

*Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles:  
A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago*

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW #25  
HUNT, KIM (1962 -) MPP 2004**

*At U of C: 2002 - 2004*

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**Interview (April 13, 2013) with Kim Hunt at her office, Chicago, IL.**

[00:00:00]

ML: Can you start off by telling me how you came to the University of Chicago?

KH: Yeah. I came to the University of Chicago because I was interested in getting a degree in public policy. I applied for the 2002 fall semester—not semester, we're on quarters. This would have been my second master's degree, and I was at the point in my career where I wasn't advancing and thought that going back to school might help with that. I've always been interested in public policy and knew about the reputation of the Harris School for the quantitative side, which is something that I used to fear in my job.

ML: What were you doing before you came to the Harris School? You mentioned a master's; where were you working?

KH: Prior to the Harris School, I had been working at the Chicago Transit Authority, and started there the second year of the master's program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. That program was focused on public policy—not public policy, urban planning and public policy. And so as a second-year student I had an internship in the president's office at CTA, and after graduation felt like, "I have a job here, so I'll stay." And so was able to get hired full-time, and stayed at CTA about 13 years. Left because, like I said, I wasn't really advancing in my career, and was doing some consulting work for a while, mostly grant-writing, between the time I left CTA and actually well into my school time at the Harris School.

ML: So you've been in Chicago for a while, it seems like. Were you born here?

KH: I was actually born in Kansas City, Missouri, and moved to Chicago in 1984? So it's been a while. I followed who was then my fiancé to Chicago, who was born and raised here. And just loved the city. Still love the city. I have an urban planning background, right? [laughs] I love the history of the city and knowing the history of the city, and just seeing

how things have changed over time. The resilience of people in this city is amazing to me.

ML: Yeah, it must have been interesting working for the CTA as someone with an urban planning background.

KH: You know, it is a great place to be if you're in the right department. You get a bird's-eye view of transportation systems in general, and because I was initially working in the president's office and was always in some planning-type department, except for a brief stint in internal audit, which—pff, whole new story. But it was nice having a bird's-eye view of transportation systems, the CTA in particular, and knowing how the lines, the rail lines originated. There was a point in my career when I had been to every single train station and had ridden most of the bus lines, because we'd have to go out for different reasons. And then I worked on the policy side of it. I got to do a lot of research, and also got to be involved in finding funding for new programs—experimental transit or bus lines, mostly. Especially during welfare reform, there was a big push to get people off the welfare rolls into jobs, and there were some heavily subsidized programs for employers, but in many cases there were no transit lines to get people to employers from the city. So I got to get involved with a lot of community-based organizations which were doing economic development and job training and that sort of stuff. Those last few years at CTA were very, very interesting to me. There were some times before—not so much. [laughs]

ML: What was your academic experience at UChicago like? Did you get what you came there to get?

KH: I definitely got what I came there to get, and more I think. At the Harris School—I can't speak to other programs—we were brought in what's considered a cohort, and we were going through the blood, sweat, and tears together. At first, if you're invited—I love the way they phrase it—to math camp, which means that you really got to brush up, because there's a lot of econ, which means that there's a lot of calculus, and for some of us that was a completely foreign word. So there was a lot of bonding that happened, particularly those of us who started with math camp and were in those core classes together for the first quarter and into the second quarter. I have lifelong friends from that experience [laughs], and I've had the honor of being able to teach mini-courses at the Harris School, one in Fundraising for Non-Profits and one, which I just got to do for the first time this year, in Policy and Advocacy in LGBTQ Social Movements. My tie is still pretty strong to the Harris School. It helps that I live in the neighborhood, and two houses down from the Dean of the School. [laughs]

ML: I didn't actually know that you were still an instructor at the University of Chicago.

[00:03:09]

KH: Yeah, well, you know for the mini-courses, you don't get credit for them, it's just something that students who want to get a deeper understanding of, and so they're a lot of fun, since the students who are there really want to be there. There is a lot of opportunity

for dialogue, at least in my classes. And I have to say, you asked specifically about my academic experience. A couple of things on that: for one, it was a really tough program, and one of the highest accomplishments of my life was making it through it, and still being here to talk about it in a positive way. [laughs]

ML: All of those dead bodies littering the wayside—

KH: Yeah, exactly! There were some nights where all of us would be crying. Literally crying. But we all got through it. I loved my time at the University of Chicago. And this coming from the perspective of a community organizer who realizes that universities can be bullies sometimes, and can have really big footprints in what are usually low-income neighborhoods because the land is cheap. There's that perspective, but there's also just the experience of being in a learning environment and a fairly intense rigorous learning environment that I cherish, even now, and wish I was more in that kind of setting now some days. It was a great experience for me, and it really pushed me in many ways, and I learned that I could do a lot more than I thought I could do, and understand a lot more than I thought I could. And I went back when I was 40. It was an interesting experience in that regard, going back as an older student with kids, and I was still doing consulting work. It was completely different from my experiences in school before.

ML: Can you talk a little bit about the cohort in the Harris School? I don't know anything about it, really—how big is it?

KH: Yeah. When I came—the year that we came was the largest class that the Harris School had ever admitted. I want to say that there were a 125 of us? And their big lecture hall only held maybe 115, so sometimes there would be people sitting in the stairwells [laughs]. It was kind of funny. They'd never had a class that big before. And of that number, there were seven black people. I think seven. I remember three women, Maggie DeCarlo who is actually working in the admissions department, Kandace Thomas, and myself—oh, and Alana Gunn. No, so there were five black women, two black men. And so we sought each other out right away. There was no...My first year, there was no group for people who identified as LGBT. I think that came during my second year at the Harris School. But in terms of the cohort, it's the group that you come in with and the way it generally works is that the people you study with during math camp are probably going to be the folks you continue to study with, at least through the core courses at the Harris School. That's where my friendships that I still have were developed.

