** Rick Miller 25:41  
Um, I heard about it secondhand by stories and the news. So I was not involved at all.

**H** Hannah Miller 25:50  
Can you give just a brief recap of what the Anita Bryant visit was?

**R** Rick Miller 25:55  
Well, the Anita Bryant situation started in Dade County, Florida. And it started when Dade County supervisors decided to make, uh, allow civil rights for gay and lesbian people. And they passed it and it became law. The evangelical community in Dade County area were just livid over this. And they found a spokes person in Anita Bryant.

R

Rick Miller 25:56

Anita Bryant had been kind of the female version of Pat Boone during the '50s and '60s—popular singer, teenage kind of, uh, age and basically kind of squeaky-clean. And then during the '60s, Anita Bryant became so popular—she had put out like five albums at least, and she had been considered Better Housekeeping's Woman of the Year for three years in a row. So she had this incredible popularity among people of America and the Florida orange juice community—orange growers decided that they would use her for their spokesperson. So she was now on all the ads for Florida orange juice. All the growers went together and chose one person to represent all the orange companies. So she did it for everybody.

R

Rick Miller 27:25

So everybody knew her and she became the point person for an anti-gay movement called Saving Children. And the Save the Children campaign was supposed to be about how homosexuals were basically pedophiles. And because they were all pedophiles, by giving them rights, we were just allowing all these children to be seduced by gay men, because that was the only way they would get other gay men, was to seduce young boys.

R

Rick Miller 27:55

Well, gay people knew better. They knew this was just a bunch of misinformation. But it was extremely successful. Dade County had a referendum and they turned it around. And then she went on to Eugene, Oregon, where the evangelicals did the same thing there. In Wichita, Kansas, and they turned theirs around to and they went to St. Paul, Minnesota, and they turned theirs around, too.

R

Rick Miller 28:18

And then Anita Bryant came in Des Moines. She decided that they were going to be more proactive. If Des Moines was even considering doing an ordinance, they were going to be here to let them know that they were not going to let it happen. So she—they got all the TV stations together down here at Veterans Auditorium. And her and her husband were sitting at a table with all the cameras rolling when she started talking about the homosexuals and how they were trying to—what they were trying to do, when a young man from Minnesota, came up to the table and just smacked her in the face with a pie.

R

Rick Miller 28:54

And—from the person who was actually there that I talked to recently—said the whole room just went, went, "Ah!" For a moment, because no one was expecting this, you know, nobody had been told. And then it just got really quiet.

R

Rick Miller 29:07

And her husband immediately said, "Don't hurt him. Don't hurt him." So the man that threw the pie they were not to arrest or stop or do anything to harm him. He turns to Anita and he says, "Hey Anita, I think we should pray."

R

Rick Miller 29:22

She had already stated that at least it wasn't a fruit pie, which caused the whole room to erupt in laughter. So somehow, she kept her wits about her, which is really amazing. To think that she would say, "At least it wasn't a fruit pie," is just amazing in my opinion. And then to just have the forethought to not just want to scream. So she starts praying, she gets about through the second sentence and she just breaks down crying. And if you watch the video—you can find the video just go online: "Anita Bryant pie." It will come up and you can see it firsthand.

R

Rick Miller 30:03

She, um, she claims that, well, at least it was a fruit pie, or at least it wasn't a fruit pie. Well, I couldn't tell from the—it was kind of hard to tell which one it was. You would think at least it wasn't a fruit pie would be the way it would go.

R

Rick Miller 30:23

So I had a meeting last week. I mentioned that and I said, "Well, I'm just going to claim that it was both. It was a banana cream pie. So it was both." And while we're in the meeting, another man in the room knew Anita Bryant's daughter. And evidently, her and her husband go to Okoboji in the summer and that's how he knew them. So while we were having this meeting, he texts her and says, "What kind of pie was it?" After the meeting, he comes up and tells me, "It was a chocolate cream pie." So now I know that it wasn't fruit, it really wasn't a fruit. But if you listen long enough, at one point, she says, "Actually it tasted pretty good." (laughs) So that's a story of Anita Bryant.

R

Rick Miller 31:15

But what happened then is that went—for its time—viral. Every newspaper publisher and

TV station was covering that nationally. And the strange thing about it is, years later—well, maybe a year later, Harvey Milk says that for weeks—if not months and years—the gay activists were trying to get the nation's attention on gay and lesbian liberation and rights. They just could not get the news media to pay any attention. But he claims that between the Dade County vote and the pie in the face that she got, more was published on homosexuality in the United States than in the history of the world. (laughs) I thought, Very interesting.

R

Rick Miller 32:05

So that explosion here really kind of rocked the city of Des Moines and the gay community here, because for the first time they had organized, they had rallied, they were ready to protest with the signs. And they were virtually going to put their lives on the line, because for years, the local police had been raiding gay bars, bringing them out, publishing their names the next day, and everyone would then lose their job. So this was kind of our little Stonewall that happened right here in Iowa.

H

Hannah Miller 32:36

And that was '77?

R

Rick Miller 32:38

Seventy-seven, seventy-eight. Yes. Seventy-nine, then, they have a march on Washington. And a lot of local people here went to that march. And during that march, they saw a sign that said, "We are everywhere." And the following year, one of the organizers, Ken Validez (??) asked me to make big banner that said, "We are everywhere." And then had me do that. And there's pictures of that if you want to see them.

R

Rick Miller 33:06

So that was kind of the beginning of organizing here locally—And the strange thing was, the only elected official that was gay or lesbian was a woman named Elaine Noble. She had been a state representative in the state of Massachusetts, and they actually got her to come out here to speak. But after the Anita Bryant thing happened the day before, it just took all the wind out of their sails and they still rallied, they still had their protests, but who cared? Nobody noticed. Everybody was talking about Anita Bryant getting a pie in her face.

R

Rick Miller 33:39

So it's kind of bizarre to think that Anita Bryant brought about the gay rights movement in America in general. It started with Stonewall, by all means, and they kept having yearly pride parades after that. We're talking about eight years later, that this occurred here in Iowa. So it took that long for that movement to start here. And the local organizers were trying to pull together kind of different groups of people that were gay: some were interested in helping others, some were more interested in socializing, some actually became interested more in gay culture as they learned more about it.

