

Battle Creek Queer Oral History Project: Larry Dillon Interview

File name: Larry Dillon interview v1.mp3

Audio Length: 1:02:52

Interview Date: April 30, 2022

Narrator: Larry Dillon (**LD**)

Interviewer: Kim Langridge (**KL**)

00:00

Kim Langridge: Here we go. All right. Thank you for listening. Today is April 30, 2022. It's about 10 minutes after 3 p.m. My name is Kim Langridge for the Battle Creek Oral History Project and I'm talking today to Larry Dillon. We're in Larry's office on Wheaton Avenue. Hi, Larry. How are you?

00:22

Larry Dillon: Good. How are you, Kim?

00:23

KL: Good. Let's just jump right into it.

00:24

LD: Ok.

00:26

KL: First, tell me your pronouns.

00:28

LD: I go by he or him.

00:30

KL: Ok. How do you identify?

00:32

LD: As a gay male.

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KL: Ok. Are you out to the rest of the world?

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LD: Yes, very much so.

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KL: Ok. And how old are you?

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LD: 77.

00:42

KL: 77 years old. Ok. Any brothers or sisters?

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LD: I have two brothers, Roderick and Richard, and a sister, Geraldine. All three of them have passed away.

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KL: Ok. And your wife?

00:58

LD: My wife was Mary Joanne Dillon. We married in 1976. She passed away in 2006.

01:08

KL: Ok. So you're 77 that means you were born in 1944, which means that you grew up in the decade of the 50s, early 60s, somewhere in there. What was life like in Battle Creek back then? Compared to what it is today.

01:23

LD: Battle Creek was a very thriving city. It was not a large city, but it was a very thriving city, very busy. A lot of little businesses, some factories that were not huge, except for the Kellogg Company and the Post Cereals Company. It was it was an era when everything was sort of conservative, mainly a Republican city. But the unions were starting to grab hold because of the factories.

01:55

KL: Ok. Growing up, you told me earlier that you are always closer to your mother than your father. Could you describe what home life was like for you back then growing up?

02:04

LD: Well, my parents were very loving, very supportive, were not well educated. My father worked after serving in World War II—not overseas, but in this country. He became a worker at the Post Cereals Company, worked there for over 30 years. My mother was basically a stay-at-home mother, although in later years, she did work at various places. My mother was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist. Many people in Battle Creek were Adventist in those days. She didn't always go to the Adventist Church. I became a baptized Episcopalian at St. Thomas Church.

02:48

KL: Has the church been a big influence throughout your life?

02:51

LD: Very much so. I was very active in St. Thomas. Later, the Church of Resurrection, then St. Thomas Church again. And now I'm involved in Church of the Resurrection again.

03:04

KL: Ok. You mentioned that when you were growing up, you heard nicknames that were not particularly kind. Could you talk about some of those nicknames and little things that kids said to you, and how that may have affected you back then? How you felt about them?

03:23

LD: Well, I was when I was young, I was not particularly strong. I had some illnesses. And so I was a little bit weak. Therefore, got picked on. Kids would call me sissy and stuff like that. I didn't think at all about anything, like being gay or queer. But I was not well accepted by kids as far as being strong. I had a lot of playmates in the neighborhood. But that sort of made my self esteem a little bit low. That's why I like to hang around my family more than anything else. They were always supportive of me.

04:04

KL: Yeah. And can you remember some of those nicknames that maybe they threw your way?

04:10

LD: Well, they would call me sissy, I don't know. Things like not being strong or stuff like that, you know. Weakling or what have you. But later, as I got older, I got stronger and—

04:27

KL: Ok. When did you first know or come to understand that you are gay?

04:33

LD: Probably early in junior high school when I was reaching puberty, more interested in what was going on, sexually and so forth, and became more attracted to other human beings.

04:45

KL: Yeah. What did you— What did you do with that? Did you act on it? How did you process all that?

04:51

LD: No, it was really something that made me question what it was all about. I thought... I was in middle America. My goal would be to someday get through school, get a job, get married, have a house with a white picket fence around it. The typical American Dream. In sixth grade, I had a very influential teacher, which made me think I wanted to become a teacher. I want to go to college. I was about the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. So my family members sort of looked down on me for that. They thought, "Oh, he thinks he's so important. He went to college." But I made it. And so I had that goal. But that time, I thought, well, someday I'm going to get married and have kids. Typical, middle-American Dream.

05:48

KL: Yeah. And back then, there were no GSAs (Gay Straight Alliance). Was there anybody that you thought you could talk to about the feelings that you had as a middle schooler or junior high school?

05:58

LD: Absolutely not.

05:59

KL: Nobody.

6:01

LD: It was just something that was in my mind.

06:03

KL: So, you just internalized everything? Yeah, I think that's a familiar way to go. So eventually, you did come out to somebody. Who was that first person that you really kind of came out to, and maybe had an experience with?

