Frank Perez

July 18, 2023

Lafayette, LA

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Ethnographic Preface:

As part of the University’s Queering the Collection project, Special Collections of Edith Garland Dupré Library and the Guilbeau Center for Public History are collecting oral histories documenting the region’s LGBTQ+ community. Undergraduate Research Assistant Gabrielle Hoffpauir-Rosatto, with the help of Head of Special Collections Zack Stein met with Mr. Frank Perez, speaking with him for about an hour on his experiences as growing up as a gay man in Louisiana and his initiatives for preserving LGBTQ+ history in the state.

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Interviewer initials [GH]:

Interviewee initials [FP]:

Other initials [ZS]:

ZS: Today is July 18, 2023. We are here with Frank Perez doing an oral history. So, this oral history is for our LGBTQ+ Archives Project. We will record and transcribe this, and we'll give you the transcription when it's finished so that you approve. Once it's approved, it will be made available on our digital library, which contains our other collections of oral histories. This is voluntary. If there's a question you are not comfortable answering, you don't have to answer. You can also stop at any time. So, with that, do we have your consent?

FP: Yes.

ZS: All right. Great.

GH: All right. So, first question, describe what it was like growing up LGBTQ+ in Louisiana.

FP: Growing up LGBTQ+ in Louisiana was not easy. I suppose I should start by saying, I grew up in Baton Rouge, which is a fairly conservative town. And I don't think we had that many letters in the queer alphabet, at that point. We were just queer or f\*gs. And the homophobic climate was pervasive. Although in my case, it was not necessarily aggressive or hostile, but there were enough hidden clues and signals to know that this is probably not something I need to talk about. And I was very fortunate in the sense that I'm kind of butch, right? So, I'm not obvious. And I say obvious in air quotes. So, people don't usually when they meet me even today, don't assume that I'm gay until I tell them. And so that made it a little bit easier when I was in the closet. As far as growing up, my family was not overtly homophobic, but it's just not something that ever came up. You know, they were Catholic, but they were like Catholic-light; [we'd] maybe go to Mass on Christmas and Easter. So, I can't say we were super religious. Although the atmosphere of homophobia just permeated everything, so the closet was a very real space that was, I suppose some people would say uncomfortable; to me, it was more just an annoyance. Especially when I started experimenting sexually in college because that was something that we had to keep hush-hush. But it wasn't easy growing up queer, but it wasn't as bad as I guess some people had it.

GH: Let me ask this. So, when you say the homophobia was pervasive but not aggressive, describe what you mean by that?

FP: Well, what I mean by that is, unlike other kids growing up, I was not a sissy. So, I didn't have to endure a lot of bullying or taunting at school, or anything like that. It was more of an inner-psychological torture if you want to call it that. But the attacks that a lot of young people encounter were non-existent for me because nobody knew. So, it was not an overt kind of, "Oh, here comes the sissy," or, you know, I didn't get beat up in the hallways, or nobody really made fun of me. But it was still psychologically damaging to know that this was something I had to keep secret, and in high school, you're still trying to figure out who the hell you are anyway. And I knew that this was a part that I better not reveal. And that changed a little bit in college. So, when I say it was not aggressive, I was never bullied or the victim of a hate crime or an attack or anything like that. But at the same time, it was a quiet violence of life in the closet.

GH: Right, right. So, more of what you perceived around you.

FP: Yeah, the major struggle was to not reveal. I mean, and people my age and older learn pretty quick on the codes and how to keep that part of ourselves hidden. But then I mean, it was easy or pleasurable. You don't really think about it when you're that old, but in retrospect, it was probably very emotionally damaging and psychologically harmful.

GH: So, when did you know that you were LGBTQ+?

FP: Well, I didn't know … I'm not sure I know how to answer that because I had no idea what that acronym meant. But I know that when I was in junior high--maybe high school--eighth, ninth grade, somewhere around there--whenever boys started developing sexual feelings and urges, I knew that that was a part of it. I didn't know what to call it. But I knew I better not talk about it. I didn't feel the need to overtly act straight. I didn't go out and date a bunch of women to hide it. It's just something I didn't really talk about. But I would say junior high is when I kind of figured it out.

GH: Okay. And when did you officially come out?