ML: What was the LGBT—how many others were there at the Harris School? What was the atmosphere like towards LGBT students?

KH: Yeah, I don't remember how many there were. I may have only gone to one Out in Public Policy event—or it may have been a listserv kind of thing. I think in terms of treatment, I didn't feel isolated, I didn't feel any negative treatment at all. I felt that folks were very open and welcoming. I think I was more aware of my race than of my sexual orientation in that environment, because it was a very very white, male environment. And because I was older, I think, I didn't really engage in much of the social aspects related to being in

school, even in grad school. The social stuff is a little different in grad than it is in undergrad because you're older, but also you don't get around as much to different parts of the university and meet other folks, or spend a lot of time on campus outside of your class time.

[00:12:12]

ML: Can you talk a little bit more about your race while you were at the School of Public Policy? Was there anything overt, or did you just feel out of place?

KH: Nothing overt directed towards me, just that feeling of “oh my God, I'm one of a handful of black people in this environment.” But there were also times—which is why I say “not directed at me.” There were situations where people—you know, you bring your whole self to where you go. I think there's an assumption that public policy folks and social work folks are very progressive in their attitudes and beliefs in any number of things, from race to gender, and that's not always the case. Going to a place like the University of Chicago, which is a very expensive school, there are some people who come from very privileged backgrounds whose parents can just write a check for them to go to that school. For me and other folks, that's definitely not the case. It was clear in some cases that people did not have a lot of exposure to people of other races, day in and day out. I think in this country it's very easy to not engage with people you don't want to engage with. [laughs] In big cities, even more so. You have your experiences at work, sometimes you have your experiences in school, although grade school, high school, public school, very brown and black in this city and many others. So it's real easy to enter a space with assumptions and with some unexplored beliefs. Hearing some of the things that would come out of people's mouths during Q&A around various policies, especially as it comes to schools and access to resources and that kind of thing, was a little jarring at first, but not completely unexpected. [laughs] But, you know, sometimes you go, “Really? It's 2002! You're still believing—?”

ML: That is unfortunate.

KH: But you know, at least they were asking the questions! In putting it out there—and school should be a place where that happens.

ML: True. And hopefully they learned something.

KH: Yeah. Well, for some people, they come right from undergrad, and they don't take too many like that at the Harris School. Or from experiences like Vista or Peace Corps or something like that, which is not bad, but also doesn't necessarily put you in a place where you have to struggle a little bit, or you have to be a part of a structure and make decisions about resources and not question your own beliefs. That's my perception.

ML: Were you involved with the LGBT group at the Harris School?

KH: I was on the listserv once Out in Public Policy was created, but not really any other social

group. The...what is it called? The LGBTQ Student Life Office? Office of Student Life? Whatever, either didn't exist or I just didn't know about it, so there weren't any LGBT-specific activities that I knew about at the University at all, so no organized activities that I'm aware of were available at that time. It may have been that I just missed them. There's a group that was already at the Harris School called "Minorities in Public Policy," or MIPPS, and I think that group also included some LGBT people. Got in under the minority banner. [laughs]

ML: What sort of stuff did that group do?

KH: They have an annual awards dinner. I think they would sponsor a couple of events throughout the year. At the time that I was there, they were trying to do some kind of mini-conference on race in public policy. So they do events like that, and they join other groups in their events too. I don't think they were social events. It was usually some kind of planned event about public policy sort of stuff, other than the annual dinner.

[00:15:47]

ML: I guess, like you said, with grad school most people tend to have more of a social life outside of the school.

KH: Yeah. And some people were working. If not full-time jobs, some intense part-time jobs.

ML: And you said you were still doing consulting?

KH: Yeah, I was still doing consulting work. And I had two kids. [laughs]

ML: Way more than just a part-time job!

KH: Yeah, exactly. One time one of my classmates was saying—and this was for a morning stats class at 9, which is like a crazy hour for me—he was just complaining that he didn't have time to do his homework and got all these classes and yadda yadda yadda, and I'm like, "Dude. Let me tell you what I did before I got here for this 9 o'clock class. I did two loads of laundry, I wrote three proposals for clients, and I did my homework. And I sent my kids off to school." And he's like, "I have nothing to complain about." No, you don't. [laughs]

ML: [laughs] Yep. Pretty much. What inspired you to start Affinity after you finished school? Or—we can talk about the stuff you might have done in between later. But it seems like your background before you came to the Harris School didn't have much LGBT stuff in it.

KH: No, it didn't. And just to be clear, I didn't start Affinity. [laughs]

ML: Oh, sorry. How did you become executive director?

KH: Yeah, because it's 18 years old. It's fine. I mean, I couldn't have. I didn't even know that I was out—a lesbian. Or maybe I was just figuring that out. Yeah, I came to Affinity in May of 2009. I'd been on the board a couple of years too. But so...a lot of things came together for me to be at Affinity in this role. When I was graduating from the Harris School, just before graduation I thought I wanted to go on and get a PhD. Around this time my sister had died, just around or before submitting applications, so I wasn't in any condition to be applying to schools. But I did. Reflecting on that now and shortly afterward, I knew that I didn't submit the best applications that I could. But around, what would that be? Probably March of that year, at the end of the winter quarter, I knew that I was obviously not going to be in a PhD program, and had to hustle and figure out what I was going to do. I did a lot of informational interviews, informational interviews with Harris alum, and people I'd known through my career in public transportation, and some of those people I'd known before, and some Harris alum who knew I was doing consulting work, just suggested that I try to expand my consulting business. I was working on my second master's, and had almost 15 years of work experience, and it's hard to get a job with those kinds of credentials. My classmates—for many of them, it was their first time getting a real job, and those are the kinds of positions that you find job descriptions for in the various places where you look for job descriptions now 'cause I have no idea.