06:19

LD: I began to date various people, had friends, was involved in various other youth organizations. One of my friends among youth organizations invited me to double date with him. So I had my date and he had his date. We had a party at his house with a number of people. I ended up having to take my girlfriend home to Marshall. I took her home, he took his girlfriend home, and then I ended up staying at his house that night. And he said well do you want to sleep over and I said, well Ok. I was about 17, I think, at the time. And we slept in the same bed and he made some moves on me while I was sleeping. I woke up and said, "Wow, what's going on?" And it made me sort of sick.

07:15

KL: Physically ill?

07:16

LD: Physically ill because I was not used to someone doing the things to me that he did. So I went back to sleep. In the morning, I got up and said, I'm leaving. And he said, what's wrong? Well, I don't like what happened last night. That was not right. And he said, Oh, that's just natural. I said, I'm leaving. After that, my relationship with him was pretty sour for a number of years. Although we later on did talk. And that was probably one of the first experiences I had with another person. Just scared me. And that was when I was 17. Although I had some suspicions prior to that time that I was attracted to men.

07:57

KL: Yeah. So have you figured out if you thought about why that made you react in that way?

08:04

LD: I think it was the fact that finally I had connection with a man. Another male. That it scared me. Because remember, I just had a date with a girl. I was attracted to her. And then this happened. And I didn't know—Now what's going to happen? What's going to happen next? Am I definitely gay, or am I

going to go with this idea of the typical American life of getting married, having children, going to college becoming a teacher? And is this word going to get out? Is this guy going to keep his mouth shut? Am I in danger?

08:52

KL: A lot to process.

08:54

LD: It worried me for a long, long time. Yeah.

08:58

KL: Back in 2015, you gave an interview to a local newspaper. And you said that growing up as a gay man here in Battle Creek meant suppressing your feelings and hiding who you really were. And you also said that you didn't really want to be gay when you were younger, because you know, you'd have to squelch your goals. Did you live in fear in those days of being maybe outed?

09:24

LD: Oh, yes. I think many gay people live in fear of being outed. There were some that were out and about, you know. They were probably more independent. Either they were independent or they didn't care. I cared because if I was outed, I would probably have trouble with college. I would have trouble getting a job. I would have trouble living the American dream. If I did get a job, then I would have trouble keeping the job, and I did get a teaching job. I had to completely hide what I was feeling. I ended up getting married after a few years. We couldn't have children because my wife was severely diabetic. And then I was put up for a principalship. No way in those days could I be known as gay. And so it became relatively hidden until my wife passed away.

10:28

KL: Was there a school policy against, you know, an anti gay school policy where if you're gay, you can't teach?

10:37

LD: No such thing in those days. They just didn't hire anyone that was gay. There was no kind of anti-discrimination policies in those days.

10:45

KL: Not written.

10:46

LD: They could refuse to hire you because you were Black, Jew, gay, female. Anything in those days. You got to remember this is prior to the Civil Rights time. There were no protections. Except maybe if you were a white man, then you were safe. There was no kinds of protections in those days. Not even for women. Nobody, except for unless you were a white male. A straight white male.

11:21

KL: Yeah. I know. It's a hypothetical, but what if your family would have known your orientation, your preferences? How would your family have dealt with it do you think? Would they have been accepting?

11:37

LD: Well, one time my mother says out of the blue said, Larry, are you gay? And I said, "Why would you ask me that?" "Well, I just wondered if you were gay" I said no, I'm not, which was a lie.

11:55

KL: How old were you when she asked?

11:57

LD: Probably about 22 or 23. I can remember asking me that in the kitchen sitting at the table. She never brought the subject up again. I'm not even sure she used the word gay. Because gay was not a word that had been—She might have used the word homosexual. Homosexual and homo was used frequently in those days. I don't know why she brought it up unless she had some suspicion. I mean, mothers know a lot about their kidx.

12:28

KL: They do. Yeah. Did you have an urge to tell her yes?

12:34

LD: No. [laughs]

12:36

KL: Ok, fair enough.

12:37

LD: Not in those days. I didn't want to risk the possibility of being shunned from my family. Because I'd known people who had been shunned.

12:49

KL: You did know personally? Oh, ok. Could you talk about that? Was it friends of yours?

12:55

LD: People I'd heard of. People who ended up in the news had been shunned. And the news was not very gentle about it. I can't identify exactly who, when, or where. But places were rated that had homosexual activity in them. People were arrested. They lost their livelihoods. Suicides are committed. So, like that.

13:33

KL: You graduated from Western Michigan University. You became a teacher at Lakeview. Back then, you said that there were no protections in almost any line of work. How difficult was it to be a closeted man in those days? You told me that you did no other closeted people. So what lengths did you have to go to to work, to live, while you were in the closet back then?

14:12

LD: Well, I'm not sure I had friends that were gay. I ran into people, I might have had a connection with them in some way. But I didn't have close friends that were gay. It's hard to explain, you know. I didn't socialize too much with them. I didn't build lasting relationships with them until much later on. I eventually, gradually, knew people who were gay and we would talk a little bit about it. But I had to make sure that they were not people who would in any way possibly expose me. They had to be people who would be afraid to be exposed themselves.