R

Rick Miller 34:24

So this group called the Gay Coalition was formed. And it was then later known as the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Iowa. And then it later became just the Gay Lesbian Coalition of Des Moines and then just the Gay (unintelligible???) of Des Moines. So it morphed many times over many years in the early '80s.

R

Rick Miller 34:46

And it ultimately rested with a men's group that had rap (wrap??) sessions, speakers' bureaus, library, newsletter, phone lines. They had media watch. They had, uh, they merged with a group called ICARE, which was the Iowa Committee for Arts, Recreation, and Entertainment. So then they had social groups, theater groups, and ultimately choruses. And that all came from these original groups that became a coalition.

R

Rick Miller 35:23

What we didn't realize at the time was that we were actually incubating all of those groups, because all those groups later became standalone groups. The Gay Lesbian Resource Center came along, because we had a young man from Polk City named Jake come to one of our meetings and he was seventeen years old and we just about freaked out, because we knew that knowing that a young man—underage—was at one of our meetings, would just put us over the top. So we immediately found a place for him and the Gay Lesbian Resource Center had a youth group starting.

R

Rick Miller 35:58

This had occurred over several years, because the local Des Moines school system, along with many counseling areas had created a series of conferences called A Matter of Justice and Compassion. And those have really brought some solidarity among all of those

groups about how to help LGBT youth. And that really was helpful.

R

Rick Miller 36:20

That later, then, will morph into GLSEN, which is a national organization, the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network in which we got their leader, um (pause)—Oh, I'll think of it later. He actually came here, and he was very, very good at speaking with school board members and many other people in community.

R

Rick Miller 36:47

So that later morphs then into Iowa Safe Schools, and that is what—

H

Hannah Miller 36:54

What's the sort of timeline there?

R

Rick Miller 36:56

GLSEN would be mid to late '90s. And then that merges by 2000 into Safe Schools. And that's what's—and then there was legislation that supported it. So once the Iowa legislature passed Safe Schools for Children, then it was just, ah, not much of a leap to do civil rights for everyone, because the theory was that, so you're going to protect gay and lesbian students, but once they become full adults, they don't get any protections anymore? While nobody can handle that argument, so they pass full civil rights for everyone. That would have been in the 2000s, early 2000s.

R

Rick Miller 37:38

So then things like the theater groups actually started doing local theater productions here, and then that later became Stage West, and Stage West productions just ended a couple years ago and now they're called Iowa Stage. So they get a lot of LGBT, uh, theater that nobody would have normally seen around here, because it's just seen in the bigger cities. And so that was very interesting.

R

Rick Miller 38:09

And then we got the Twin City men's chorus to come down here on two different occasions and sing at Hoyt Sherman place. And that caused us to create our own gay men chorus here.

H Hannah Miller 38:24  
And when did you start that?

R Rick Miller 38:25  
That started in 1985 or '86? Somewhere in there.

H Hannah Miller 38:29  
Okay.

R Rick Miller 38:29  
And I was the president of that group until 1990.

H Hannah Miller 38:33  
Okay, so you were one of the people who started it?

R Rick Miller 38:36  
Yes.

H Hannah Miller 38:37  
Okay.

R Rick Miller 38:38  
And we started singing at a, an award ceremony down at Hotel For Des Moines (??) for a pride event. And it was a place where you gave awards for outstanding leadership, both personally and as organizations and so on. And it was, it was kind of our version of what they do at all the galas now, whether it's One Iowa or whether it's Matthew Shepard or whatever, so. But that was the beginning of all of that.

R Rick Miller 39:08  
And then the phone lines ended up being given to the Gay Lesbian Resource Center as well as the library. And then the library expanded when St. Paul actually sent a lot of their

second books, they had a lot of LGBT books, but they had second copies of it. So they sent them down. So I helped develop the library. And we got Margaret Little, who was a library science instructor at Drake, and she loved doing these smaller libraries, because she would write them—about them in news journals and so on, about how she created these specific libraries, for like the Jewish community and for the LGBT community. (sirens) So it was really fun to do that.

R

Rick Miller 39:57

And that was at a time when you couldn't just go in and find books anywhere. And we used to get upset, because when the libraries would get LGBT books, we thought the evangelicals were stealing them all. Well, it turned out that was really not the case. It was gays and lesbians who were stealing them because they didn't want to check them out and let everybody know that they were LGBT.

R

Rick Miller 40:19

So we had ultimately a 3,500 book library with fiction and nonfiction.

H

Hannah Miller 40:28

Where was the library?

R

Rick Miller 40:31

It really followed the GLRC wherever went. It started at the American Friends Service, the Quakers, which is just about four blocks south of here. And then it moved to the—the largest move and the biggest thing was when it was right next to the Blazing Saddle gay bar. It, um—there hours and hours were spent cataloguing everything and cross-cataloguing it so people could really do research if they wanted to.

R

Rick Miller 41:00

Then there was a fire there that occurred. And some of the people that came on after us did not notify the library and it was absolutely thrown in the dump—all the books. They weren't burned. There was some smoke damage to some, but that would have probably dissipated with time. But instead, they started all over again. And now—

- H Hannah Miller 41:21  
What year was the fire?
- R Rick Miller 41:22  
That was 2000. And then now, today, 2019, there is another pride center, which I'm president of now, and it has a 3,500 book library. (laughs) But I think we lost some books, probably, permanently, because of that.
- H Hannah Miller 41:39  
Where did you get funding for the original library? Like how did you purchase these books?
- R Rick Miller 41:46  
All the books were donations.
- H Hannah Miller 41:48  
Okay.
- R Rick Miller 41:48  
And it was amazing how many people donated. It was just—and such a cross section of—the only thing we ever paid for is we would pay for magazine subscriptions to Advocate, Out Magazine, Lavender, and other contributing magazines.
- H Hannah Miller 42:06  
I want to return to the original—So the Gay and Lesbian Coalition was sort of the original group that emerged. Is that right? And like late '70s, early '80s?
- R Rick Miller 42:17  
Yes. And the reason the women didn't stay as much with this was because they had another group, the Women's Cultural Collective here. And that had really been going on since the '60s, because it kind of was defined early on and around the Drake University area when a group of women would start meeting for these book discussions. And it was called the Red Bookstore. Now, I think it was R-e-d, it wasn't R-e-a-d. So, uh—and that no

longer exists, and I've never known it or never been in it. But that was the beginning.

