

## Battle Creek Queer Oral History Project: Jim Eldridge Interview

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**Narrator:** Jim Eldridge (**JE**)

**Interviewer:** Larry Dillon (**LD**)

00:01

**Larry Dillon:** Hello, this is Larry Dillon. We are doing an interview of Jim Eldridge in regards to the Oral History Project of Battle Creek Pride. This is March 22, 2022. We are at the Battle Creek Pride Resource Center. And we are ready to begin. Jim, please tell us a little bit about your background.

00:34

**Jim Eldridge:** I was born in Battle Creek in 1957. I grew up in the Urbandale area of Battle Creek and lived there with my three older brothers until 1970. I lived a very typical life for a white family in that area of town. It was a blue-collar neighborhood. I had the kind of paradigm where, in that day and age, it was not accepted that people of the same sex could have a romantic relationship. So, it wasn't even something that I saw as a possibility at that early time in my life. Then we eventually moved out to the Delton area. I spent junior high and high school out there with my folks and stayed there till 1979 (I graduated in 1975). So, in '79—actually 1980—we ended up moving back to the Urbandale area, where I continued to live with my folks until I bought my home in 1990 and have lived there ever since.

02:18

**LD:** Where did you go to school?

**JE:** I started out at Battle Creek Public Schools and went there from kindergarten through sixth grade, at the Urbandale Elementary School. Then, we moved to a home that was originally a cottage of my grandparents, my paternal grandparents. That was during the Civil Rights era. There had been riots in the late 60s, and so forth, to the point—not only in our area, but other areas around the country—that my folks had had this in their mind to move out there anyway. That kind of just prompted them to move to an area that was less urban. So, we ended up living there for about 11 years and I went to school at Delton Kellogg Schools through junior high and high school.

03:09

**LD:** What kind of relationship did you have your fellow students? Were you close to anybody particularly? Or were you more a loner? Whatever you care to say.

03:22

**JE:** When I was in elementary school, I won't say I was outgoing, but I was known for talking in class. (laughs)—on occasion anyway—to the point I can remember one time, in second grade, the teacher deciding to move me from one location to another, because I was talking too much to this kid that I was

next to. When they moved me over to this other spot, the kids that saw me coming said, “All right, Jim!” I’m sure the teacher’s face just dropped, because she thought, Well, I didn’t solve anything there; it looks like I just went from the frying pan to the fire.”

I had a neighborhood kid that I hung with most of the time in the Urbandale area, on the street where I lived. He lived kind of kitty corner from me, where we played sports and two square and a little bit of football and whatever we could do to entertain ourselves; watched television. We played “kick the can,” and those kinds of games, into the evening in the summertime. I didn’t do a whole lot with other kids outside of my neighborhood. Although when I was in school, I was plenty comfortable with everybody. It was a little bit of a culture shock, when I moved out to Delton with my folks, because it was just a different environment. I didn’t have any children of color that I was going to school with, which was a big change. And I can’t say that it made me feel any more comfortable to be around just people of my own race. It was actually kind of just very different; maybe a little a more cliquish environment to be out there than it was going to school at Battle Creek Public Schools for the seven years I was there.

But at any rate, I had like, four or five kids, males, that I hung with in school. I didn’t date anybody. I was kind of like my dad, in regard to the fact that I wasn’t very good at being ingenuine. If I didn’t feel something, I didn’t feel very comfortable putting myself in a situation where I had to put on a show or pretend that I cared for somebody when I didn’t. So, there wasn’t a lot of dating, but lots of time with my friends. On our off time, on weekends or whatever, we would go to the movies and different things like that. I had a lot of fun in school. Of course, I found my best friend was also the person I found to get in trouble with talking, there, too. So, that continued to be a little bit of a problem. I could play the game a little bit better and not get caught; better than he could, but, um . . . I can remember us reading out loud in class and then I was kind of watching—somebody else was reading; it wasn’t my friend or I, but somebody else was reading—so I was careful to watch as we were reading along, even though my friend was talking to me intermittently, and the teacher got to a place where he asked someone else to take over, and he asked my friend to take over. I quickly tried to show him where we were at, and the teacher caught on right away that he wasn’t paying attention, and he got in trouble for that. So that was kind of the fun/ (I don’t know) conflict things we went through. It wasn’t anything terrible. I was involved a lot with choir—vocal music—through high school in particular. And I was involved with what might be best compared with the A Capella choir, here, in Battle Creek or something where it was a high school choir and we did concerts—in-school concerts—and things like that. So, that was kind of where I was at.