15:00

KL: Yeah, that must have been difficult to know who you could trust. Yeah. Did you—Someone told me that that people, LGBTQ people back then almost had to talk and code. Codes for Rest Stop, you know, words like that, that they would abbreviate. Did you have to do that?

15:21

LD: There were very few places that you could meet up with gay people. One of the grubbiest places to meet up with somebody who was in the rest area and I-94 not too far from Capitol Avenue. It was a code word that people would say, why don't we meet up? Where do you want to meet? Let's go to Ruth Anne's.

15:45

KL: Ruth Anne's, Rest Area? Yeah.

15:49

LD: And so you drive out there and you meet them in the parking lot. And then from there, you might go to their house or something like that. Or you just hanging out in the rest area. The police would sometimes come driving through and shine their lights in the back to see if there's anyone back there doing anything. Or go into the bathrooms and see if there's anyone doing anything in there. So you had to be very careful. After a while the police just, meh, ignored it. But rest areas all over the country had that reputation. At night, a lot of people were arrested some of the rest areas—teachers, parents, priests, all kinds of people were arrested at rest areas. I could tell you some really harrowing stories about that.

16:34

KL: Do you want to?

16:37

LD: I'm not sure how deep you want to go into. But one of the biggest rest areas in Ann Arbor, at one time, had like a party of 150 people there. Huge.

16:47

KL: Did you know about it at the time?

16:49

LD: I did.

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KL: You were aware. Did you ever go to a rest stop?

16:52

LD: Oh, yeah.

16:54

KL: And how did you feel? What was—Was it excitement or anticipation?

17:02

LD: And extreme nervousness. I would usually just go there drive through and see if there's any familiar cars I knew. And if there wasn't, I'd leave.

17:10

KL: Yeah, yeah. You told me in an earlier interview that you knew a fellow teacher who, you were kind of, you kind of knew that he was gay and he may have known you are gay. Is that? Do I have that correct or did I just mix things up?

17:26

LD: Yeah.

17:28

KL: And did you? You never socialized? Did you talk in confidence with him or anything?

17:34

LD: Well, there's some that I did some I didn't. Just depends. One almost lost his job, but I think the school board let it slide. I can't say too much more about him because I might out somebody.

17:51

KL: Sure, I understand. That's fine. Do you think LGBTQ kids today have an easier growing up and then you did?

17:58

LD: Much so but not perfectly. All kinds of things have happened like the G—What do you call them?

18:09

KL: The GSAs?

18:10

LD: Yeah GSAs. Counselors have been taught how to deal with them, the kids. More parents are accepting because parents were raised in a different age now. They have gone to school with gay kids that out. So they deal with them. They have gay friends. Especially the mothers are more accepting.

Fathers, I think a little bit more secure. Everyone knows gay people. Parents sometimes don't want their kids to be gay, but they know of gay people. And it's still sort of, I think, for many parents a real heart-wrenching experience if they find out their child is gay or lesbian or whatever. But there's ways of dealing with it now. They would much rather have their kid be happy, than have them do something rash. Which happened 1000s of times. 1000s of times, 1000s of kids have done bad things—drugs, harmed themselves, and even killed themselves.

19:22

KL: Anybody in your life do that?

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LD: A couple. Very sadly so. I've gone to a couple funerals over that. They just couldn't make it.

19:36

KL: Well, you were happily married for 30 years.

19:40

LD: Approximately 30 years.

19:41

KL: But you told me that you did face some problems during your marriage. Specifically, there was one time when you stayed out until 4 a.m. Could you tell me that story?

19:53

LD: Well, after my marriage, I still had doubts whether I should have been married. We kept putting off my marriage, kept moving up the date, because I was concerned, is this really what I want to do to her? I was afraid at some point it was going to hurt her. But finally, she said, "Are we finally going to settle on the date?" We went together for four years. Said, "Ok, let's do it." We were talking about wedding. I don't want to go into much detail here. We were both teachers. We both had hundreds of friends. She had been in so many weddings. She wants to invite people to be at our wedding. We made up a wedding list, it was going to be hundreds of people. We were afraid that her father would have to spend through the nose to put on this wedding. We finally said, why don't we just have a small wedding? And so we had a wedding where only about 12 people attended. A lot of people were mad that they couldn't come to our wedding. But we got married, moved into our new apartment. And I can't remember how long after that, but maybe a few months later, I was really wondering if this was the right thing to do. And that was the night that I was really questioning myself and I left and went up to Lansing, went to a gay bar. I was thinking about— didn't get home till late, ate morning. And she was very concerned.

21:29

KL: And then?

21:30

LD: And then I ended up talking to my minister at the time. And he put me in connection with a counselor and I met with that counselor for years about various things, not just this. And that was very, very helpful.

21:42

KL: Did your wife—if you could, tell me what her suspicions were. How did she—Describe her concerns.

21:49

LD: I don't know if she thought it was gay or not. She was a very, very bright person. She was a German teacher. She probably had some serious suspicions, but never mentioned the word to me about. We just had a very happy marriage, traveled all over. Did a lot of things. She was very supportive of me.