But for me, it was going to be a higher-level position, and something that more likely would have been created for me by some entity, which takes a lot of time. I continued to do my consulting work and eventually co-founded a consulting firm called O-H Community Partners, which still exists. But after about five years of that, of doing a lot of business development during daytime hours, and a lot of client work at night, and just having that constant churn and doing more travel than I wanted to do, I was just burnt out. Around this time, we—Affinity--got notification that it had received its second multi-year grant in the same year. I did a lot of grant-writing for Affinity in the time that I was on the board, and so we knew that with this particular grant we would be hiring an executive director. We had already gone through one round of interviews, or résumé reviews I should say—we did very few interviews. Because it was just as the economy was turning and we thought that we'd get some really good candidates, and they were okay, but not great. Just as we were doing the second round of interviews, I decided that I really couldn't take any more of the consulting firm and had a talk with the board president of Affinity about me applying for the executive director's job. She said, "Great! But you have to go through the same process that everyone else does." So I did, and they hired me. I was interested because while it's true that my previous career had not been LGBT-focused, the work that I did as a consultant was centered around strengthening non-profits. Even the work that I did at CTA was fundraising, policy development, so a lot of transferrable skills. The thing about consulting is that you swoop in to do one piece of work, provide some advice, and you're gone. So you really have no idea what happens to your suggestions when you're gone. For me and for my business partner, we'd not run a non-profit business before. We gave people really good advice, but not within the context they were living in. Now being in an executive director's shoes, especially for a small organization, I have a much better sense of the challenges that people are against. There was that desire to really see something through. Also the desire to be a part of a new

place for an organization.

[00:25:49]

ML: Sorry, what do you mean by new place?

KH: They'd never had an ED before.

ML: So, the new position?

KH: Yeah, and the new place in their development as an organization, going from all-volunteer to actually having staff. I learned that I like start-up types of situations, even though the organization has been around for a long time. When you're in a new phase for the organization—they call it the life cycle of the organization—it's like starting over again in many ways, even though you have this foundation to, not rest upon, but work from. It's a new situation for the organization in that sense.

ML: What are some of the interesting challenges that you've had to work with as the ED?

KH: Not enough time. Not enough staff. Not enough money. [laughs] Being pulled in many directions, having to wear literally many hats. On the other hand, it's been very rewarding, seeing the organization being sought after as people are making decisions, also being at the table where decisions are made now. Seeing staff develop, seeing my own development, are all very positive things. But it's really very difficult, running a small organization especially in an environment where funding is very iffy, and the value of the work is hard to quantify and describe because it's social justice work. As opposed to direct service work where you have a certain number of clients that you see, and so many of them have been with you for so many days, and go through this process and that process. Social justice work is ongoing and not always easy to define ahead of time, even though looking back you're like, "Oh, that happened."

ML: It's hard to say that you've empowered X individuals.

KH: Yeah, exactly. It's so big. It's so big. Wrapping your arms around that is really hard and trying to find your organization's little piece of that is a challenge, and focusing on that piece because there are so many other things that are equally important. But you can't do everything, which you learn as an individual but also as an organization. The challenge for Affinity is that because it's one of only a few organizations in the Midwest that focuses on queer and trans people of color that has capacity, that even has office space, we get asked to do a lot and participate in a lot, and it's hard to say no to people, because the need is great. Even among other organizations. We do a lot of coaching of organizations. Not that we have it all together, but we've learned a lot of things along the way.

ML: Can you talk about the landscape of LGBT-focused organizations in Chicago?

KH: I'll tell you a story to get at that. I can't remember if I've mentioned this to you before, but...let's see. When would this have been? Late 2009...is that right? When was the mayoral candidate forum? I think Daley decided that he wasn't going to run for mayor again in 2009 or 2010, I can't remember—the years are all running together now. I was having drinks with someone from two other organizations, one from Amigas Latinas, which is like a sister organization to Affinity. They were founded around the same year as us and focuses on the Latina population, queer Latina population. And ALMA, which is Association of Latino Men for Action, which is a gay men's Latino association. Drinks to discuss the potential of actually submitting a proposal to a national funder who would come to town and meet with the three of us since I think they really want to give money to organizations in Chicago—they do more regional work, not local work so much.

So we were exploring that and thought that since it was clear that we were going to have a new mayor in the next election, it would be good to have a candidate forum for them that focused on LGBT issues. There had been some sense that the more mainstream LGBT organizations like Equality Illinois or Lambda Legal were going to do a candidate forum, but we hadn't heard anything and the primary was going to be in the following February. So we were like, “Why can't we organize this? The three small organizations—why can't we do this?” So we said, “Okay, let's do this,” and we put a call out to just find other LGBT-focused organizations that were interested in participating with us, and ended up with a list of 32 in Chicago alone. [laughs] First of all, we were amazed. Nobody'd had any idea of how many there were. And to find 32, and probably not reached everyone we needed to reach—we thought, wow, there's some stuff going on here, and we need to move as a unit, as a coalition in this candidate forum, just to show our power in this city, at least in terms of numbers. So we moved forward with that. Those organizations, those 32 organizations or groups range from a one-person operation that has a name but is not necessarily a 501(c)3 charitable organization that's designated by the IRS to the big groups, like the Center on Halsted, which is not really an organization but was part of the coalition, the Equality Illinois, the Lambda Legals. So quite a range in terms of capacity, which we found out in many ways. Even people's ability to commit to a weekly planning phone call—those one-person operations are working during the day. And our phone conference is as late in the day as we can take it, which is like 3 or 4 on a Friday afternoon. Friday afternoon calls are the worst! But we're trying to accommodate everyone. And in terms of having a coherent mailing list to mail things out... So that's the range. A lot of people doing great work, but not necessarily the capacity to operate as a fully functioning organization, and also tied down by life stuff from participating in meetings and other activities that take place that are more geared towards organizations, like public hearings or trips to Springfield for lobbying—excuse me, “legislator education.” [laughs] That kind of stuff.