R

Rick Miller 42:55

And they later on had their own rap groups and their own discussion topics and they, they—they are the oldest group in the city to this day. They are still alive and kicking and they are still doing things all the time. They are just a little below the, the radar—and it's not like there's not out lesbians everywhere in the city, but they need safe spaces. And so they're pretty protective of that, and naturally so. The women have joined in like the Gay Lesbian Resource Center, they joined other organizations to that—like One Iowa and others that are existing today.

R

Rick Miller 43:49

So, so the theater groups grew. They, the, the chorus grew, it actually went down in 1992. And then for several years, two things happened. A diversity chorus was started by one of the members of the men's chorus. And then there was a series of variety shows that were held in the summer. And these were normally choral, things where people did small group and solos were featured.

R

Rick Miller 44:16

And then in 2000, a young man named Randy \_\_\_\_\_ (??) decided he wanted to start a Des Moines gay men's chorus, and he and his partner, Craig, spent—I heard—over six months twisting guys' arms. "If we start this, will you come? If we begin, will you come there? Will you get there? If we can—if we start this choir?" And when they started, they had nearly, I think seventy people sing in the chorus. And the old course, we could never get over twenty-five. So they did an outstanding job of recruiting and figuring out who could sing and who would sing.

R

Rick Miller 45:00

The first concerts were just blow away concerts with over-packed houses, with people coming from everywhere—didn't even know this phenomenon of gay men's choruses even existed, you know. And it just became extremely popular and is very popular to this day. The chorus is one of the largest organizations that's GLBT in Des Moines. It has a probably \$100,000 budget here.

H

Hannah Miller 45:31

So when it started, those original seventy people—were they all from Des Moines, or were they from all over Iowa?

R

Rick Miller 45:38

Actually, they came from as far away as Osceola, Fort Dodge. We even had some come from Cedar Rapids. They were driving over two hours just to come to rehearsals and to sing with us. It was really a phenomenal thing. They also had almost full orchestra for every concert. And we were singing commissioned pieces written especially for LGBT groups. And so it was about AIDS, it was about freedom. It was about peace. It was just an amazing compilation of music we sang.

R

Rick Miller 46:09

And there's some beautiful music out there for men's voices that's not even gay. (laughs) So we sang some of that too. And through all of that, the women never actually started a lesbian chorus. So the Pride Center is actually considering bringing in a piano and seeing if somebody wanted to direct it and somebody wanted to accompany it—they got some music and you know, some women would get together and want to do that. Don't know. We'll just see if we can incubate something and get something started. You never know.

R

Rick Miller 46:45

And then that, these, uh, the recreation areas, they were doing everything from going on ski trips to going on canoe trips and camping out. They would go on—they would have volleyball in the summer. And this was all rather—some of it was kind of unorganized. But now we've got major bowling leagues in which you might have as many as twenty-five leagues in bowling. And the Pride Sports League now has all kinds of recreation going on year-round—volleyball in the winter, softball in the summer, and volleyball in the summer—just all kinds of activities.

R

Rick Miller 47:25

That is kind of a continuation of what that rec program was like. And the, the speaker's bureaus continues and the education components continue with things like the First Friday Breakfast Club, which meets the first Friday and we have a speaker, and it's been going on since 1996.

R

Rick Miller 47:47

And we still give out scholarships, we're giving aid scholarships to high school students, \$3,000 scholarships, and the best part of that is we actually go out to their schools and during their ceremony, where they give these scholarships, we announced that, We are a gay group and we're supporting gay people. And there's some in your community and they've done wonderful things. (laughs; unintelligible) I've been in many of them, and they all are just amazingly wonderful.

R

Rick Miller 48:16

I was at one in Centerville, and it's in a darkened auditorium, and everybody seems \_\_\_\_ (??) sleepy. The only people that are there are the parents of those that are getting the awards. And everybody's just kind of laid back and kind of in a dream state, and I get up and I say, "My name is Rick Miller, and I'm here with a gay and gay, uh, bisexual organization." Everybody kind of wakes up. It's like, What? What? Did I hear that right? (laughs)

R

Rick Miller 48:46

Another time, I'm in Corrigan (??), and this extremely talented young man is being honored and I'm giving him a \$3,000 scholarship. I'm thinking, Ah, I can give him a big scholarship, because he was not Getting a Matthew Shepard scholarship, I don't think. And there was a woman on each side of me. One was a young woman and one was a very elderly woman. And the young woman goes up right before me and she gives him a \$28,000 scholarship from Iowa State Extension, and I just want to go, What the heck is going on here? You know. And then this elderly lady, she gets up to give a \$300 scholarship for something for someone else.

R

Rick Miller 49:30

And then it's my turn to go up. And I of course, go up and I give my spiel about being a gay man from a gay organization and bisexual organization and everything and I get back and I sit down and she turns to me and she says, "Well, that was a first." And as I'm trying to figure out and interpret what that exactly means, she says to me, this eighty-some year old woman, "You know, My son was gay. And he's died."

R

Rick Miller 50:02

My heart just broke that moment. I didn't know what to say to her, you know, and—they

got, that ceremony ended and she just disappeared in the crowd. And I just thought, I wonder if I'm the only person that she's ever told that to, because I'm the only other gay person she's ever met.

R

Rick Miller 50:22

So, incredible stories, and the other people that give these scholarships tell incredible stories about what happens to them too. So you just never know.

R

Rick Miller 50:36

I gave one to a student in Eagle Grove, who lived most of his life as a twin girl and decided in high school: he was actually a boy. And so I gave the transgender forth (??) to him—he was a lovely kid.

R

Rick Miller 50:53

So things continue to happen and make a difference out there and wouldn't have happened if it weren't for organizations like One Iowa that has just taken off and is flying somewhere up in the heavens above us. There's just such an incredible group. I was at their gala last night—twelve hundred people were at this event—their largest ever—10th anniversary since marriage equality. And they were just humming. I couldn't believe the numbers of young people there. It was just so exciting to see a legacy that was created by the baby boomer generation that's going to be carried on by those that are younger than us.