22:14

KL: You'd spoke to this, the priest and the priest put you in contact with, would it be a counselor?

22:21

LD: Yeah, it was a counselor through my church. He's a very nice guy. I talked to him here a few days ago. He's still he's in his 80s. He still counsels a couple of people. He lives over in Kalamazoo.

22:33

KL: Ok, so a question I have is, you knew you were gay but you got married? Did you ever think you could just make it as a single man? Or was that even maybe more difficult than getting married, when you were of that age?

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LD: Did I ever think I could make it as a single man? After I was married, or?

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KL: Before you got married, you knew you're gay. You're pretty sure you were gay. But you got married anyway. And

23:05

LD: I think I could have made it as a single man but it would be hard to explain to coworkers. Why didn't you ever get married? Everybody gets married. It was hard enough explaining why we didn't have children. I wanted children even though I was gay, but my wife was seriously diabetic. We could not have children. So, there were a lot of pressures when you get married. Well, I'm in my 40s. You can still get married. You still have children. There was that kind of pressure. Social pressures. What's wrong with you, you're not getting married? You don't come out say, Well I want to get married but I can't marry a man.

23:52

KL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But you had dated other men, yes?

23:57

LD: Yeah. Later, after my wife passed away. I might have seen men prior to that, but—

24:07

KL: What was a date like between two guys back then? What did you do? Where did you go?

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LD: After my wife passed away?

24:15

KL: Yeah, your experience.

24:16

LD: Well, we might have gone to Partners. We might have gone out to restaurants. I always enjoyed going to restaurants. Still do. Might have seen movies. Occasionally we'd just get together the house and talk and stuff like that. Typical things that people do on dates.

24:39

KL: But that had to be postponed, maybe in your own mind, it had to be the right time. So that happened after you retired from teaching and after your wife had passed away. Did you feel kind of a sense— I know it must have been a sad time—a sense of liberation that now you could be yourself?

24:57

LD: Yeah.

24:58

KL: You felt that?

24:59

LD: Yeah.

25:02

KL: Do you think that was always the plan? That you said, you know, the wife and the picket fence in the house and all that, the American dream. But did things, did you think, "Well, my dream has to be postponed for a while?"

25:19

LD: I thought my wife would live a lot longer than when she did. I thought she would like be like me live into my 70s and that there would never be a gay life.

25:28

KL: Yeah. And you're prepared for that? [no response] Yeah.

25:33

LD: It was not what I really wanted completely. But the dream was to have a good marriage. And have a normal life, whatever normal is.

25:46

KL: Sure. And if you had chosen to be yourself and live as a gay man, you probably could not have lived anything close to the same life, I'm going to guess. What would you have sacrificed do you think?

25:58

LD: Being out? And there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of men like that. That continued right up in the old old age, married and never came out. I've had many friends like that.

26:22

KL: Did you regret the way things went? That you postponed being who you were? Or did you do you think it just had to happen?

26:30

LD: I think so many good things have happened to me in my life. So many great experiences with my wife. Some sad things have happened. Some crises have happened, just like any human life. I've had surgeries. Been in accidents. The typical life but I— I just—My life has just been, fairly good. So I am. I can't complain too much about things. The fact that she passed away was very regretful to me.

27:12

KL: Certainly.

27:14

LD: I still miss her a lot. But it did open up the door for me—I love to organize things. It gave me a chance to do things like Battle Creek Pride, and other things like that.

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KL: Yes, I want to get into that. You are considered to be, at least one of the founders, if not the founder of Battle Creek Pride as we know it today. You told me back in 2010, that you and about 20 other people met at the Ale House in Springfield, which is now Territorial Brewing. You decided to organize. Could you tell me why you felt it was a good idea for people to get organized? What that process was like, tell me about those days.

28:01

LD: Well, I had been a regular at Partners Bar in Battle Creek, the gay bar in Battle Creek. Got to know more and more people. Seemed like there was no organization of gay or lesbian people—we didn't have all those other initials in those days. And I kept trying to keep track of other people by collecting their emails, addresses, and so forth. And I want to send out notices of any activities we might have. And I finally got together about 26 people. Me and some other people got together then at the Ale House, and we had a dinner. And said, We need to organize a group for a number of things—for social purposes for the gay people in Battle Creek, for anything we can do to protect the gay people in Battle

Creek because people were being beat up. And stuff like that. And they all thought it was a good idea. About, I think about a month later, we had a second meeting. That was when they decided to call it Battle Creek Pride, although there had been an earlier pride group. And we organized that night. They named me president and Tom Kyvig Treasurer, Deana Spencer Harrison Vice President, and I can't remember exactly who was the secretary—we had a number of secretaries. And we started meeting, sometimes at Partners Bar, sometimes other places. And it went on from there.

29:44

KL: Yeah. Why did you meet there?

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LD: At the Ale House?

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KL: At the Ale House.