And then, on a national scale, only a quarter of a percent of foundation funding goes to LGBT-focused organizations. Even worse than that, when people hear about non-profits or think about non-profits, they think about these big entities like YMCA or United Way or something like that, but almost 50% of non-profits have budgets of under \$100,000. There was a study done of organizations that work with queer and trans people of color—a foundation caucus put this together probably about five or six years ago, and they did



interviews and surveys of 84 organizations, Affinity being one of them—and they found that the average budget for them was \$80,000. And 50% of them were not 501(c)3s, so they had fiscal sponsors, and the average staff size was about 1.8. That's the context in which all of this work is happening. [laughs]

ML: I actually hadn't realized that there were so many small non-profits working.

KH: Oh yes. Most of them are very tiny. Information I keep up with because of the classes that I teach, but it is pretty amazing.

ML: Yeah. And you mentioned LGBT organizations that focus on people of color, the pool is even more limited. What are the challenges that you face working in a field like that?

KH: Being heard is a big one. Both by folks who we'd like to reach, individuals who would be part of our constituency, but also funders, other organizations that we might want to partner with, that's difficult. Because even though we have staff, it's a small number of staff, even when we had more. I can only do so much as executive director. There are still things I have to do to maintain the institution as well as being out and being visible with the public and with other organizations. So there's that. There has been, not so much anymore, a hesitancy to move in the policy advocacy arena. This is often true for tiny organizations, so focused on the people, which is important, but it's hard to make the space for dealing with those bigger policy issues. This is why we have situations here in Illinois, with the marriage equality legislation, up until about a month ago there was not a concerted effort to even reach black caucus legislators. I took a trip to Springfield along with a very good friend to the organization, and we made the rounds, and in a week or so helped organize a busload of people, black people, to go, who were either LGBT or allies, to talk about the legislation. It's easy to be under the impression that this is not an issue for black people or any people of color, if all they see is well-dressed white men going to down to educate legislators, and only legislators who look like them. [laughs]

ML: And that is the public image of gay people, right?

KH: Yeah, it's the public image, exactly. And that's the image that we fight all the time with other organizations, our own constituency, with the general public. [Ed.: Before the recording started, Kim Hunt talked about going on a radio show very recently to talk with a black minister about gay rights.] When I was on the radio yesterday, with the dialogue, and it really was a dialogue, fortunately, that I had with the black minister, at one point he mentioned, "This isn't even our issue!" I was like, "Wait a minute. I am a black lesbian. It is my issue. It is our issue. This is an economic issue for us, because we're talking about the stability of families, not the only economic issue but one of many." We know, we as in the board and staff of Affinity, that we have to as an organization get out and do this stuff, and it's not something that we've been able to do as an all-volunteer organization. I think there's some misunderstanding among many non-profits about what they can do on the policy side, because there are limitations. Which is why I said, let me not say lobby, let me say "legislator education." [laughs] There are limitations, and because people don't understand the limitations and I'm not sure 100% myself, they tend to not go in that

direction. And it's the ongoing perception that people have that policy work is not social justice work. It's what the big organizations do, they focus on policy, not people. But policy is people.

ML: To talk more about your personal identity, when did you realize that you were a lesbian? When did you start identifying as such?

[00:40:59]

KH: So I would say really realizing it, I was in my 30s. It was a reflective period in my time, during my life I should say—not that I wasn't reflective before, but there's something about hitting your 30s that make you want to pause to look at your life. By that time I had been married almost 10 years, had two—well really 3 kids, because we had adopted my stepbrother when he was much younger. And I knew very early on that I wasn't really that attracted to men, and had some attraction to women, but nothing—I thought that I was maybe asexual, or scared to explore any sexual feelings towards anybody for a long time. But there were times, especially during college when I knew I had attraction to some women, but just kind of...let that go. It wasn't until I was in my 30s when it just hit me that I was not only—not only that I was unhappy with where I was, married to a wonderful person, having wonderful kids, the house, the car, the garage, the paths, all that stuff, but I just wasn't happy. And part of that, I came to realize, was because I wasn't really living my life. Really through journal-writing, got to that place. Came from a culture where seeking mental health services is just not a thing you do, or even recognizing that that's something you need to do—we have this image of black women being superwomen and kind of buy into the image ourselves as black women, and nobody can be that super. It was more that awakening for me. I eventually talked to my husband about it, who I learned thought I was bisexual. [laughs] We went to college together, so we had mutual friends, and there was a lot of coming out during our college years, experimentation, not us so much but people around us. We went to college in Iowa, small number of black people in the school compared to the whole school, so you knew—not everybody, but you got the rumors. So I decided that now that I knew this, I had two choices: I could stay where I was, and quite possibly be very unhappy, and it being no one's fault, but I had a fear that I would take that out on my kids. Or I could rock the boat and just come on out, get the divorce, get through all the hard stuff, and on the other end, be happy. And feel like I was really living my life. And decided for the latter.