R

Rick Miller 51:36

So we always wonder, well, there's this big bump with baby boomers—is anybody going to be left to carry on? I have no problem with knowing that things are going to carry on just fine.

R

Rick Miller 51:48

So in the meantime, I had one more partner and that was a young man from Iowa City who was from Guam. He was Melanesian. And he was quite exciting a guy.

R

Rick Miller 52:05

But that didn't work out either. And after that, emotionally I felt like I've been through four

loves and four divorces. And I just thought, You know, I'm going to become an adventure seeker rather than home builder. And from that moment on, I sought out different partners at different times, and that's brought me to where I am today.

R

Rick Miller 52:30

And I basically in the 1990s, early 1990s, joined Plymouth Congregational Church, and by 1995, they were an open and affirming congregation. And that's just been a wonderfully exciting sanctuary for me.

H

Hannah Miller 52:48

It's here in Des Moines?

R

Rick Miller 52:49

Yeah, it's just four blocks north. It's right across the street from Quaker and it's right next door to the Catholics. (laughs)

R

Rick Miller 53:00

The wonderful thing about this congregation is it's large. It's a 3,500 member church. So you never feel that you know everybody. But it's such a tight-knit group of liberal, progressive, theological people, that some of them will admit that they're actually—they don't even believe—they're non-the—they're not theists. They don't believe that there's a god that lives in a cloud above us. They believe there's a god that lives within us and it's called love and love abounds. God abounds, and we should take care of each other.

R

Rick Miller 53:43

And our motto is, We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve. And that just covers about everything we need to do at church. So there's just a great deal of activity on multitude of levels. Whether you're in a coffee shop and being served by mentally challenged students that are baristas, or whether you're in the art gallery and learning about anti-racism, or whether you're, you know, in the, uh, on the social committee and learning more about the new green deal.

R

Rick Miller 54:24

I mean, it's just an amazing number of amazing people doing amazing things, from prison

ministries to helping resolve conflicts in high schools with—between students and just a wide variety of things. Housing older people, young and youth groups, uh, young married couples, families, all kinds of programming for children.

R

Rick Miller 54:56

So that's been just a great place to be, because when you're working in the gay community, especially as we worked up through it, everything was a struggle. Could we find the money to do it? Can we find the people to do it? Can we get enough people there to encourage and get a movement larger? And so it's just a real sanctuary to go to this church and be surrounded by a whole community of allies.

H

Hannah Miller 55:22

Can you talk a bit more about that back in the '80s, and maybe into the '90s, when all of these different groups were forming? I mean, who, who was in the groups? Who came to meetings? When did you meet? How were you funded?

R

Rick Miller 55:39

Well, most of the groups met on a monthly basis, but there were also subcommittees, so the subcommittees were also working all the time, too. And, um, an interesting aspect of that is, at one point, I found out—and I made a list, I love to make lists—I had found out that over twenty people that I was on campus with at UNI were gay and working in this area, that I did not know of there and did not know they were gay. Uh, I knew a few. But most of them I did not. And so it was interesting to think that they were willing to come out here, but not on campus.

R

Rick Miller 56:17

Now that's changed. UNI is quite different now than it was then, because it was still kind of dealing with old teachers college mentality, and that meant, you know, expectations, expectations that no one would be gay.

R

Rick Miller 56:29

So a wide, really diverse group of men and women. It's hard to almost describe them, because I know that one time, the First Friday Breakfast Club just tried to list all the different occupations of the people in their group. And I think it was almost two rows of—on a piece of paper, you know, all the different things and often many professional

people. It was surprising. There were doctors and lawyers and others that, you know, that you might not have thought would be willing to be out at that time, but were.

R

Rick Miller 57:07

For instance, when, um, when Ken Eaton was murdered in 1988—about 10 years before Matthew Shepard—he had gone to the local theater right over here, the Ingersoll Dinner Theater, and he'd seen Pippin with a friend of his. Then they went downtown afterwards and went to one of the gay bars called the Garden. And after they had departed at the Garden, he went up to the Gay Lube (??), and that's where he met two young men. And he, I think, invited them back to his house and he was going to give them coffee, but instead, their plan was to rob him. And in the, in the process of robbing him, one of the men stabbed him and he died.

R

Rick Miller 57:59

And under the most peculiar circumstances ever—you can't make this stuff up—several days later, a local trash collector was going around emptying dumpsters. And he came upon a dumpster a long ways from where the murder occurred up on Euclid Avenue. And he couldn't get to the dumpster, because there was a car illegally parked in front of it. It didn't belong to the two men that did it or anything. It's just a car randomly that was—so he decided he would unload the dumpster by hand. Now, who does that? (laughs)

R

Rick Miller 58:33

So he's over there unloading the dumpster, when he comes across a bloody knife and bloody clothes and he's going, Oh, this does not look good. So he calls the police. Well, the police put two and two together and realize they've stolen some things from Ken Eaton's home and they're in the dumpster too. So they put it all together and they arrest the two men that evidently their fingerprints were all on it. So they caught these guys that did it. And they are both serving double life sentences, I think, in prison to this day.

R

Rick Miller 59:06

And that is the person that—Remember I told you my—when I went for my haircut, the person that does my hair? She knew him too. She was devastated when he—had children. The students loved him at the middle school where he was an English teacher. He was very popular. He was a very handsome young guy.

R

Rick Miller 59:24

And the weird thing about the police, when they were trying to solve the murder was they came across a list—and this is really unusual for the time, because this list was members of the Gay Coalition of Des Moines. And these guys actually put their names on—in the directory, they put their addresses in the directory, and they put their phone numbers in the directory. And there were probably close to 100 names on this list. And they noticed that several of them had checkmarks in front of them. While the police just knew that there was some sex club among these gay men and that's, that's what he—Well, come to find out when some somebody who really knew what was going on said, "No, those were the people on his Christmas card list."

R

Rick Miller 60:09

So you just can't make stuff up, you know, if you wanted to. A car misparked in front of a, a dumpster? I couldn't think that up if I wanted to, you know. Thinking a list is a bunch of people in a sex group? I never would have thought of that. So, these—that's why I love these stories, because they give us the flavor for what the times were like, and so on.

