

Baxter Interview

[00:02] *Ashleigh:* Today is July 11, 2018 and I'm interviewing Jim Baxter, who is staff here at Hornbake Library Special Collections. He's being interviewed by Ashleigh Coren and we are in Hornbake Library. So Jim, tell me a bit about yourself.

[00:17] *Jim:* Well let's see, I grew up here in Hyattsville, College Park area. I went to college eventually in North Carolina and graduated with an English degree in the middle of a very bad recession so I was stuck in North Carolina. My first job after college was at a Pizza Hut, so, it took me awhile. 30 years later and I'm in grad school back right where I grew up, which is weird.

[00:44] *Ashleigh:* So what brought you to University of Maryland?

[00:47] *Jim:* Well in 2006 I went back to school. I was publishing a **newspaper for the gay and lesbian community**, or if you prefer LGBT community in North Carolina. I did that for 26 years and the Internet was basically meeting the needs that made my paper somewhat redundant, so I decided to go back to graduate school and perhaps take a class in journalism because I've been doing it for 26 years and I probably should find out what it is I was doing. So I went to Syracuse, I actually got two masters there and I thought, well, several people said that I'm not bad at teaching, let's go ahead and so I applied for a PhD program and of the, only two schools accepted me. One was the University of Ohio in Athens and the other place was University of Maryland. I think the tiebreaker was that Maryland offered health insurance and Ohio did not. Plus I really didn't think as a gay man that I would be happy in Athens, Ohio. It's beautiful, it's isolated, it's, you know, if you wanna sort of to be in the mountains amongst the hippies that would be, and that would be great in some respects, but you know where do I go to meet other persons like myself.

[2:09] *Ashleigh:* Would you mind naming the title of the paper that you worked on?

[2:13] *Jim:* Um, it was called **The Front Page**, it was named after, there's a famous play which was made into a film, which is about newspaper reporters in the 1920s you know, with the, with the grey fedoras, and with the press cards, and the headband and always talking into candlestick telephones, so I thought that was an appropriate enough name, and bland enough too. And as I said I did that for 26 years and I was very honored that the libraries there between Duke and the University with Carolina Chapel Hill they microfilmed the entire run of the paper which is both a blessing and a curse because if I had known they were gonna do that I would've been more careful about the typos. I cringe thinking about some of things that have been preserved for posterity and they also have, Duke University has my papers from that period as well. So one way or another, libraries have always been a big part of my life.

[3:16] *Ashleigh:* I'm gonna switch gears a little bit, would you mind defining community?

[3:24] *Jim*: [sighs] Something we're short of these days. To me community is something, my ideal of it would be something out of an old Frank Capra movie where people somehow managed to get along, despite their differences and had certain common values and we seem to be losing that, at least in sort of the public sphere. But certainly a group of people on campus, a group of people who work together become a kind of community for as long as they're there. And, you know, it depends, does a community only exist when there is a specific need to be addressed or does it exist on sort of a day-to-day basis? I think it's constantly shifting at least now, these days

[4:24] *Ashleigh*: What was your first contact with you in the LGBTQ community and what was the nature that contact and what changes have you witnessed or participated in with respect to this community at the University of Maryland?

[4:38] *Jim*: Well I have to go back in time for this, I graduated from Northwestern high school just down the street from here and my grades were not good enough, my SATs were not good enough to get me into the University of Maryland at the time. And even though, I think I might've been lost here, it was a very big school, even then, although its twice, three times four times bigger now. But at any rate I wouldn't have been accepted but they did accept me at American University. I had come out of the closet though in the late 60s, to myself at least and there was nothing at American University.

[5:18] *Jim*: No, no LGBT presence of any kind whatsoever but, and you know this is, this is an earlier, um, organizations are just beginning to form in Washington DC. **the gay activists alliance, Lambda Rising bookstore**, which was the largest gay bookstore in the country for until it closed some years ago. It was this little tiny space much different from where it wound up on Connecticut Avenue and so I was at a loss. You know I knew there was night life but I was 18 years old and I feel rather not ready for it.

[5:58] *Jim*: So I did hear and I can't remember quite how, that there was **a coffeehouse**, and then we only said lesbian and gay, we haven't quite gotten quite, all the alphabet in there. Somewhere in Stamp, I can't remember where, probably on the second floor. But that was my first experience with community. And what I remember of it is that I found the location, I stood at the door for a minute, and then I shot across the room as fast as I could to the table where the coffee was, and then hoped somebody would talk to me before I had to actually open up and talk to them I was so, I'm very shy with strangers anyway. And somebody did, and some other people did, so that was you know my first experience with a social group was here on the campus even though I wasn't a student.