I was still at CTA then, but that happened for me then when there were a lot of out people working in the planning department, because our vice president was an openly gay man who had been with the city and had been very successful at the city with his projects. So while there was some—there were people at CTA who were using derogatory terms, some of whom got fired for various reasons, not necessarily because they used the terms but because they weren't doing anything—they came to, if not respect him, at least acknowledge that he was the vice-president and act according. I could not have come out at a better time. Of the group, I had been there the longest time, people knew me from before I was married, then married, then saw me pregnant with my kids, and now I'm hanging out with these gay people. [laughs] Because I happen to be one of them. It was

probably three, four years after coming out that I left CTA. It's been a journey, and then to be a professional lesbian in the sense that I get paid [laughs] to do this work that clearly benefits people who I identify with is just something that I never thought would happen. I live an out life, if you will, from the point and process of going through my divorce and all of that to this very moment. But to actually be out in a very public way, to be on radio stations and newspaper articles and labeled as a lesbian in my bio and all this stuff—it's something I hadn't considered before.

ML: Is it difficult to have something that's fairly personal, like sexuality, be a part of—be very much a part of your public persona like that?

KH: I thought it would be. But it isn't. I really thought it would be. And it's weird for me to even be—I'm just an executive director for a small non-profit, but have within that sphere a very public life. I was very shy growing up. So to even be this person who does all this public speaking now and has her picture splashed different places is not something I would have—I would have laughed 20 years ago, if someone had told me that this is what I would be doing. Not so much about the sexual orientation part, but definitely about the public part. [laughs]

ML: So in a way, being public is more of a surprising transition than being lesbian?

KH: I think so. I think I've just embraced it all at this point, so I don't—I certainly don't cringe about it anymore. But I still have these moments where I'm not as—where I have to think about being public with my sexual orientation. When my oldest daughter first went to college—she went to college in Texas A&M, their small campus in Commercet—I decided that I would go visit relatives in Louisiana who I really hadn't seen since my grandfather died, a long long time ago. On the way back, my partner and I would go to see them. And just didn't comment on who we were, together. My partner's white, so they were probably like, “why is this white woman traveling with Kim,” but so—so these cousins, the couple, they're in their 70s, almost 80. They have a daughter who's a little bit older than me, and she has a daughter who's about the same age as my oldest daughter. And I—so we just never talked about it. But after the first year, my younger cousin kept saying, “We want you and Mary to meet somebody we know,” and we were like, “Okay.” But it didn't happen until three years later. Lesbian couple, living in Louisiana. They wanted us to meet. [laughs] Because they got it! Didn't say anything, because I actually got a little shy, but they figured it out and they were perfectly fine with this lesbian couple. It was a blast, I actually felt myself relax in that situation. So you're constantly coming out. My kids come out, as kids of a lesbian mother. They have to decide when to tell their friends, or how to tell their friends. You're never done with that.

ML: How did you meet your partner?

[00:50:46]

KH: My partner was also involved in transportation planning. We actually met a couple of ways. There were a couple of mutual friends we had who were also lesbian, so we called

ourselves the Lesbians in Transportation, which I'm sure there were many more. So occasionally we would have lunch together, and you know, just chit chat. And the times we were having lunch together, Mary and I each had other partners. And so just nice conversation, whatever, would bump into each other occasionally. But when CTA decided to march in the pride parade—it was at the urging of that vice-president, and he invited Mary to be part of our contingency in the parade, so we held the banner together. At one point she was like, “So where's your partner?” I said, “Well, I don't have one, where's your partner?” And she said, “I don't have one.” Well, okay. So we went our separate ways. She was meeting a group of friends for drinks after the parade, and I was meeting a separate group of friends. But about a week later, we actually went out on a date together. We were both at the point where we didn't really want to be a relationship. I had gone from being married to being in a year-long relationship with someone I had gone to college with, and I just wanted to be single for a while. And she had just ended a relationship that she wasn't happy with at all, and she just wanted to be single for a while. So we agreed that we would not see each other again for about a week or so, we made another date. We saw each other the next day. [laughs]

ML: That always happens!

KH: And here we are thirteen and a half years later. [laughs] So much for wanting to be single! If that desire was still there it's long gone! [laughs]

ML: [laughing] Wow! So to go back to your background, why do you think it took a while for you to come out as lesbian? Because you said that you were aware.

KH: I don't remember encountering anyone else who I would label lesbian. I didn't even have a word for a same-gender-loving woman. Had seen gay men. Had gay men in the family. Sometimes who were teased. Saw gay men in the church—choir directors, pianists, sometimes ministers. But didn't knowingly know of any gay women. It wasn't until college that there were people who would be recognized as lesbians that I was aware of. And they seemed to be...over there, somewhere, and not necessarily a group that I wanted to be associated with. Kind of my naïve own Kansas City kind of thing. And being a very shy person and not wanting to be the center of attention. And if you were definitely other within this small black circle—there was some otherness that I subconsciously didn't want to be a part of. I think it was more reaching a comfort level with not only who I was in my own—bigger than sexual orientation, with myself, but also finding language for what I was experiencing, kind of came together much later in life than for many other people. Although I know of someone in our senior group who didn't realize that she was attracted to women until she was in her 70s. She had been married a long time and didn't consider anything else, including any other man outside her marriage. Just feelings that I think a lot of folks just learn to tamp down for one reason or another. I was definitely there. And so it just took a little longer. [laughs]

ML: Like you said, it takes all different amounts of time, right?