29:51

LD: That seemed to be a good place to meet. There was a little private area where we could meet that no one was particularly listening to what we were doing. And we met on a night when it wasn't very busy and the owners didn't even know why we were there. And it was a good place to eat. [Laughs]

30:05

KL: And was it you who called this—I'm curious as to how everybody decided, tonight we're going to go there or next week or wherever. Did you call the meeting? And how did you manage to get so many people there at the same time?

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LD: Well, I sent out emails or called them. And, I let them know probably a week or two in advance. And they showed up. Some didn't show up. But I was amazed how many did show up.

30:38

KL: Yeah. How many? How many did you expect?

30:42

LD: About the amount of people that came. There are people like George Mackay and Matt Downing. Father Brian. A number of people like that came and, of course, Deana and Deana's partner at the time, Mitzi. A lot of people came.

31:10

KL: Yeah. It all came from an idea where you saw other pride organizations in other cities and said, Why not here?

31:18

LD: Right. They had a pride organization, Kalamazoo Pride it was called in those days. They have prides in all the major cities. Lansing had something like it. Grand Rapids had something like it, and I thought why not little Battle Creek? And we did.

31:35

KL: Did you have any idea of what it would become? Did you know what you were doing? Or were you surprised?

31:41

LD: I think we knew what we wanted. And I'm happy it's developed into what it has. It's been a long time developing. It's taken various twists and turns. It's had various different headquarters. I've seen some prior organizations in some cities come and go, like Jackson. But I'm just happy how well it's doing now.

32:11

KL: So once it started to take off, it all started from all the emails that you collected, right? You said you collected hundreds of emails at Partners Bar. Could you tell me how you went about doing that?

32:22

LD: Well, I would be sitting there drinking my Diet Coke at the bar because I don't drink much alcohol. And someone would come in. If I knew them, I'd just say, "Hey, we're trying to keep in contact with all the gay people. If you'll give me your email address, maybe your phone number, maybe your mailing address, I'll keep it confidential. But you might once a month you get a message from me that we're going to have a picnic, or we're going to have a social event, or there's going to be a special thing at the bar, or what have you. But I won't share your email, I will send you a message. And your address will be in the blind category so no one can copy it." And they would I would say maybe one in 10 people would say no. And so it was just a straight email. I never, I would print mine out, what I sent out. I'm not sure if anybody else sent it out, but it would be a list of events for the month. It gradually developed into what we have now. The Battle Creek Newsletter. I eventually gave my email list to Deana or somebody, and I'm sure that it's grown from there, you know, probably sent it out to hundreds of hundreds of people now.

33:41

KL: Uh huh, yep. So you got everybody got together, you organized. You established a Board of Directors. And you said that St. Thomas (Church) offered space to you?

33:53

LD: Eventually. They had a basement room that they weren't using for anything. And Father Brian said you can use that room. I think we may have paid a couple hundred dollars a year or something like that, not much. And it was pretty much a bare room, had a long table in it that we could use for a Board Meeting. And we gradually put stuff in it, couches and so forth. We had one fairly rich member that bought some fairly expensive furniture. We were able to get a TV, bookcases, desks, so forth. I know Deana and Mitzi and some others did a lot of painting in there. And we got it pretty much cleaned up. We would open it up occasionally for various things. Tim Spooner started his group. Eventually we had

a group called Dining Out. I asked George Mackay if he would help organize that. And we talked about how to do it, and so he helped me organize that. That's continued on now. Jim and Roger run that. And we would go to various places and have the same Dining Out, which was sort of dangerous, because suddenly you had a bunch of gay people going someplace in public. We had a number of things like that we would do. We would have HIV testing there, which was something new, because HIV was just coming into play. And, of course, the Health Department would help us there. And we were probably there I don't know how many years before finally, they moved the headquarters to quarters at First Congregational Church, and now of course, they are on Calhoun Street.

35:52

KL: Yeah. How did the church members react to having a gay and lesbian headquarters right there in the same building?

36:00

LD: Well, pretty well, because the church had a large portion of gay people. St. Thomas—Father Brian was gay. So that didn't hurt at all. When he became priest, I think we lost a few families because he was gay, but not very many. Yeah, he was pretty, he would always announce in church, "Well, they're having the gay pride parade this month. And we're going to have a contingent from St. Thomas marching behind our church flag." So we would always have a group of people from St. Thomas marching in there. And eventually First Congregational would have a group marching. Trinity would have some marching in there.

36:45

KL: Were there protests in the church about that?

36:48

LD: Not particularly

36:49

KL: No, everybody was pretty accepting?

36:50

LD: Maybe someone complained to Father Brian, but we were downstairs. Once in a while we'd have a banquet or dinner, chili dinner, or something like that. We use the church parish hall for that. This was before they had that nice facility at First Congregational Church.

37:05

KL: Ok. Gotcha. Now, you told me that there was an earlier version of Battle Creek Pride that existed before your meeting in 2010. Can you tell me anything about how that got going?