R

Rick Miller 60:34

A real irony with all of this is that in the early days—I heard recently—of gay bars, if you were a bartender and you put a blue light up in your bar, that meant it was a safe place for gay people to be. I had no idea of this. I never heard it before. I've heard of red light districts and those things, but I never heard of the blue light.

H

Hannah Miller 60:57

And when did you hear about that and how?

R

Rick Miller 60:59

Just about three months ago. So very recently.

H

Hannah Miller 61:03

Yeah.

R

Rick Miller 61:03

And then I found out that—so these were often in hotels, because hotels would be places where people might be able to have trysts and meet—just like the straight community, you know—And it turns out that these blue lights were a sign in those hotel room bars where you knew that it was okay to have a conversation with another guy about sex, you know.

R

Rick Miller 61:34

Strangely and extremely ironically, now, the opposite is true: blue lights actually represent the police. And if you turn on your blue lights, that means you support the police, basically in situations often involving the Black community, and the police are feeling—abandoned a little bit by some of the policies they've been pursuing. Even the black ta—blue tape on the back of a window in a car, you know, is a symbol that you support local police.

R

Rick Miller 62:05

Oh, I think it's a great irony to think that we've gone from that to this today. He just—like I said, you can't make this stuff up.

H

Hannah Miller 62:16

Do you want to talk more about the gay bars in Des Moines from '70s, '80s, '90s?

R

Rick Miller 62:26

When I first started coming to the gay bars in Des Moines, they were downtown in the area where the Federal Building is now in the Civic Center. So extremely popular areas in well known and active places, but at the time, it was a warehouse area. And there was one building that had one—it was like a warehouse. If you imagine this giant building that's as long as a square block, and it's got one door on the side of it and beside the door, it says "P and S Lounge." But if you say it really fast, "P and S Lounge," it sounds like you're saying, "The penis lounge." So that was the gay bar.

R

Rick Miller 63:08

But there was a gravel parking lot right across the street and you had to get across Second Avenue rather quickly or you might be run down, because people knew what that bar was. They, uh—the bar—I would love to go back to the bar now and look around and see who was there and say, "Oh, I know about you, you're going to move to California, and we're never going to see you again. Oh, and you are going to get stabbed to death in a, in

an alleyway in about five years. And you're going to get actually married to that guy over there. And you're going to have a very happy and long life." You know, wouldn't it be fun to be able to do that? But that's very likely what was going on.

R

Rick Miller 63:51

The P and S Lounge had one side where you could dance, but the floor was so rickety that if you danced too hard or got too excited, the needle on the record would start bouncing. And I—a guy named Connie, would go, "Now girls, you're going to have to calm down a little bit, because of the record skipping here, I bet." (both laugh)

R

Rick Miller 64:21

Of course we'd all laugh and we'd calm down a little bit. (laughs)

H

Hannah Miller 64:27

Other bars were the Club Grand, which was at the 12th and Grand. There was A Menagerie, which was out by Margo Frankel woods, which is popular place for men to meet. And then the age of disco occurred around in 1975-78 or '79 and the City Disco was an upstairs bar downtown, where the Civic Center or the YMCA is now—that building has been torn down— but it was extremely popular and the decor in it was interesting. It was like wooden pathways that you would walk around on, like you were on a boardwalk, and all of the tables—for the first time I'd ever seen—were the taller, standby roundtables with stools around them. And then the dance floor had lights periodically in the floor that would light up above and in different colors. So it was a great dance floor, it was \_\_\_\_ (??) a space, there was a stage at one end, and at midnight, all the drag queens would come out and do a number, which would just be fantastic. It'd be like "I Will Survivor" or something like that by Donna Summer (note: by Gloria Gaynor) or whoever was popular at the time. But there was also a small \_\_\_\_ (??) right beside it on that same level, that was just for drag shows, because some guys just love to do drag shows. I'm not one of them, but you know, they want to do that, that's fine. And so there was always a drag show there, too. So it's very, very positive place. That's where Joe, I told him, "One, that's one, that's two, that's three." That's the bar that that happened in.

R

Rick Miller 66:05

But, um, after a while, an interesting thing occurred. Gay people, of course, knew straight people, and they say, "Oh, there's this great place, we have great fun. You ought to come sometime." So they would come, and they would interact with the gay community and so

on, and everything was cool.

R

Rick Miller 66:24

But then those people that came would invite other people. Now, they didn't know any gay people. So they were there, basically, to just see the freak show, guys dancing with guys, you know. And I remember looking up from the dance floor one time and there was a whole group of people all standing along, kind of a bar, and they're all like this—They're just looking at me dancing, and I'm thinking, I am not a freak show. And I just didn't want to go there anymore.

R

Rick Miller 66:56

And that's what happened to a lot of people. Everybody just started leaving, and then they couldn't get anybody to go. And then they made it a private club. And that didn't work because still nobody went. And then they tried to make it an all-Black bar and that didn't work. And then it just had a fire.

R

Rick Miller 67:13

And then there was a cove (??) and it was down on Court Avenue, where all the restaurants are now, but this was not a restaurant area at the time. And it—after a couple years of that one, that one burned. And then there was another bar, and that one burned. And that's when the insurance companies went, "Who is this dude that's owning all these bars that are burning?" Well, that guy ended up going to jail. His name was Chuck Brooks and he was a brother to Archie Brooks, who is on the city council. (laughs)

R

Rick Miller 67:48

Yeah, can't make this stuff up.

H

Hannah Miller 67:51

How were all of the fires starting?

R

Rick Miller 67:54

Oh, I think in different ways, but it was always a way to get insurance money and start a new bar. So that's what he was doing. You would have thought that after the second time that he would be a little more cautious about that.



Rick Miller 68:08

So there've probably been over twenty-five different bars just since the '70s. And there were a few ones that were earlier than that, but people don't generally know much about them. They were these hotel bars. And the biggest one in the early days was a place called the Blue Goose. And once again, see how blue is used to describe the bar so people would know it was gay. And it was known to have open gambling going on at it.



Rick Miller 68:39

I never really—I think I was in there once, maybe. And it just made me so nervous, I wanted to leave. This is the one that would be raided all the time. And it was also mostly older men and kind of the alcoholic type of people that I didn't want to hang out with. So I was never around.