KH: It's different for everybody. We have a board member who says she knew at 4. [laughs]

ML: Huh. That she was even thinking about that...

KH: Yeah, you have these little crushes on little kindergarteners, even this kindergarten teacher who I think was my first crush, okay? [laughs] Wow, you're very clear on this. I didn't have that. Or at least that I would acknowledge—I'd have to think back on that.

ML: So was the main problem—well, not problem, main feature I guess—of your background just the invisibility of lesbians? It seems that the environment was fairly welcoming towards gay men, at least.

KH: Fairly, in the sense of acknowledging that they were there, not necessarily treating them with respect. It's weird, I come from a family that is very open and welcoming of all people. But there's this weird dynamic around sex. My mother was married four times? Four or five times. I think the fifth time they just decided to live together, she decided that she wasn't going to marry again. I remember when I was maybe in middle school and she wanted to have a talk with me about the birds and the bees, as they say. She had these crazy religious notions, and I didn't know her to be a religious person at all [laughs], spiritual yes, but religious... She really relied on these kind of biblical reasons for why women's bodies did what they did, why men's bodies did what they did.

ML: “The Bible is my gynecology manual.”

KH: I know! It was what was told her, and nobody went back to correct the information. Once you're grown, you don't go looking for explanations for things, you're kind of out that learning environment. And we'd had sex education in school at that time. It's just like, no, this isn't God's curse, this is the cycle that your body goes through and it has to do with pregnancy and when you're fertile and all of that. So she was looking at me like “...really?” But I knew my mother to be a sexual person, because, you know, married four times and dating. She had friends and her friends would be single and they'd have these riffs about sex from time to time. So I knew her to be a very open person, but just going beyond that surface level discussion about sex was just not something that she was comfortable with, at least with my sister and I. There was not necessarily a close-mindedness about sexual orientation, but just a lack of discussion. At all.

Now, when I came out to my mother and father, who have been divorced since I was 3, my mother's response was, “I know you to be someone who really thinks things through. This is something that's important to you, and you need to follow where your heart takes you.” When I told my dad, he was like, “Okay. So?” I came to find that his best friend's brother was gay, and when people teased him, my father would come to his defense. This was like in high school in the '50s. [laughs] So he was, you know, like “Okay.” I had no idea. My mother actually said, “You know, I never worried about losing your father to another woman. I thought I might lose him to another man.” Because he was just—his best friend's brother was, as he would put it, flamboyant, and they were like I said good friends. They may have been more than that, I don't know. 'Cause when my father died we found all kinds of pictures of women, and I remember my aunt saying, “I found these

pictures,” and I found out about a younger sister I didn't know about.” [laughs] Who was 16, and I was almost 50. She was like, “What can I say, my brother was a freak.” Okay! [laughs] The things you learn about people when they die. But I also learned from my sister that my father was always very open about talking about sex, so it didn't really surprise me that—I mean, we still get some of his mail, and he's been deceased for a while. So it's like, ooh, you did a multi-year subscription to this magazine, we thought we'd be done now. [laughs] Yeah. So that's where the absence of language comes from, just the lack of discussion about much sexually.

[01:02:25]

ML: But it's good that your family seemed really open!

KH: Oh yeah. That I did not have to worry about. And I was thirty-something, had been through school, had a job, had kids, so...Although you still look for your parents' approval, even after you're good and grown, so knowing that I had their backing was wonderful. It was a relief.

ML: What about the wider community as you were growing up? Were they mostly like your parents, or was there more hostility among them?

KH: I think there would have been more hostility. There wasn't a gay movement in my community, so it's hard to know. The gay community or people who would identify as LGBT now were just invisible to most people, and so it wasn't a matter of discussion. We hear people talk about how homophobic the black church was. Well, they didn't even talk about homosexuality, so it wasn't a matter of being homophobic. Maybe ignoring people, but nothing was stated for or against LGBT people. So it's hard to know what the broader society thought. I lived in a bubble. The neighborhood I moved into when I first started elementary school was experiencing white flight. When we moved in, 50% of the households still had white families. By third grade, the block was all black. So there was that going on, and it became...the school went from 50% white to all black, with maybe one or two white families still left. If there was anything related to the LGBT community, I had no exposure to it, and it was probably assumed to be a white thing in the Westport area of the city, and not something that impacted black people at all. Which probably wasn't true, but it was nothing I ever knew about. Even today, when I go to visit family in Kansas City, I have no clue where the LGBT community hangs out. It actually took my partner doing some research on the internet to find the bar, bars because there's more than one, because I just didn't know, it wasn't part of my identity growing up. So now we go there and we know where our people are. But it wasn't because I looked for them. [laughs] That just seems to be foreign to my experience in Kansas City.

ML: You talk about the idea or the perception that homosexuality isn't a black problem—you mentioned also the minister talking about that—and there's probably an untrue stereotype that black communities are more homophobic than white communities. Can you talk about that?

KH: It is true that that is a misconception, that black communities are more homophobic. Not necessarily true. Many black families acknowledge the LGBT people in their family, and they're part of the family. Many black churches acknowledge LGBT people among them, their parishioners, and they treat them like everyone else. Whether or not they create support systems, that varies from church to church, as well as the perception of how many LGBT people might be there. I think there's just a lack of understanding about black communities. A lack, also, or acknowledgment that black people are not monolithic. We know that, but the way that things are described for folks, the top level, the headline. I see this particularly in the LGBT community around this marriage equality issue, with a lack of concerted outreach really to people of color. Because to me, groups like Affinity—people should have been talking to us about how to reach the black community. Not that we have all the answers, because we're still figuring out how to reach mainstream black progressive organizations and all of that too, but it's something that we could have worked on together. But again, people have gone back to what they're comfortable with. They're comfortable with people who look like them. But this particular piece of legislation is showing that you can't ignore the rest of the folks who are under the LGBT umbrella who come in different colors and genders. I think there's a lot of that that gets repeated, no matter what the issue is, because of the lack of really, really working with organizations that are in black communities, or work with constituents that are from black communities. Because most of us live in the black community. Not Lakeview, not Andersonville. We're in a community.