07:43

**LD:** So how long did it take before you decide to come out?

07:50

**JE:** Well, that’s kind of interesting. I had some concerns about it. Feeling like speaking of the paradigm that I was brought up in and then not feeling like I was quite fitting into that with the idea that straight was the norm and there wasn’t any other option or alternative. I came to a point like in fifth or sixth grade, where I started feeling like I was questioning, and my mom took me just to our regular general practitioner doctor to talk to him about it. And he assured me it wasn’t anything to be worried about. And he said sometimes kids start out feeling same sex attracted, and then they can change later on as

they grow up through their adolescence. And then it kind of got put on the back burner for the remainder of my school days until I got to the very end of high school and I don't know, I can remember. I don't remember. I hadn't graduated yet. And I was getting ready to go to sleep and my mind must have been wandering I must have been thinking about things that I'm not sure how aware I was that that my mind was just caught up in this kind of mulling things over. And I all of a sudden came to this conclusion that I must be gay. It was just like an all of a sudden thing where it was just like a curtain raised and the truth was revealed or something, but I went into this panic attack from it. My parents had already gone to bed. I got up in the middle of the night and I think I must have stayed up all night thinking it through because I was trying to get myself back into a comfortable place again and my thought process, and I couldn't do it. I eventually had to go in for counseling because I was dealing with depression and I hadn't really reached a point where I was okay with being gay. So I was beating myself up a lot. That's where a lot of the depression came from. It wasn't from anybody else persecuting me. And eventually, I got to a point where I was—I had some other my anxiety issues started affecting my ability to drive and things, I was just having a very hard time with it all. And then I got to a point where the psychiatrist counseled me through all that, and I got to a point where I was really functional again. But that was when it really came to the fore. Therefore, my high school graduation time was not the happy time that it could be for a lot of kids. It was just a difficult time because it was right in the midst of all of trying to sort things out in my mind, and I was dealing with a lot of depression through my graduation time. So that's where that came in.

11:04

**LD:** Were your peers aware of what you were going through?

11:08

**JE:** No. It was still in an era, when I didn't feel comfortable sharing that with anyone. I don't know if I had been in a different [hesitation] maybe the inner-city environment that I started out in. I don't know if that would have been better. I would have had a larger group of people with more varied backgrounds to draw from, to befriend. Possibly I would have found one amongst them, whom I could relate to, and I felt could relate more to my situation. In comparison, out in Delton it was very, very white, very straight—if anybody was gay, I don't know how they would have come out, let alone myself, in that environment. It wasn't the circumstances in the United States, at that time as it is now, to be open to gay people, to consider them as normal and to bring them into the mainstream of society, so that they would be treated like every other human being. So, it was very hard for me to get to a point where I felt like I could even talk to anybody about it. And my dad was not... he had grown up with a brother that was gay, and he didn't think much of that brother. He was my uncle. He could have gone through a lot of difficult circumstances. He ended up drinking and things like that. And that wasn't something that my dad looked favorably upon. They often said when I got older into my high school years and stuff that they didn't really dislike my uncle, so much for his being gay, but because of his drinking and different things like that. I wonder if drinking alcohol wasn't just his way of coping. At any rate, my dad wasn't somebody that I thought I could share that with very readily because I knew his history with my uncle. He was aware of my being gay. Later on, in my 20s, he was aware, because I had gone to counseling and stuff. They were both aware, my mom and my dad, about the situation and what I was struggling

with. Even so, in high school, and even after high school, I didn't have anybody outside of the psychiatrist that I could share that with.

13:47

**LD:** What happened when you graduated? Did you leave Delton right away? Or

13:51

**JE:** No, I stayed there. I stayed in Delton, and I was still living with my folks. Because of all this emotional struggle that I had—and I was the baby of the family—I was almost like an only child. The youngest of my three older brothers was six years older than me. So, I was almost by myself anyway. I didn't feel real confident being on my own and I was very complacent about that. I wasn't like some kids where they're like, "I don't want to be accountable to my parents, I don't want my parents asking me where I've gone or where I've been." I was pretty open to being with my parents. I stayed with them through our remaining time in Delton, and then when we moved back to Battle Creek. I was in Battle Creek with them from for like 10 more years until 1990, when I would have been 33, something like that. I went to a counselor to see about trying to accept myself as gay and trying to have a relationship with another person. And in the process, he said, "Well, that's fine. We'll work toward that. But let's address some shorter-term goals and maybe some things that aren't so daunting for you to work on." One of the things was for me to move out on my own, either to rent or to buy a house. I ended up buying a house in 1990.