37:21

LD: That was established by people like Matt Downing, Carol Recher, Greg Youngchild, the first president of the early Battle Creek Pride. They had a picnic at Matt Downing's house, but they paraded around Rose Street and Calhoun Street. Yeah, they had convertibles for a while. There were, I believe,

maybe pictures in the newspaper, which would be radical. But there are pictures. I don't have copies of those pictures, but Matt Downing does. And the group went up to Lansing Pride Parade and drove those convertibles representing Battle Creek Pride up there. Those I believe are about the only activities they had. Carol Recher is still around. Matt is still around, of course. Greg Youngchild is around but he's very secluded, I guess you'd say. He doesn't like to get out and about, but I have talked to him in the past year. I have a lot of information about him. I'm hoping people will interview him and he'll be willing to be interviewed. So that was an early group. Matt Downing, I'm sure he's being interviewed, probably can say a lot more detail about that.

38:53

KL: Were you a part of that group of Battle Creek Pride?

38:56

LD: No, that was before me coming out and everything.

38:58

KL: Ok. So you were still teaching? Or at least you were not out publicly anyway.

39:03

LD: Yeah, I was probably teaching at that time period.

39:06

KL: Ok. What was your time, like on the Battle Creek Pride Board of Directors and as president? Tell me about some of the things that you were proud of.

39:21

LD: Well, the anti-discrimination ordinance passed by the City of Battle Creek was a biggie.

39:26

KL: That was back in 2013, correct?

39:29

LD: Something like that. That was a major political thing that we did.

39:34

KL: Yeah. Could you tell me how that got going?

39:39

LD: Well, there was concerns about protection for the city employees and for the people of Battle Creek. Not too many cities had anti-discrimination rules. I think the very first one to be passed in Michigan was in East Lansing then I think they got it passed maybe in Detroit, in a few other cities. I think we were like maybe the 30th one in the state of Michigan. So we decided to go to work on it, we contacted the city manager, how do we do this? Well, we're going to have to pass an ordinance.

40:23

KL: Do you remember who the city manager was then?

40:30

LD: It may have been Ken Tsuiama, who was very supportive of gay people. But we had to work through the city attorney who wrote up all the ordinances and stuff like that, the rough drafts. And they got one written up. It had to be presented to the City Commission. As soon as it was presented to the City Commission, it hit the news. Before that, we knew it was going to be very controversial. How are we going to support this? We didn't have a lot of money for a campaign. So what we came up with is we were going to get postcards and distribute them to everybody and their brother. There'd be a place for people to say, I support the new ordinance for anti-discrimination in the City of Battle Creek. And they could write that, whatever way they want to, and sign it. I think there was a place for the name, address and phone numbers and so forth, which they could put on there if they wanted to. People from the City of Battle Creek were supposed to sign it. Although some people from outside the city signed it. But remember some of the people from outside the City of Battle Creek, worked in the City of Battle Creek and paid city taxes, so we didn't care. I think we collected nearly 1000 of those cards.

42:02

KL: How did you get them in people's hands?

42:05

LD: We took those cards wherever we went and passed them out. We went door to door with a lot of them. We would try to get him to fill them out right there when we were at their doors. But if not, there was an address on the card. And I think we might have put stamps on them if they said we'll mail them, we'd put a stamp on them and we'd get them in the mail. But most of them, we got signed right then and there. They were filled out like mad at Partners Bar. And we got, I think nearly 1000 of them. There were I think at least three meetings of the City Commission where we talked about it. At the last meeting of the City Commission, we presented those cards.

42:52

KL: And you told me some of the people that did speak some of the people that you basically put in charge of this, could you—

42:58

LD: Yeah. One of the real enthusiastic people at that time was a young guy called Charlie Fulbright. He was sort of new to Battle Creek Pride. He'd been very active partners as a DJ and so forth like that. And he said, What can I do? You know, and I said, why don't you get involved in this? He was younger, he could do a lot of running around, I couldn't do. And he got busy with the cards, organized people going door to door and did a great job of getting those cards together and talking to people. And he wanted to talk to the City Commission too. So, that momentum really helped a lot. And eventually he was the star of the show, as far as I'm concerned. I give him all the credit. And the three meetings, we tried to pack as many people there as possible, gay and non-gay people, allies and so forth. But we could only have so many people speak. We were afraid of negative speakers. I think we had this one guy who always spoke very negatively, but I can see his bearded face today. [laughs] But we would try

to keep ourselves calm. It was hard to keep our members calm. I think we even had sometimes when the police were there to make sure everything was calm. And we were allowed time to speak. And the City Commissioners would not say anything, they would just let us speak for a certain length of time. I think you could only speak for three minutes. I would speak, Deana would speak, Charlie would always speak passionately, and others would speak. I was surprised that some people that came in to speak that I did not expect, you know, friends of gay people, mothers, important people. That happened for I think about three meetings.

45:17

KL: How did that make you feel?

45:19

LD: Wonderful. And those days the newspaper used to cover the meetings. There was always a newspaper reporter there. The Enquirer doesn't do that anymore. And so we would get an article usually in the paper.

45:38

KL: what kind of press did you get back then? Favorable, or neutral or—

45:43

LD: neutral reporting of like, well, they had these people talking about the ordinance. But of course, when it passed, it was pretty important headlines.