[6:50] *Jim*: There was also **at that time some controversy in the, in the Diamondback about, let's say, gay sex in inappropriate places on campus, in McKeldin**. And it was just such a kerfluffle about it that I wrote a letter to the editor of the Diamondback and I said I was a senior because they don't take letters from people aren't students but they also don't check people who write letters and say you're a senior, so **somewhere in in 1971 or 72** there's a letter for me on that particular issue, even though I wasn't a student here.

[7:27] *Jim:* But the nice thing about that group was that it was a very friendly space and through the people I met there, who were not all University students themselves, I had someone to investigate nightlife and other activities. I went to a **dance at the gay activist alliance** used to have a dance every so often partly as a fundraiser but also as a community thing. So I saw **Franklin Kameny** who was a prominent founder of gay activism. I saw him do the polka one night which was interesting because I thought it was terribly old even then. So that's my first experience with community out here on the campus but after my first year at American University, which I did not enjoy, I transferred to North Carolina so that's a whole 'nother chapter, down south.

[8:28] *Ashleigh:* So has being an LGBTQ employee on a college campus been different than what you expected, if at all?

[8:39] *Jim:* The lack of, I mean what did I expect, it um, you know I came as a graduate student so I had graduate assistantships. It's such, at least it where I've been, it's such a non-issue. but it's also like it I know it's hard to sort of talk about it. I know several people, I was in the journalism program, and I know you know half dozen people that building who are either gay or lesbian and we're friendly and it's hello and how are you and all that but we've never had a meal together and we've never bonded in any particular way. and I've been to the **student center** but I feel like such an old relic when I go. I did apply for a job there at some point but you know **Luke Jensen** who directs it is a 60-year-old man, a 60-year-old white guy, I'm a 60-year-old white guy, I figured they don't need 2, and they didn't. So that was not unexpected that I didn't get the job but everyone is much younger and in the issues that they're discussing are much different than my issues at this stage in my life so I haven't really connected in a strong way.

[10:12] *Ashleigh:* In regards to civil rights, particularly for the LGBTQ community here on campus, are there any challenges you still see that we have to face?

[10:26] *Jim:* Less so on campus than in the world at large, we are, I don't want to say a protected class exactly and some of my ideas about, sort of, my thoughts about a certain universal set of beliefs amongst everyone on the college campus was challenged when I worked as a teaching assistant for the **College Park Scholars**. These are freshman coming in and, no we don't all have the same beliefs. And so that sort of made me stop and think again. So you know there are, there are issues although it seems that everything that comes up gets dealt with fairly swiftly. I wish I could say something really pithy on the subject but I'm stumped. It's a very, for all its size it's a very welcoming campus. Now I don't live in the dorms, I can't say for sure you know what that's like. For me, it's been, I've been here 10 years, it's been isolating for me but that's probably my own fault. just not looking in any place.

[11:45] *Ashleigh:* Now you work in Special Collections, would you mind talking a bit about either your interactions with Collections that may relate to the LGBTQ community, or LGBTQ history?

[11:55] *Jim*: Well I particularly work at that mass media and culture collection broadcasting archive, and I have donated a couple hundred books myself, but one of the things I noticed lacking were any of the books on LGBT in media, you know, various representations. So I went out and got those books first and donated them. Now they're just books, we don't have anybody's collection that I'm aware of, although some unmarried people, you think hmm, but you don't know.

[12:33] *Jim*: Um, in fact a little digression, but a professor of history, journalism history, of whom I'm very fond of, one of the first conversations we had when I did an independent study with her. Her expertise is Eleanor Roosevelt and she knew I was gay so the first thing she wanted to know was did I think Eleanor was a lesbian and I said well we're never really going to know. The letters are certainly passionate but, you know, to me it's a question of what, what do we learn looking at her from that perspective as opposed to other perspectives. I said that in that regard I have no conclusive answer. However if I'm in a gay pride march in someone wants me to carry a sign with Eleanor's picture on it, for that day I know she's a lesbian and cause we have a political point to make. But in terms of history, we'll never know.

[13:30] *Jim*: In terms of the people who work here everyone's always you know very friendly, and liberal. If anyone is terribly conservative, I don't know if they feel pressure to not share. When I was teaching I did make, for a couple semesters I made a statement saying 'This my political point of view, this is not a political class but just so you know, so you're not surprised and if you know if you come from a different perspective please please please speak up, should we somehow wind up by political issues.' And in one of my student reviews was, I just assume it's a guy, about how he felt oppressed the entire semester by my politics and it's like, you could've talked to me. So it's just, that was just weird.