15:38

**LD:** Where were you working at this point?

15:40

**JE:** I started working at Meijer gas station for a time, back in the early '80s. Of course I was living back in Battle Creek then, so it was easier to find work and the businesses were more prevalent than they would have been out in Delton to find a job. I was involved with my church. And the church was something else that was helping me to cope with things, although it wasn't helping me much with being gay.

I was involved with church, I was leading a youth group, I was working at Meijer, and then decided that it was time for me to start a career. I knew I was always interested in surveying and mapping and different things like that. I thought about working in the travel field—that was another love of mine—but that didn't pan out. I ended up going to City Hall and camping out by human resources. One of the guys that went to my church was one of the highest seniority people at City Hall, and he would see me sitting there. He worked in the engineering department. When it came time for the deputy assessor to look for somebody to draw maps, he went to this individual and asked him if he knew of anybody. The reason they needed maps was because that was about the time that the City and the Township of Battle Creek were merging. The township didn't have very good maps at all for property mapping. The assessor needs property maps to do his job well. The Assessor's Office ended up hiring me. That was in 1984. I worked there for a year through a temp company. By that time, the Office knew me well enough, and it knew it wanted to have somebody permanent in that position to keep the maps up. The City Assessor created the position and he ended up placing me in that position permanently in 1985. I worked in that

same job from then on. I loved working for the City and doing that job so that's what my work life looked like for my adult life.

18:28

**LD:** Did you go to college?

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**JE:** I went to college. I started in 1979 or '80—something like that—going to school. I had started part time. I guess I will back up a little bit to say that—I don't know why I blocked this out. It's not something I've blocked out entirely; I just did for purposes of this interview. I was involved with a young man, older than me, but a young man, when I worked at Robinson's Department Store. I kind of skipped over that. I worked from '75 to '79 at Robinsons Department Store and I was living out at in Delton at that time, so I was driving back and forth between Delton and Battle Creek working at Robinsons Department Store. I met this guy in the same department that I was hired into, and we ended up becoming physically involved with each other. I won't say romantically because he was aloof and could hold himself in a place where he was not emotionally available, so that was kind of a dysfunctional relationship. ... But what did you just ask me Larry? Can you remember?

19:56

**LD:** About college

19:57

**JE:** Oh college. That relationship ended in crisis. My folks found out about it . . . and it was just a big emotional mess that it ended on. I ended up leaving my work there because of it. I started school. I went to KCC for two years for a two-year degree, I should say it took me longer than two years because I started out part-time. But I did get an associate degree in business at KCC. I have that associate degree naturally.

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**LD:** About what year was that?

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**JE:** I graduated in 1982 from KCC.

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**LD:** What was it like going to the KCC? In those days? Was there much discrimination about people who were maybe LGBTQ?

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**JE:** I did not run into anybody that was out that I could tell. And I was not really aware like I am now of people's sexual orientation to even probably realize that I was around a few people there that were gay. The college had a teacher that I'm pretty sure was, but I don't remember any of the fellow students being gay around me. Like I say, I was not super aware of people and cognizant of their sexual orientation.

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**LD:** At that period of time did you go to any places like Partners Bar or anything like that? Or did you stay away from something like that?

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**JE:** I pretty much stayed away from those kinds of things. I didn't even know how to navigate into those situations. I was very much wanting to be in control of my circumstances. I thought, if I got involved with anybody again, and certainly my experience with the man at Robinsons—I think that kind of scared me off from trying to have a relationship with anybody. So, no, I didn't. I think the way I was brought up with gay people being hypersexual, or whatever, it was almost like, I couldn't imagine being just hanging with some gay people that didn't want to have sex. You know, it was just, I wasn't really shown a realistic picture of what it was to be gay. So I really didn't have anybody that I knew of. And it was really not until I went through counseling and, I don't know when it was, it was probably in the 2000s, that I decided to venture out. I got involved with a group called Friends Southwest and was going to those meetings when they would happen just so I could get used to the idea of being around other gay people and see what they really were like, rather than what my preconceived notions were. And so it wasn't until that time when I was getting counseling and everything that I started venturing out on my own and meeting people and making friends and so forth.

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**LD:** Can you tell me a little bit more about the group called Friends Southwest? Was that here in Battle Creek?