Rick Miller 69:01

And then the bars have continued to grow and expand. The Blazing Saddle is the most popular bar here. The Garden is still open. And it's more of a metrosexual bar. And I've heard maybe it's going to be sold now. And I don't know what kind of a bar it's going to become. Somebody said it might have a lot more food at it. So, we'll see.



Rick Miller 69:23

The Blazing Saddle has just been almost a centerpiece to what's gone on in the gay community here, because in about the late '90s, they began to more actively engage in gay pride weekends. And because they put all this money and effort into it, suddenly the tents went up, the streets got blocked, the parades got bigger, and suddenly it just went kaboom. And the parades went from twenty-five people to 1,000 people to 10,000 people to they're expecting 22,000 people this year. So very interesting.



Hannah Miller 70:03

You mentioned police raids at some of the gay bars. Were you ever there for one? No? How did you hear about them?



Rick Miller 70:10

No, I was very fortunate that I've never been in gay bar when it was being raided. It's weird, because I guess they didn't necessarily just clear out the bar. Sometimes they'd just

go down the barstools and take every other person. I mean, it was so random and so ridiculous, you know, and a lot of times, if the police were paid off, they just—didn't arrest anybody. So it was crazy.

R

Rick Miller 70:38

And of course, every city was a little different. So everybody had their own form of corruption going on. Sometimes it was mob-oriented and that kind of thing, but it was hard to know. So—But here, I never heard that it was mob-oriented. It was just a way of trying to control gay people, I think.

H

Hannah Miller 70:57

And was it mostly gay men at these bars? Were there a lot of women there?

R

Rick Miller 71:03

There were women.

H

Hannah Miller 71:04

Okay.

R

Rick Miller 71:05

Women tended to meet in small groups, if at all. I heard an interesting story recently about two lesbians that met in San Francisco. They couldn't find any other women to hang out with—any other lesbians. And so finally, they went to a couple gay guys. And the guy says, "Oh, well, we'll introduce you to some gay women." (laughs) It was the gay guys that introduced them.

R

Rick Miller 71:31

And they actually created the Daughters of Bilitis. Have you ever heard of them? That is one of the first organized lesbian organizations in the United States. And the male counterpart to that would be the Mattachine Society.

R

Rick Miller 71:46

So yeah, it's an interesting story, because they were able to do poetry readings and all this

stuff and it made it sound like they were some literary group. But basically, it was a chance for lesbians to meet in secret. But they could say, "Oh yeah, I've got my Bilitis meeting later." (laughs) Because—

R

Rick Miller 72:05

From what I understand is, there was an island of Lesbos, but either the other side of the island or a matching Island right next to it was called Bilitis. And so you kind of got the Lesbo/Bilitis combination here, and that's what made it all work. So—very clever. I thought, just like women to be very clever about that, you know. (laughs)

R

Rick Miller 72:32

And, I've got other information here, I can actually show you. I know, that's not going to be part of an oral history, but I can show you some things, too.

R

Rick Miller 72:45

I think I covered just about everything right up to the latest. What's happened to me personally, is that I have often gotten involved in an organization, like on a committee level, and then I'll do this or I'll do that—like I might work with the library and get it all set up and going, or work with a particular committee like this one, which is the Pride History Project, and before long, I'm on the board. And then before long, I'm president of the board. It's—I think, in some ways, it's a natural progression of how things work in organizations, but it never occurred to me when I'm striving to—I really kind of like doing what I call the "busywork." I like just being in the background, just doing my own thing, and getting things done. And I'm not out for any glory or leadership position or anything, but I always kind of end up suddenly being it. So that's just happened to me personally.

R

Rick Miller 73:49

My whole family knows I'm gay, and everybody's cool with it. And I have one gay nephew, and believe it or not, he's a twin. And his brother's not gay. And he's living with his partner near Iowa City. And what I can't really figure out in all this is that it took him so long to come out. I thought I would have made the—made it easier for him, and it doesn't seem to work that way.

R

Rick Miller 74:18

Matter of fact, it was at his younger brother's wedding that we were sitting after the

wedding at a round table—I remember exactly where it was—and I said, "Mark, I think your cousin's gay." Because his cousin, very cute young man, whatever I had gone in the bathroom, he was coming out and I just looked in those blue eyes of his and I just thought, Well! You're a little cutie patootie! and so I says, "I think you're—I think your cousin's gay." And he says, "Well, listen, I need to tell you that I'm gay too."

R

Rick Miller 74:59

And I went "Oh," (laughs) thinking this was a huge revelation, because he hadn't even told his parents yet. And I said—he said—then he started to cry. And I said, "Why are you crying?" And he said, "Because it took me so long to tell you." And that just broke my heart. Because I thought, I don't know what I did make it seem like he couldn't tell me, you know.

R

Rick Miller 75:28

But he was around all these macho guys and they were always getting married to these girls and they were having children then and everything, and I think he just got to the point where—there's no disguising this anymore, you know? And the guy that is his partner was actually best friend of one of his brothers at Iowa State so, you know, it's just amazing.

R

Rick Miller 75:49

The world is just a very interesting place. The journey's incredible. So, um, I don't even know what your original question was, now.

H

Hannah Miller 76:00

I actually would like to talk about the AIDS crisis a bit if that's okay with you?

R

Rick Miller 76:05

Okay.

H

Hannah Miller 76:06

Yeah. Um, when did you first hear about AIDS?



Rick Miller 76:13

Well, I think I heard about it in the early '80s, when everybody else did it. It was a scare. It was like gay guys were getting this cancer. And it seemed to be that nothing could be done about it. And the people—it was just like a death, uh, knell, because they would die. There was nothing that could be done.



Rick Miller 76:32

It seemed to be a form of cancer, but it had to do with, you know, cellular stuff. And, and then it's—they found out that it was actually an HIV—It was a human immune virus of some kind. So, HIV, and—but there was just so, absolutely—there were two things going on simultaneously. Those that didn't want to have anything to do with it. Didn't want to know about it or anything, in the general community. And those that were in the gay community that couldn't talk about anything else and were scared to death. So didn't want to know. And then there were those also that condemned it and said, "Well, this was God's wrath on gay people." So that was one of the scenarios, too, going on.