[14:22] *Jim*: In terms of our collections, if I put my mind to it, when I came here I um, I reached out and got us two small collections that, just things that occurred to me and you know you just pick up the phone and call somebody or or email him and say do you have a home for your papers yet. But in terms of LGBT people in the media I don't know. There is a thing called a **National Gay and Lesbian Journalist Association** but those of us who were in the gay press were always sort of second class citizens. So a guy who was the weatherman on television in Dubuque had more status than you as a publisher of a gay newspaper for 50 years. It was a little weird. So I'm sure there were people there who are getting into their 50s and 60s who probably have papers that would worthy but I don't, I didn't interact with enough of them to sort of talk to them. and often people donate their papers to their alma mater.

[15:35] *Ashleigh*: So I have additional questions if that's OK.

[15:39] *Jim*: Sure, what question?

[15:40] *Ashleigh*: Additional questions.

[15:41] *Jim*: Please, shoot away. Have we run through everything so far?

[15:44] *Ashleigh*: Almost there. So you mentioned uh, a march earlier, has activism been a part of your story?

[15:55] *Jim*: Oh, sure, I've been to **every march on Washington for gay and lesbian equality** that they've ever had from '78 forward. I'm sorry, '79 forward. And I think I've been, if I go to, to borrow a joke from **Ellen Degeneres**, if I go to one more, I get a toaster oven. So um, '78, and now I'm going to forget the specific years, um, those have been my main activism, I went to the um **women's march after the inauguration this year, whatever year that was, 2016**, so yes, marching on Washington. Sometimes I wonder, because it happens on the weekend, and you can't actually sort of lobby congress, and frankly, with at least some of the marches, the congressmen hightail out of town anyway. And I also wonder, the cynical part of my personality wonders, if there's a march on Washington just about every weekend for something and all of them worthy probably, but, if it's lost its effectiveness since the 60s. I don't know I mean when **the march on Washington in the 1980s where the AIDS quilt** was presented and it stretched the entire length of, I'm gonna choke up, of the mall and there were still quilt pieces they couldn't unroll, that was powerful, that was really powerful. and to their credit, **Bill Clinton and Hillary** came. They didn't announce it so there only amateur photographers there but they did come, and there were some snapshots taken. That meant a lot.

[17:42] *Ashleigh*: Has that been a part of experience here at UMD at all, your activism or participating in the different initiatives on campus?

[17:50] *Jim*: Shame on me but no, mostly I was, during most of my time here I was struggling. I'm not the brightest bulb in the, in the, in the lamp, so media studies at the graduate, the PhD level it was just, I was constantly trying to catch up and then when it came to my dissertation I spent six years on it and finally decided I need to stop and get a job. So that was my main focus was just sort of trying to live up to the standards of the PhD program and the results were mixed.

[18:30] *Ashleigh*: So what would you want incoming staff and faculty to understand about being an LGBTQ staff member on campus right now?

[18:41] *Jim*: If there were, and there may be and I could be ignorant of it, but some sort of gathering for LGBTQ staff, which would be of a more diverse range of ages than say the center, I wouldn't mind that. I wouldn't mind sort of meeting people and having a chance to talk more than, I mean, of the people that we work with here in the library I have a rough idea of who is in who isn't and all that but, we don't interact very often. We don't get to bitch about whatever it is that bugs in life anymore or whatever pleases I suppose.

[19:22] *Ashleigh*: Do you have any last comments about your experience at the University of Maryland, anything significant that didn't touch upon in the interview?

[19:33] *Jim*: Again I have not worked here as a full-time staff member over a long period of time. I've been here 10 years but not as a full time staff member and there may have been things that others have experienced that just went clear out of my head. one of the things on campus there's a diversity program, a diversity class in the journalism program. Principally about matters of race in the press but once a semester **they have 'gay day'**, and I'm the gay. And I have you know I have second thoughts cause I mean, you know, it's a diversity class and here's some 60-year-old white guy and I really –

[20:17] *Jim*: - **there is a woman in the building** and she's very busy but she's African-American, she's a woman and she's a veteran and a lesbian so I feel like she has a lot of stories to tell and every year we try to get her in, every year, I don't think she's avoiding it I think she's just too busy to spend 90 minutes talking to the students so I guess for the time being I'm the gay. We probably could try harder get other people in there.

[20:46] *Ashleigh*: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me this morning and thank you for your contributions University Archives.

[20:52] *Jim*: Well thank you for asking me.