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**JE:** I think their constituency or membership came... there were people from as far east as Battle Creek, I don't think they're they went too much farther that way with people coming to it. And then certainly out of Kalamazoo. Those were the two main areas that people came from. And it was very much a social group. We did a lot of things. Usually monthly, we did things that were planned for social events, like it might be a progressive dinner, or it might be a movie or some kind of a dinner or social event where there were snacks and things, and just all kinds of different events that were planned. And we would meet, I don't know, quarterly or something like that [for planning meetings]. And there was a leader or a couple leaders that led us through planning and so forth, so that we came up with events that could be planned out for three, four months at a time. So yeah, it was very much a social group, which is what I was looking for.

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**LD:** Does that group still exist?

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**JE:** No, it's pretty much dissolved now. And in fact, the two people that were key and leading it have now passed away and nobody else stepped up to the plate. And certainly, things have changed a lot since... I was kind of probably on the end of that culture because now it seems like it's kind of changed a little bit with people being able to be out and so forth. They probably don't feel compelled to go to a group like that as much. Because they can be themselves more out in public. So

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**LD:** What are some of the organizations that you now participate in?

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**JE:** Well, I'm still involved in my church, and the same church, I started at Christ United Methodist Church to start, that was originally Urbandale Methodist Church, back in the 50s and 60s. I'm still involved there, I'm very much involved with the administration end of things. I don't mean to say that I'm doing treasury and all that kind of thing, but I am heading up the worship committee and planning worship services and involved in other things that need my assistance, and so forth. So, I'm involved with that.

Of course, I'm involved to some degree with Battle Creek Pride. Not so much holding any offices, but just involved when there's events going on. Along with my husband, Roger, we took over First Tuesday Night Out, which is a dinner out thing that you, Larry, originally were heading up and planning. So, we've been doing that.

26:36

**LD:** Years ago

26:38

**JE:** That's been a lot of fun. We've made a lot of friends and acquaintances through that, and I get a lot of gratification out of it.

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**LD:** Very popular social group

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**JE:** Just be being able to reach out to people, maybe people that hadn't thought about coming, I feel like I can get on Facebook or something and reach out to them and say, "Hey, have you ever thought about coming to this?" So we got a pretty good showing of people every month. So, I'm involved with that. Trying to think, I'm not formally involved that I can think of with any other organizations. My husband's involved with some things that I'm not but so I get pulled into those on occasion, but I'm not really officially on those things like the dog park committee for Home Run Dog Park, is one thing that I'm not involved with formally, but I do end up attending events and being involved in some of the meetings because he is. So I can't think of any other things that I'm involved with that way.

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**LD:** Is the church pretty open to people LGBTQ?

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**JE:** It is now. When I first started coming out and I continued to go to church, I didn't drop out of church. Some people might do that when they were needing to adopt this new life or accept themselves as gay, they might drop out of anything that might present resistance to them in that way and church can

oftentimes be one of those things. But I continued to go there, which was to the benefit of the church as well as to me as far as being accepting of gay people. Because they could see a real life person that was gay and it's like, we always knew this guy, and he's a good guy. And so they I was kind of like the ambassador for LGBT folk in my church. And eventually, slow by slow, I think, maybe three pastors back, maybe or something like that, and I can't even think what year that would have been, we started getting pastors that were open to gay people, and even though the denomination formally is not on its discipline and so forth, open to gay people, it's moving in that direction. And with 1-2-3 pastors, this pastor we have right now, she's very open to gay folks and her brother happens to be gay also, so that doesn't hurt either. Yeah, so we're moving in a very positive direction that way, and in fact, we're partnering with Chapel Hill United Methodist Church out off of Riverside Drive to go through what they call a Reconciling Ministry Network Orientation, where they kind of get their feet wet on what it would be to be a Reconciling Church because since the church is not officially welcoming to gay people, this idea of reconciling these folks to the church, LGBT folk, came about. So this Reconciling Ministry Network started up as a movement within the United Methodist Church. So we're working with Chapel Hill on that, to see if we can't become one of those churches that adopts that membership. Eventually, we're hoping that the church overall, the United Methodist Church, will accept people formally through the discipleship on everything through their discipline. But right now, with COVID and everything, they've even taken a couple years off of having General Conference, which would be where they would decide those kinds of things. So we're having to move, do this stop gap measure instead, while we wait for the rest of the church to catch up. So, in a nutshell, the church has become much more accepting of gay people unofficially, in hopes hopefully, someday officially.

31:17

**LD:** Even although it was there for the record, about when did you marry Roger Ballard.

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**JE:** I married him on September 19, 2015. We had been together since 2007. He moved into my home that we still live in back in November of 2007. And got married. I suppose that was the year that the Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay marriage and that's when we got married. We didn't want to go to another state to get married where it was legal, we wanted to be married when it was legal in our state. So, we just waited until that happened. Of course, we could see it was about to happen. We could kind of watch the news and see what was taking place and kind of was watching for that to occur. So we kind of knew it was something on the horizon.