FP: Oh, that's a good question. Well, the problem with that question is it assumes that coming out is a one-time process. And I suppose for some people it is, but in my experience--and I think [for] a lot of other queer people--you're constantly coming out. So, the first step of coming out is admitting to yourself that you're queer. And that took me a while. When I was in college--I went to LSU initially—and I didn't want to be gay. And I was much more concerned with partying than I was with studying. And I had a great time flunking out of LSU. I joined a fraternity, I drank a lot, I did drugs. And it was in that fraternity that I met my first, I guess you can call him "boyfriend," although we weren't declared an item. But we were kind of together. But that was like a hush-hush thing. We had to keep that a secret in the fraternity. We lived in the same fraternity house with 20-30 other guys, which is kind of weird now looking back. I mean, if you're gay, where else would you rather live? You wanna live with a bunch of drunk guys, right? And years later, I learned that there were a lot of other members of that fraternity that were queer, but none of us would talk about it at the time. We were all screwing each other or paired up, anyway. So, at that time, the homophobic climate was an inverse relationship: the more sexually active I became, the more guilt I felt. And I was never super religious or devout. So, to me, it's kind of a mystery, but I guess it's just the society pressure of being a "pervert" or "weird" or "wrong" or "sinful" or "damaged" or whatever. That started to bear down on me. Combined with the fact that I was like flunking out of school and partying too hard, I think it just really weighed on me. And an interesting thing happened--and this may come as a surprise, I don't talk about it a whole lot--but there was a gay bar near the LSU campus that my boyfriend and I would go to. And there would always be on the weekends, in the parking lot on the sidewalk in front of the bar, these other LSU students who were like super Christians, like right-wing fanatics, the fundamentalist assholes, and they would be out there with bull horns and signs telling us we were going to hell and everything else. I didn't like that, but a couple of them were attractive, so I wanted to meet them. And I thought it was kind of cool that these people have (can I say balls?) the balls to come out here and just scream at people through a bullhorn. That kind of appealed to me in a way--not what they were saying--but the fact that they were just doing it. Plus, the fact that they were kind of hot. I was like, "I want to go meet these guys." So, in a weird way, I developed a friendship with a couple of these people. And I made it real clear that I was not interested in converting or going to church or anything, but we started talking and hanging out and I ended up converting to make a long story short. And I think that was obviously an effort to try to not be gay. But I think it was a lot of other things as well. It was just the confusion of youth. My brain was swimming in drugs and alcohol, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, and these people offered a really easy solution: "Just come with us, give your heart to Jesus, come to this church, and he'll figure it all out for you and he'll turn you straight." “Uh, okay.” So, probably in retrospect, it saved my life as much as I regret it now, because I was partying really, really hard. And I did flunk out of LSU. And eventually, I went to work for a year trying to figure out what's going on. And then I said, "Well, I got to go finish my degree." So, I decided to transfer to this institution, which was at that time called USL [University of Southwestern Louisiana]. And I could have gone anywhere, but my grandfather was from Breaux Bridge, we had relatives here, and so on. I always liked Lafayette. And I figured this was the spot for me. So, I transferred here and got involved with... I was still doing the religious thing. So, I got involved with a Christian group on campus. And so, my time as an undergraduate at USL--and I did graduate with a degree in criminal justice--was pretty much in the closet. I made a conscious effort to suppress that. I quit drinking mostly. And I was really, honestly trying to do what I thought God wanted me to do. Looking back now, it's kind of embarrassing to admit that, but that's where I was at. That's where my head was. Today, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God. I think religion is bullshit. And I think it's probably one of the most toxic institutions on Earth, religion that is. But at the time, it felt right; it seemed right, so I did it. But I could only do that for so long. When I graduated from what was then USL, I decided to actually go to work for this campus ministry. And I actually went to North Louisiana briefly to pioneer a campus ministry there. And my heart was in the right place; I was not being a hypocrite. I felt like that's what I was supposed to be doing. But my sexuality didn't just go away. God didn't flip a switch and turn me straight. And you can only be celibate for so long. And so, you know, when that started manifesting, I told my superiors in the church what was going on, and I told them when I was here [at USL] as an undergraduate, I said, "This is what I'm struggling with." So, it's not like I ever tried to hide it. But then I kind of got into a relationship with another person in the ministry, not up there, but here. And that created a big scandal. And I didn't deny it, and they asked me, "What's going on?" I said, "Well, this is what's going on." And I said, "Well, maybe I just need to resign. This is not for me." And they suggested that I go to a conversion camp. You know about conversion therapy? They're illegal now in half the states or twenty-something states. But these were Christian-based ministries where lesbians and gay men and--I don't know what they were calling trans people back then--would go if you were confused about your sexuality. According to them, they could fix you. And so, I thought, "Well, let me see if this works." I hadn't fully come out to myself at that point. So, I went. And part of my motivation was not only to see if it would work, but also, I had fallen in love with a girl, even though I was seeing this guy, and all three of us were friends. So, it was really weird. And there was no sex involved at that point. But the emotions were there. And so I thought, "Well, if we're gonna get married like we're planning, I need to see if this works." And so, I went to, it's called Exodus International, it was the umbrella organization. And the specific "pray the gay away" bootcamp I went to was called Freedom at Last in Wichita, Kansas, and that would have been 30-something years ago, and it was a year program. I don't know if you really want me to get into the details of all that, but I think the main point is... Would you like to hear some details?