ML: But a bunch of the gay community stuff—the bars and so on—are up on the primarily white north side.

KH: Yeah, and that's a part of town that has changed. I had Julio from ALMA speak at one of my classes, and he said, “You know, I was born and raised in Chicago,” he's of Puerto Rican descent, and Lakeview used to be a Puerto Rican neighborhood. And then it was a place where gay women went. And then gay women got priced out, and then it became the enclave for gay men, predominantly white gay men. And now they're being pushed out because families, heterosexual families, are moving in in droves because it's got the mix of stuff they want to see. And they don't seem to realize that they've moved into an entertainment district. [laughs]

ML: “Lakeview sounds so nice!”

KH: Exactly, right? That's where a lot of these tensions are popping up now. Not that these tensions were there before, but...there's that. So knowing the history and not repeating some things is hugely important. But I think also in the other side of that is not enough organizations that focus on queer and trans people of color have stepped into this arena of public policy, really pushing the other organizations to deal with the race issue. Because all the -isms are just as much a part of the LGBT community as they are in broader society, and those are things that we have not really done a good job of dealing with because we're focused on the gay agenda, whatever that is. [laughs] So it goes back to thinking of groups as monolithic, which is why I try to say “communities” instead of “community.” There's no LGBT community, there are many communities that make us

this diverse group of people who have some power to wield, but we gotta talk to each other. Acknowledge that we all exist here.

ML: That's true. So to go back to something much earlier...Affinity is located in Hyde Park, you live here, you're sometimes an instructor in the Harris School. But you're also really involved in community stuff, or communities stuff, around LGBT and black issues. Do you see there being tension between the town and the gown, and what are those tensions?

KH: Yeah, I think there's definitely tensions there. Wait, that's weird—

[Kim goes to answer the phone, 1:12:08 – 1:12:43]

KH: So, town and gown. Yeah, I think there's definitely a number of tensions. Part of it is just the feeling that the university is intruding on neighborhoods. Many years ago, a couple of community organizations in Woodlawn got together with the university and agreed that the university would not go beyond 61<sup>st</sup> street. I think the university is honoring that? It's hard to know—

ML: Yeah, there have been some—since they're building so much on 61<sup>st</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> St.

KH: Yeah, and the university owns a lot of the apartment buildings in Hyde Park and in parts of Woodlawn, so there's probably some movement beyond 61<sup>st</sup> St. And also just buildings with such huge footprints, where they are definitely technically allowed to build, I don't think people envisioned that. And then the contract with the University of Chicago Police, and the relationship with the Chicago Police. Now the University of Chicago Police patrol up to 63<sup>rd</sup> St. That used to not be the case. I know that I live in one of the most policed neighborhoods in the nation, because I know that the University of Chicago Police is one of the largest in the nation. It's pretty hefty. There's that, too, and I don't know if it still happens at the level that it used to happen, but stopping people because they look like they don't belong in the neighborhood—that has happened to folks even now. There's definitely that.

But I also see efforts to work with community and acknowledge that dynamic, and I know a number of professors that are very very involved in community in a very authentic way, not just because of their own research, some of it, but others in a way that moves beyond the research they want to do, and really trying to find ways to help in ways that the community wants that help. I think anytime there's a situation where you have an institution in a neighborhood and there's a lot of privilege that comes with being a part of that institution, and there's a lot of ignorance perpetuated by the institution. For example, still telling folks, “Don't use the Green Line,” or “Don't go over 63<sup>rd</sup> St,” or whatever it may be. Just this unfounded, in many ways, words that convey to students and parents that they can't be a part of the broader community is, I think, disturbing. So there's that tension for sure. Our organization has worked with various University departments, with programs, having space for our programs. We've more so with UIC collaborated on research projects and that sort of thing. But we're also aware there is this town-gown tension. And so are also still not afraid of call them on it when something occurs. It's



there. Most definitely there. I don't know how it will not be there.

ML: Hyde Park is a neighborhood where the University of Chicago really permeates. What effect do you think that's had on Affinity, working as community-based organization, as opposed to an academic organization, to be in such an academic neighborhood?

KH: I don't know that...it definitely hasn't had an impact on the work of the organization in terms of its mission and what it's here to do. The “how” may change because of access to something, a space, a scholar, students, that kind of thing. But being in this neighborhood is not driving our mission. There is a perception of being in this neighborhood, and for some people there's a perception of safety, a perception of being in a “good” neighborhood. Off and on for the last four years, we've been looking for another space. We've been hoping to have more of a community center with a couple of other organizations a few years ago, so we've had to consider other parts of the city and were considering other parts of the city. But in that consideration, we've had to think about people's feelings of safety, going to and from. We're really concerned about queer youth, trans youth, and staff too, because small staff working crazy hours, sometimes when no one else is around. So we thought about all of that as we were looking at different locations, and gang territory, you know, any number of issues. As it turned out, we just didn't have the kind of budget that would support a move anyway, and the other organizations we were looking to join forces with were having issues of their own with finances and sustainability. But when we start looking again, we'll be taking all these things into consideration. We know that we want to be south. We know that we want to be in a location where people feel safe coming to. And being in. We'll see how that turns out. Right now we're in the Hyde Park. [laughs] Affinity's first space, many many years ago, was on 61<sup>st</sup> and Indiana. So we get around. [laughs] And our constituents are everywhere, so that's definitely something to consider.