32:28

**LD:** What else you'd like to share with us?

32:33

**JE:** Trying to think if there's anything I've left out. I've caught up on my relationship with the guy at the department store that I worked with.

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**LD:** What was maybe some of the scariest events you had in coming through all this process?



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**JE:** Certainly one of the earliest events that was scary for me was, like I said, when I came to the conclusion that I was gay back when I was just finishing up high school. Emotionally, that was very scary. I didn't know how I was going to get through that. I even got to the point of contemplating suicide at one point. It didn't get to the point where I actually planned anything, but certainly there were plenty of times when I thought, I don't think I can take this anymore. I think I might have to end up killing myself in order to stop the pain. But my family was always very... I was very close to my family and my folks in particular. I always had playing through my mind how horrible that would make them feel, how much of a horrible experience that would be that they would end up carrying that through the rest of their lives. I was lucid enough through all that depression to know that I didn't want to do that to them. You know, when it came down to it, that was the one thing that kept me from going any further with planning anything or anything like that. Other scary times, let me think...

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**LD:** Anything that you remember about Battle Creek in the early days and places that people went as far as gay hangouts or places you could feel comfortable in, even with Roger, other things. Restaurants you enjoyed or something or particularly places that a lot of your fellow gay people went to?

35:07

**JE:** Certainly Partners was a bar on North Avenue just outside of the city limits that people that were LGBT went to find a place where they could just relax and be themselves. I understand the Metro was another place over in Kalamazoo on the north side of that city, and I think we went there one time. But that was another hangout for LGBTQ individuals to go to. And like I said, there were groups around I think, I don't know, of other groups, but with Friends Southwest, that was another environment we created for ourselves so that we could feel comfortable in another person's home and be ourselves. So I'm sure even if there weren't groups like that for people, there were people that had built relationships with individuals where they can knew they could go to their friend's house or whatever, and be themselves, at least in that environment. So you found your allies somehow during those times.

36:28

**LD:** What would you say to young people nowadays about the struggles of coming out in the late 1990s, early 2000s, compared to today?

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**JE:** First of all, I would say that they should always be aware of the struggles and the battles that their predecessors went through in the gay community to help them to be as free to be who they are today as they are. Society is certainly much more welcoming of LGBTQ individuals than they were when I was young and even into my 40s and 50s. It was amazing how it was almost like a threshold we went over in society where first it was not accepted at all, and then all of a sudden, it was very accepted.

I'm afraid that there's a lot of individuals, younger individuals, that are in danger of losing sight of all of the dedication and struggle that people of their same background went through decades before. I would say, don't take your circumstances for granted. That and doing that, always be aware of those around you who are also LGBTQ and need support, because there's still parents out there and still families that

don't accept their children as gay. Those individuals who are fortunate enough to be accepted within their families and within their immediate, immediate society, if you want to call it that, need to be aware of those who weren't as fortunate, weren't as blessed, and need their assistance, need their companionship, need a listening ear, to vent to and to share with so that they can get through the difficult times that I remember as a younger person.

39:09

**LD:** What else would you like to share with us?

39:13

**JE:** I can't I don't know if there's anything else to share. I would just say to those who are who are struggling, who and I think in particular even more so than the gay community, the trans community is now the next one coming up that's going through a lot of struggles to be accepted by those around them because they were shut out. Their situation was so shut out like mine was when I was young that there's a lot of people that can't even imagine being open to trans people. They don't really know who they are, they don't know what it is to be a trans person, just like I thought that being gay was a certain way of being and living and thinking. It really wasn't that and I think there's a lot of society that's there right now with the trans community. And I would say to the trans community to keep fighting on, to keep finding allies. The gay community, I know our community here in Battle Creek, has been very accepting of trans folks in our Dining Out and different events that we have. And find those individuals that can give you support. Don't think that if you're super depressed like I was, and feel like it's just a dead end, there's no hope for you—there really is hope for you, just as there was for me, and you just have to take those steps to find those allies and those individuals to give you the support so you can get to a point where you can be your own person and be comfortable in your own skin.

41:10

**LD:** Well, thank you very much.

41:11

**JE:** Thank you, Larry.

41:12

**LD:** You've given me a lot of information here. And you've given the committee a lot of information. And I express our appreciation to you for your time.

41:23

**JE:** Well, thank you, Larry.

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**LD:** We will talk more about this when I turn this off.

41:29

**JE:** All right.

41:30

**LD:** Thank you very much.