GH: Absolutely.

FP: Okay, so they operated three houses, and two of the houses were for gay guys. One house was for lesbians. And each house had a leader or a counselor, probably not licensed, but they were the counselor leader of the house. And then, we had to get jobs during the day, and then at night, they would do the ministry. So, one night would be group therapy; one night would be church; one night would be prayer meeting; one night would be individual counseling. There was a recreation night where we all went to the movies or went bowling or whatever. And it was kind of nice to have a built-in infrastructure and network of friends, but it was ultimately incredibly stupid and damaging. And it was during my time there in Wichita, Kansas, that I realized, these people are completely full of shit; this is all bullshit. And ironically, it was while I was in conversion camp that I came out to myself and said, "Okay, I figured it out. This is not working. This is who I am, and I don't give a shit." And there's just an incredible liberation and freedom in coming to that realization, where you just don't give a shit what people think of you. I like to say now that what other people think of me is none of my business. But I was far from that in college. And so, I left that program early, I called the girl that I was engaged to, I said, "Not gonna happen. Here's the deal, blah, blah, blah." And I just came home, and I didn't know what to do. I have my whole life ahead of me. So, I thought, "Let me get my master's degree." So, I enrolled back at this institution [USL], and earned a master's degree in English, and ended up pursuing a career in academia, which I did for quite a while before I got to New Orleans.

GH: So, how much do you think the environment--particularly being from Louisiana--affected people who came out at the time, including yourself?

FP: What do you mean?

GH: So, you mentioned the homophobia being not aggressive but still being psychologically damaging, how do you think that affected people coming out [at the time]?

FP: Well, I think it affected people not coming out. I think a lot of people stayed in the closet because they didn't want to deal with it. And the ones that did come out had to endure a lot of bullshit. I mean, it's much different now, but I think it's important to remember that even today, in 2023, you can still be fired for being queer. You're probably not going to get thrown in jail or evicted or put in a mental asylum today, but that was happening when I was younger. I mean, there were no gay-straight alliances in high schools. You know, the sodomy laws were overturned in 2003 with Lawrence v. Texas. But before that, the police could arrest you on sodomy, and crimes against nature was another common charge. I was lucky; I never got arrested. There was also the AIDS epidemic to deal with that scared the hell out of a lot of people. How I escaped that, I have no idea. But I think the atmosphere really did not begin to change until the early 2000s. If I had to pinpoint a year, I would say 2003. That was Lawrence v. Texas when the sodomy statutes were overturned. It's when *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was on TV; that became a big hit. The Internet was growing. So, I think things really began to shift around that time, but my coming out was prior to that, so it was a little more difficult. And I still know people in the closet. When I was doing my campus ministry up in Monroe, there was a young man that was involved, a student at the time with our group, and recently--when I say recently, maybe five years ago--reached out to me on Facebook. And I learned that he had a family--he had a wife, two kids--and he tells me he’s gay. He calls me and tells me he's gay. And he's talking to somebody online, God knows where. I said, "You need to come out. I mean, that's not fair to your wife or yourself." And he's like, "I can't; we're in church, and blah, blah, blah." So, that attitude is still stubbornly clinging, or hanging around, maybe that's the best way to put it. And I don't know what it's going to take for people to get over that, but I mean, it's still a very real thing. I mean, look at the depression rates for queer kids, and the suicide rate is astronomical, especially among trans kids. People don't realize how damaging all this bullshit legislation is; it propagates this very mistaken idea that there's something wrong with us. There's nothing wrong with us; there's something wrong with you.

GH: I do want to go into the AIDS epidemic a bit. Were you involved with any initiatives at the time or …?

FP: No.

GH: … no?

FP: No. AIDS really became an issue when I was in high school, and I remember, obviously, a lot of AIDS jokes, a lot of f\*g jokes that kind of serve to reinforce the notion, "Keep this part of yourself to yourself." But AIDS scared the hell out of us. And I can't say it played a big role in my life. I didn't get too sexually active until I got to college. And I always tried to be careful--I wasn't always, but I never contracted any communicable diseases, which is kind of surprising to me. I was very fortunate. Now, I should say this, the AIDS issue affected me when I was in Kansas because one of our housemates was a young man named Eddie. And he died, so I can mention his name. Eddie was [HIV] positive, but the virus hadn't kicked in. He was healthy as a horse, and then all of a sudden, he got real sick; he was on... Back then, the only medicine they had was called AZT, and it was awful. I mean, that probably did more damage than good. I think most healthcare professionals will tell you, but it's the only thing they had. So, Eddie went downhill really quickly; he began to deteriorate physically. We'd reached out to his family in Michigan; they're like, "We don't have a son; do what you want with him." I mean, they didn't want him. And that broke my heart. And that was one of the things that kind of made me realize there's something wrong with this, you know. But anyway, we put him in a hospice--back then there were a lot of AIDS hospices--and it was a place where you went to die. And we would go every day; I went every day. Not everybody went every day. But I went every day. [I was] watching him slowly die, but not just him--it was everybody else. It just scared the hell out of me. And so, I was always careful. Of course later, they developed the protease inhibitors and the cocktail drugs, and it's no longer a death sentence, but it’s still an issue. I mean, Louisiana has one of the highest AIDS rates--HIV rates, I should say--in the country. I think Baton Rouge is the worst.