45:52

KL: Yeah, yeah. Tell me, once it was passed, you said that there was kind of a celebration afterward?

45:59

LD: Yes. We were almost sure it was going to pass. One lady voted no, but she was very nice about it. We had already ordered food at Partners to celebrate. And we went out there afterwards. And in some of the City Commissioners came out. And we just had a good time.

46:26

KL: You say, even some of the police department came?

46:28

LD: I think we had one or two of the police officers came out.

46:30

KL: And one of the city commissioners was a recognizable name for me.

46:34

LD: Yeah, I think it was I think Jim Haadsma was on the City Commission in those days, I might be wrong. But Jim Haadsma, he was either that or he was a county commissioner. But I had asked him to serve on the Pride Board because I felt we needed a political connection. And he agreed to serve on

there. I also asked Mark Schauer to serve on the Board but he never agreed to. Mark was very favorable to us. He later became a congressman in the area. He was always supportive. The Democratic people were pretty supportive of the whole thing. But we had a few Republicans that were not that unfavorable. Locally, politics is a little bit different than nationally, and so—

47:33

KL: Yeah. What are some of the other things you remember doing? The ordinance, of course, was a big thing during your tenure, but can you think of some of the other things that that you look back on and you're pretty proud of those?

47:46

LD: Well, I think the fact that the Enquirer was so favorable, had been so favorable to us, good coverage. I think when the managing editor asked me to serve on the Citizen's Editorial Advisory Committee, I was very impressed. Not because it was me, because I asked him, "I'm happy to do that. I'm interested in what goes into writing the editorials. Why did you pick me?" He says, "For two reasons. Because you're a former educator. And you are a leader in the gay community." I thought, You know, we've arrived.

48:38

KL: Yeah, that representation and recognition must have felt—

48:43

LD: They no longer had that advisory committee. But I would sit on that advisory committee, with all different kinds of people in the community, including some very conservative people. And the one that was most conservative, we got along famously. I don't agree with a lot of his policies like abortion, gun control, and so forth. But he supported us as gay people. He said, whatever you want to do, yeah, that's fine. And we were we were very supportive of each other in that advisory committee.

49:20

KL: Who was that? Do you remember?

49:21

LD: His name is—Should I say? I think so. Joel Fulton. He owns the, I can't remember the name of the store, but the local gun shop in Battle Creek, where they teach you how to fire guns. He's also the co-owner of the Cricket Club. And he has ownership in in Swanks Flower Shop. He saved that flower shop. Very good, man. Very conservative. [laughs]

49:53

KL: So eventually you left Battle Creek Pride. And did you— were you one of the founders of Calhoun County Equality (CCE)?

50:01

LD: Me, and Matt Downing, and Mike Madden, Tim Madden, Tom Kyvig, and so forth.

50:09

KL: Why did you form CCE?

50:11

LD: Well, we felt that we still have a need to serve. And we felt that we needed to develop more things going on in Calhoun County. About the best thing we did was to help support a group over in Albion, where they established the Albion Rainbow Group. And they're still active and going and doing things. CCE sort of run its route and has recently decided not to continue. But they've had a bit of a long history. They did some good things, but I think they feel that Battle Creek Pride's doing a pretty good job and that's probably where we need to support.

50:55

KL: Yeah. So what's next for you, then? What's the next thing you're going to tackle?

51:04

LD: I think I'm just watching what Battle Creek Pride does and try to support some of its activities. I can't support all of them. I'm going to go to the next Dining Out next Tuesday. It's right in my neighborhood. I'm looking forward to this summer's Pride festival. I'm looking forward to the parade and things like that. There's something that's going to be developed in Battle Creek, which I'm not allowed to talk about. It's major. And if it comes to pass, it's going to be fantastic. I'll tell you more about it than I know more about for sure.

51:51

KL: Fair enough. Maybe we'll have to schedule another interview for that one.

51:55

LD: It's going to be a while. I'm not at liberty to tell everything. But I think people are going to be thrilled when they hear about it.

52:03

KL: Ok. Well, now you've got my interest up.

52:06

LD: I'll just leave as a cliffhanger. [laughs]

52:09

KL: Nothing wrong with that. As a gay man living in Battle Creek and in the year 2022, are you optimistic about the future for our LGBTQ population? Do you have optimism that things are going in the right direction, or maybe not so much?

52:29

LD: I think things are going pretty much in the right direction.

52:33

KL: What makes you think that?

52:37

LD: Well, the facts that Battle Creek Pride is pretty well organized. It has a good board. Good communications, good activities. I'm interested in seeing the Constellation group developed. I think we need to be doing things for young people. I'm glad that they're developing more and more activities at the Price Center, that we're putting in abeyance during the pandemic. I like them to be out and about in the community. I'd like to see more things done with the seniors. But I don't know what we can do on that right now. Might be something to consider.

53:29

KL: For someone who's thinking about coming out right now, what advice would you give them?