Rick Miller 77:20

The fact that Reagan was president during seven years of the epidemic—or plague, if you want to call it—and never even mentioned it. Three thousand men in the United States died. That's almost as many that died at the World Trade Center. And nothing was said.



Rick Miller 77:41

Matter of fact, it wasn't until the blood supply got messed up and a young man named Ryan White, who was I think—he had a blood disease that meant he had to have transfusions and he got HIV by that, that finally, straight people realized, Oh anybody could get this.



Rick Miller 78:07

However, anybody were getting it before, anyway. So HIV was getting Haitians, drug users and gays, and people could have cared less about anyone else. Well, they learned, ultimately, that they needed to.



Rick Miller 78:26

I lost two close friends. And I think the last count, I lost about thirty acquaintances, people

I knew that died. So it wasn't as dramatic here as it was on some of the coasts. There's a picture of the San Francisco Gay Men's chorus, and it's got like 150 men, and there's—they all have their backs to you. And there's two that are—No, sorry. There's like five that are in white jackets. Those are the only ones that survived. Everyone else—that's how many people from the—from the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, that survived the epidemic. Out of 150 people, they lost 145. They were doing one and two funerals a week at one point. It's hard to imagine. It's just hard to imagine. So.

R

Rick Miller 79:27

And you can watch movies about it, but I've never really seen a movie—other than maybe "Philadelphia"—that really cuts to the heart of what's going on.

H

Hannah Miller 79:40

So what was it like here in Des Moines?

R

Rick Miller 79:42

in Des Moines, it started rather slowly, when we found out some people were infected. And then they started trying to get them services. But the health community was not very excited about getting involved with it. So there were only a few that would. And then they had to be highly careful, because you didn't want, you know, gloves—even at the dentist now, dentists always wear gloves when they put their hands in your mouth, because of AIDS, you know—And that wasn't the case before AIDS.

R

Rick Miller 80:15

So then they formed the Central Iowa AIDS Project. And to fund it, they would have what was called the All Iowa AIDS Benefit every year, and they raised a lot of money: thousands and thousands of dollars and this went to HIV prevention programs and support throughout the state. It wasn't just here for Des Moines.

R

Rick Miller 80:42

These were large events held at the Embassy Suites downtown. They were lengthy. They were long—like every drag queen in the state wanted to perform at that. So there was just one performance after another, all night long, but the Des Moines Gay Men's Chorus sang at those every year. And other groups, in ballet (??) performed at it. There were straight people that performed at it. They had emcees like Mary Brubaker and Dana Cardin (??)

and others, that were well known TV personalities that were \_\_\_\_(?).

R

Rick Miller 81:18

And they were quite the events. And so, uh, the big thing, and one of the earliest things that happened, is a man named Robert Mann, who was a designer, arrived back in Des Moines, his hometown, from New York City. His—his job, if you call it a "job"—profession, had been working with leather, and he didn't work with just any leather—he did leather interiors for jets for the very wealthy. So he would make their chairs and their seats and their cushions and all that stuff. Whatever was made out of leather, he did the leather designing for all of that.

R

Rick Miller 82:05

So he came back here and he continued to make belts. And that's about all he did here, he—because he worked with leather, so he would make leather belts, and he was making some profit from that. But he got ill very quickly and very fast. And they—he—his house became known as the Robert Mann House. And so others that were stricken and were very, very sick often ended up at his house, also. So they could all be cared for together. And that lasted until I think he died. And then I don't know whatever happened to the Robert Mann House. I never heard.

R

Rick Miller 82:42

But by that time, services were really getting pretty good about helping people in their own homes. So they could get food delivered, they could get health care, they could get rides to where they needed to go and so on. Most lost their jobs or left their jobs, because they were just so incapacitated.

R

Rick Miller 83:00

And uh, I guess— (pause)

H

Hannah Miller 83:10

Who had access—

R

Rick Miller 83:12

What, what happened in the mid '90s was just incredible. They got this cocktail, and the

cocktail was a rigid number of pills that you'd have to take. And that actually stopped the stem of the deaths. Suddenly, people stopped dying. And now there's a new drug out there now, that is, I think one pill, and you don't take this regimen of ten, twenty, thirty pills a day.

Hannah Miller 83:43

Were you involved in a lot of organizing around AIDS?

Rick Miller 83:46

I did not, no. It's kind of weird. It's like the—the community kind of divided into two parts. One was totally concentrating on just the AIDS epidemic. And the other one was the one I was involved with and that was just kind of, Can we continue the culture? Can we continue to live, survive, and thrive with this terrible, awful disease? And so that's when I was head of the Des Moines Gay Men's Chorus. And then trying to work with the Gay and Lesbian Resource Center.

Rick Miller 84:18

And I mean, at the same time, we're still trying to get rights that were being denied, you know, like the military and marriage and foster care. Well, you name it. I'm just amazed sometimes at the kinds of fights we've had to have. The straight community did not give an inch on anything, ever. They made us work for it, no matter what it was, no matter what.

Rick Miller 84:47

One of the few areas is, they just didn't know if we were gay or not, so voting did not seem to be a huge thing. They wouldn't deny us voting. So.

Hannah Miller 84:57

So what were you doing to organize around some of these issues, like marriage and foster care and the military?

Rick Miller 85:09

Well, one of my best friends—the guy that I told you had me make the sign, "We are everywhere"—was one of the first men to go through the system and fill out all the forms

and do all the work to be the first foster care provider that was an openly gay person. And I've got some pictures in the other room that I can show you: him and some of the boys that he's helped raise. I think he's helped raise twenty-five boys over the years.

R

Rick Miller 85:36

He was a Vietnam veteran. He is Hispanic. He worked for John Deere. And he got the John Deere union to be one of the first unions in the state of Iowa to accept gay and lesbian people, too. So he was quite a fight around here—Trying to think where I was going with this story.

H

Hannah Miller 86:04

Other ways that you were organizing, working on these different issues?

R

Rick Miller 86:06

Oh, okay. And so—and so there's always this crossover, because like, like I said, the Gay Men's Chorus might be a community thing, but we're singing songs about AIDS, too. And we're singing at AIDS events. So there is this crossover going on all the time between communities. And everybody seemed to be mutually respected, respectful, and so on.