ML: Looking back, what place do you think the University of Chicago has had in your life? Both being a student and in your current involvement?

KH: It's had a big influence on the latter half of—well, I don't know what half is yet. [laughs] But definitely on the last ten years, it's had a big influence on my life. I'm definitely still a part of the Harris School in many ways, and happy to be a part of the Harris School in many ways. It was overall a really, really good experience for me. Having that degree also helped get my foot in the door for a lot of business conversations, and has brought...I don't want to just say respectability, but a different lens for folks who care about that stuff, when it comes to a willingness or openness to working with a small organization like Affinity. Although Affinity's work by itself should be enough, people do look for other signals for this kind of stuff. And then, one career thing that I hope to do more of is teach, so it's given me the opportunity to do that on a small scale, and I enjoy that a great deal. But also the experience at Harris itself, academically, has made me a much better consumer of information. I question studies now, or look for the assumptions and qualifiers which might influence the results of the study. Stuff like that. So yeah, big influence, the last ten years or so. Gotten to talk to people who it would have been more challenging for me to talk to, I think. But also, some of the alumni activities have offered

ongoing learning opportunities for me that I find very rewarding. Like I said, I have these awesome friends that I didn't have before going to the Harris School. [laughs]

ML: Math camp friendships are lifelong friendships!

KH: Yes, absolutely, I'm telling you! When my youngest daughter was looking for schools—looking at schools, I should say—in the Bay Area, we reached out to one of my math camp survivors [laughs], and we stayed with her as we were looking at Berkeley and Fullerton and Stanford and all these other places. That was really cool, saved us a lot of money, got to reconnect with somebody. Yeah, math camp is a bonding experience. [laughs] Two weeks of hell! And I got to see, what's really crazy, our orientation week speaker was then-senator from Illinois, Barack Obama. Who said he was thinking about running for US Senate. I remember thinking, “Barack Obama, how do you even say that name? Who are you?” [laughs]

ML: What? That's really cool!

[01:24:33]

KH: Yeah, that's really crazy when I think about that! That was—you know? Doesn't get that much better than that!

ML: For sure! How typical do you think your experience at the school was for people in your cohort? Or for people who are LGBT or queer or trans at the Harris School?

KH: I think it was pretty typical. I think what's different now though is that there are more resources. It was actually students who requested this last class that I taught about LGBT Social Movements, it wasn't something that the school thought of. But I think it says a lot about the school itself that they acted upon that. But I think, and I could be completely wrong, but because it was a professional school, master's degree level, and given how that typically goes for folks, in terms of the social environment and all of that, I think that my experience as a lesbian or LGBT person was very similar to others. Don't know what happened prior to 2002. That may have been completely different, I don't know. But I don't recall ever being called out or being made to feel uncomfortable about my sexual orientation. I think I was more uncomfortable being black. And not necessarily because people made me uncomfortable, just feeling a little isolated because it's such a white environment.

ML: The U of C probably still is.

KH: Yeah. It's not going to change in our lifetimes, that's for sure.

ML: It's too bad. That's all the questions that I can think of. Is there anything else that you want to tell us?

KH: I can't think of any. You asked really good questions. No, I can't think of anything. I'd be

curious to hear about people's experiences from many, many years ago. I think that the parallel in some ways was the experience of black students and other students of color even in the '60s, going to school there. And women, especially in fields where there just weren't that many women. I'd be interested to hear about that. I've worked with a couple of people, black men, who went to the University of Chicago in the '60s, and they talk about being stopped by police in the neighborhood, having to explain that they actually went to school there, and the police not believing them initially. I'm curious just to see what pans out with the full project. I think it could be very interesting, for sure.

ML: Yeah. I actually don't know if we have anyone who was black and gay during the '60s and '70s. We do have white gay men from the '70s. But I don't even remember if there have been any black people in the pictures from the organizations from that period of time. Hopefully there are.

KH: And that you can find them, right? Are you interviewing faculty too? Or is it all students?

[00:49:44]

ML: Faculty too.

KH: Have you talked to Cathy Cohen?

ML: I think so? If not, she should be.

KH: Because if anyone knows about the—not that she was here during the '60s and '70s, but she would know. So you should reach out to her. And Waldo Johnson, who's at SSA.

ML: Yeah, if you have any other names of alumni or faculty who you think would be good, please.

KH: Yeah, I'll keep thinking about it. I just don't know. I think I have more of a social circuit—circuit? Circle. Of U of C people since I was at Harris than while I was there. But I'll keep thinking about it. See if we can round up anybody. Somebody you may want to reach out to who's not part of the LGBT community, fierce ally though, is, are two people, Kathi Marshall and Maggie DeCarlo at the Harris School, because they see applications and may know of people who are out and alum, just not on anybody's radar.

ML: The gaydar.

KH: Gaydar. I really meant radar, not gaydar—we don't want to out anybody in this process. [laughs] So yeah, those are the sources. I'll keep an eye out. And of course you've reached out to the LGBT Student Life Office.

ML: Yeah.

KH: I don't have anything to add, but if you have anything else you want to ask me, you know

where to find me. You definitely know where to find me! [laughs]

ML: I will be around.

KH: You can ask Monday! No, this was great though. I enjoyed the conversation! You made me think about some things that I hadn't thought about for a long time.

ML: Thanks!

[01:31:13]

***End of Interview***