53:38

LD: Well, if they're young and uncomfortable about it, I think they need to talk to someone that they can really trust, which might be a school counselor. If they're really uptight, they probably need to get to some sort of a psychologist, or what have you. And probably the best way to do that is if they don't know how to get there can't trust their parents or something, they probably should talk to the school counselor, where do I go from here? There are various websites they can go to. But almost every school now offers some sort of contacts with their counseling department. That was not always the truth. So but other than that, I would encourage them not to do anything rash. Some are probably scared to death of these feelings they're having. They should realize that they should go to bed every night because the next day is always going to be a better day. I've had some some days where I've been scared to death in my life. I'd just have to say, I've got to go to bed and get up next morning and invariably the crisis I've had settles itself just by getting good night's sleep. So if a young person is scared to death of their feelings—if we can somehow publicize this—there's always a better day the next day. There's always people out there to help. If their parents can't help them, please, at least go to your school counselor to schedule an appointment and say, What do I do? I think I'm gay. I think I'm lesbian. I'm not comfortable in my own skin. I think I need to change gender, or whatever it is. And we need to publicize that as much as we can.

56:01

KL: What about for folks who came out or are thinking about coming out and maybe they're later in life. Like me and you, we came out much later in life than most people do. What advice would you give to them?

56:16

LD: Every circumstance is a little different. Mine was a little bit different, although there were some similarities with a lot of my friends. Everyone has a different situation. They probably need to work through their own situation. I don't think they should be afraid to talk to trusted friends, someone they're comfortable with. There's probably a lot of people in Battle Creek Pride that they could talk to. How they get those people, I don't know. Maybe that's something that Battle Creek Pride could offer. If they can't find it some other ways, somehow offer a listening system. Say, "Are you worried about your future? Do you—again, this is off the top of my head.

57:19

KL: Sure.

57:12

LD: Do you need help? If you do, call this number. And maybe Battle Creek Pride probably can't offer that service. But there are 800 numbers for various things. All kinds. For narcotics, for alcohol. For suicide.

57:39

KL: Hotlines.

57:41

LD: We need to publicize those things. I think there must be numbers for people who are concerned about you know, should I come out?

57:54

KL: Sure. This interview could be listened to 50 years from now. Some historian may be curious about what it was like to be LGBTQ in Battle Creek, and they may be listening to this interview. 50 years in the future. What would you say to that person? What would you like them to know about you and the life that you've led?

58:22

LD: Battle Creek has become a great place to live. If you're LGBTQI in the in the 21st century, we've come a long way, baby. This is my hometown, and I love it. It has its problems, but it's a great place to live. It's not always been a great place to live if you were gay, lesbian or whatever. A lot of other cities have are great places to live too. I've never wanted to live anywhere else, but it's just a great place to live. It's given me great opportunities.

59:26

KL: How would you like that person 50 years from now to think about you?

59:36

LD: My name is Larry Dillon. And I'm pretty proud of the fact that I've been through 77 years. And I don't plan on dying right away because there's always another day to come. And I can't wait to see what happens tomorrow.

1:00:02

KL: Wonderful. That's wonderful. Is there anything that you want to add to this interview that that we didn't touch on? Anything that maybe we missed out?

1:00:18

LD: The thing that sustains me is my religion. My hope is in God. And that's it.

1:00:25

KL: Ok. That's a good place to leave it except for one thing. Could you tell me about Mr. Bear?

1:00:34

LD: [laughs] That bear was given to me when I was born. My mother put it in my cradle the day I was born. So it's a little bit older than me. It sat on a shelf in my guestroom for a number of years. When my wife died, I came home I had no one to talk to. I was wandering around the house, I found that bear and I thought, hm. That's my bear that my mom gave me. So I just thought, Well, I don't have anyone to talk to. I'm a little bit crazy anyway. Somebody to talk to. And so that bear has become almost a constant companion. You'll see that bear with me almost anywhere I go. It's traveled all over the country. I take it to restaurants. I take it to meetings. It's met important people. It's met just regular people. So, um, I become known as the man with the bear. I had a book that I read to my students called The Teddy Bear Habit years ago. So I've sort of been interested in teddy bears. I'll take it to a restaurant and people will say, "Oh, that teddy bear is cute." And I'll say do you have a teddy bear? "Oh, yeah, I do. Or I have a stuffed rabbit. Or, I have a, I still have my blankie that I used to have when I was a kid—my security blanket or what have you." So I'll say, that's great, you know. Sometimes even people will buy my supper and say, "Oh we liked your teddy bear, so we bought your supper for you." So, that bear has some financial benefits.

1:02:21

KL: He does, doesn't he? He's had that much influence. I see he has his own little chair to sit in.

1:02:25

LD: A friend of mine was with me and she said, "Oh, your bear needs a chair so it can sit at the table." So she gave me that little wicker chair.

1:02:34

KL: Oh, wonderful.

1:02:36

LD: People think I'm crazy. And I assure them that I am. [both laugh]

1:02:42

KL: Larry, thank you so much for this interview.

1:02:44

LD: Oh, it's been a pleasure. I hope it helps.

1:02:47

KL: I know it will. Thank you again.