R

Rick Miller 86:30

So in the meantime, the women's organizations were holding some of their own fundraisers, too. Some of them—many of them—were helping gay men with the disease and helping them with estates and all kinds of things like that. Some of them were actually organizing around cancer, especially breast cancer, and some other issues that they have in the women's community. So that was happening, simultaneously, too.

R

Rick Miller 87:08

I can't think of any other things right off.

R

Rick Miller 87:17

Believe it or not, there were other organizations that were kind of transitioning through all kinds of things, too. For instance, the drag queens had virtually come to invent the imperial court. So there's this whole genre of imperial court people and, and they have a

king and they have a queen that are announced every year and, and they do all this fundraising around us and they sing, you know, and do their impersonations and so on.

R

Rick Miller 87:47

So there's that group and then there's a bears' group that is now formed. They are interested in hairy men and those that like hairy man and so that's called the Bears, Capital Bears. Then there's Capital City Pride, and they have become extremely—an extremely expensive and good group lately. They even have their own gala now, to raise money for, um, just the pride events every year. So it's Capital City Pride. And this year, they are creating banners that are going to be hung all over in the East Village. And these are expensive banners. And they're beautiful, absolutely wonderful. I can't wait to see them when they're up on the light posts.

R

Rick Miller 88:28

And there are—I think I mentioned them—pride sports leagues and Transitions Iowa and other groups that are also active and—

H

Hannah Miller 88:44

These are all groups that are active today?

R

Rick Miller 88:47

It turns out that they—I had set aside during this museum project for the fiftieth anniversary—ten spaces for groups, and when I actually got down to it, there were fifteen groups that probably could have gone in, because—and I've had five thoroughly about mentorship (??) or scholarships should probably involved in this group, and this group should be like, primary health care should be involved, because they're the—the new version of the Central Iowa AIDS Project. I think, Oh gosh I couldn't get everybody covered. So I'm just going to kind of rely on whoever comes first. They're going to get in the museum and show, and if you wait too long, they just lose out.

H

Hannah Miller 89:31

Can you talk more about this exhibit that you're working on?

R

Rick Miller 89:35

Yes, the exhibit is called Evolution of the Revolution: 50 Years Since Stonewall, and it is placed in the sections of the museum that are kind of between columns that are built into the wall. And this space is by decade, so each decade will have its own set of things that happened nationally and locally here since, like 1970. Yeah, so the '70s. So the '70s would have like, the American Psychological Association drops homosexuality as a sickness, and suddenly 200,000 Americans are cured instantaneously. (both laugh) Well, that's what it says on the paper.

R

Rick Miller 90:30

So, and then of course, that's during Anita Bryant. That's actually the '70s, is when Harvey Milk became supervisor and was murdered and believe it or not, when his murder occurred, the different gay men from choirs all over the city and the different churches decided to come together and sing at his funeral. And that was the beginning of the first Gay Men's Chorus, was in San Francisco, after Harvey Milk died.

R

Rick Miller 91:00

And then to spread like wildfire, because I remember watching my first HBO program on this new cable network on your TV. And they had a program called America: Underground. And there were two older gentlemen that were getting dressed in their tuxedos. And they were going to the Lincoln Center in New York City, and they were hearing this group called the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, and I was just fascinated by this. So I'm watching it and I just amazed that the \_\_\_ (??) Johnson is a composer that did this incredible job of recreating "God Rest Ye Gentlemen" with an orchestra. And that's what they were singing for this program. It just blew me away. And I've sung that now in our own chorus. So, and it was so nice to be able to do that.

R

Rick Miller 91:57

And so after this group—so 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s—and then each organization, I told you about, each get a side of a block, a cube, and they get to show their own organizational history. So One Iowa will show this, and Women's Cultural Collective, and First Friday Breakfast Club, and all these different organizations.

R

Rick Miller 92:23

So they will get to show their history, and then the back wall, when you go to, will be kind

of the culture wall, and it's going to be visual arts, locally—I'm not going to do nationally on this, because there's just too much nationally. And then it's going to be chorus and music, and it's going to be theater, and then it's going to be literature. And so we've got a whole bunch of writers here in town—both fiction and nonfiction, that have written books—and I think we should also publish or put up, at least for attention, our local newspapers and local newsletters and so on. So there'll be some of those too.

R

Rick Miller 93:08

One of the first things you'll see when you come in to the—to the gallery, is a large mural. It was done by the State Historical Society for a conference on elderly gay and lesbian people. It was called "A Matter of—no, uh, "Growing Old with Dignity and Grace." It was all about helping elderly LGBT people. And on—in this large mural is really a lot of the earlier brochures and photographs of everything that happened here locally until 2000. So that's going to be hanging on the wall in the first section.

R

Rick Miller 93:59

Then the second section is actually what I call "influencers." And it has all these different things that kind of influence the rise of gay and lesbian people, ultimately. But each one has its own story—like the lavender scare, which would be McCarthyism. And then things like Magnus Hirshfield, and his sexuality studies in the 1890s in Germany, which led to the paragraph 145, which banned gay/lesbian people. And how Hirshfield Institute was burned to the ground by the Nazis, and how the pink triangle was created to put on gay men in in the concentration camps—That will be part of that whole story of what influences—even things like during World War II, a lot of men that were dishonorably discharged from the services ended up in the port cities like New York, San Francisco, LA (Los Angeles), Miami. And that's why those large populations of gay men remain to this day, is because they became kind of these little sponges that kind of soaked up the community—the gay communities from other places, because they were such a concentration and everybody wanted to be there, where they could be around their own people.

R

Rick Miller 95:14

So—all led to Stonewall, ultimately. So, it's going to blow up somewhere, you know, and that's just where it happened to happen.

R

Rick Miller 95:26

If you like, we could turn this off and I could show you some actual visuals of some of this.

Unless you want to—

 Hannah Miller 95:32  
Yeah, I love that.

 Rick Miller 95:33  
Okay.

 Hannah Miller 95:34  
Is there anything else you want to talk about before we finish the recording?

 Rick Miller 95:41  
No.

 Hannah Miller 95:42  
Okay, great.