GH: Wow.

FP: I mean, double check me on that.

GH: So, do you think that AIDS had a huge impact on the way that straight people thought about [queer folks]?

FP: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Because when the AIDS epidemic hit in the early ‘80s, those first couple of years, like '81 to '84 or 5, there was so much ignorance about it. No one knew anything about it. All they knew was it was a "gay man's disease"--which it wasn't, we know that now. But it was perceived to be a "gay man's disease" long enough for that stigma to set in. It wasn't until Magic Johnson came out of the closet and Rock Hudson died that the straight world began to realize, "Oh, this can affect us too." But even today, it's still associated with queerness and gayness. So, yeah, that definitely stymied the movement, and by movement, I mean the queer rights movement. And historically, if you just kind of survey the movement--and everybody says that the queer rights movement started with Stonewall, it actually started long before that, but that's a whole other topic. But Stonewall, if we just use that as a touchstone, the '70s is the gay liberation movement, right? So, gay men are coming out, they're experimenting, Pride parades develop, festivals develop. And so, it was a very free, sexually liberating time where people are exploring and enjoying their sexuality. And then all of a sudden, within 10 years, the medical establishment is saying, "Don't fuck anymore." So, it's like that, you know, talk about Debbie Downer. And there was a lot of resistance to that. I mean, if you look at the history of ACT UP and Larry Kramer and the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York and all that, those gay men up there did not take it seriously. That's why it spread so badly. So, I think, to answer your question, it greatly affected the movement and people's reactions because the straight community was already against us. The more people came out in the '70s, the more the people realized, "Oh, okay. My brother's gay or my neighbor's gay or my coworker's a lesbian. Maybe they're not so bad after all”, right? That's why coming out is so important: it reduces people's fear because it puts a face on the label, and it humanizes people or the issue. But then you have preachers like Jerry Falwell and all these right-wingers saying, "This is God's judgment," that just reinforced all the negative stereotypes. So, I mean, it set the movement back a good 15-20 years. If AIDS had never happened, imagine where we would be now. So, it definitely had an impact, and not a good one.

GH: I'm not sure how old you were whenever the whole Anita Bryant and Jerry Falwell and that entire movement was going on. But I'm curious as to how you felt about it. What was your perception of what was going on?

FP: I was a little too young for Anita Bryant. I was like 9 or 10 years old. So, I didn't really know. I know a lot about Anita Bryant now because of my research as a historian, but at the time, I didn't really know. When I was young, when I was like 20--I think I was 20—it’s when Jimmy Swaggart had his big meltdown; he got caught with a prostitute in a hotel in New Orleans. And that was headline news. And then there was the Jim Baker scandal with Tammy Faye. And so, the televangelists scandals were everywhere. And I didn't like them to begin with because I didn't agree with them. But mostly I didn't like them, not because of their stance on sexuality, but because they were Republicans. I'm a staunch Democrat, always have been. I was raised that way. One of my childhood heroes was Huey P. Long, and when I was in the eighth grade, I read the T. Harry Williams biography [about Huey Long], which is 900 pages. And I've read it 30 times since then. And that informed my political leanings. And so, I have never, ever supported or voted for a Republican. And I don't think I will. But the problem with the religious people to me was not so much that they were crazy, but that they were Republican. Because to me, Jesus to me would be a socialist, right? Giving everybody healthcare and feeding them, and he's homeless. It makes no sense to me. And I still feel that way. But believe it or not, there are--as mystifying as it may seem or sound--there are a lot of gay Republicans. And I'm not one of them.

GH: Okay, back on the line of questioning, I got a little sidetracked. So, describe the cultural environment and both friendly and hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals at the time of your adolescence, early adulthood. We kind of touched on it.

FP: So, adolescence--it was just not something people talked about. I didn't know anything about it. When I started having a sexual thought life, and I had these fantasies, I was like, "Oh, that's unusual." And I didn't know if that was okay or not. But what can I do about it? I mean, it was there. So, it's not something I talked about. So, the societal attitudes were "keep it in the closet," which I did. And I was able to do that because I didn't obviously come off as gay. The older I got, it started getting a little easier. But even in college, it was still the same way.

GH: So, whenever you were at UL Lafayette, what was the culture for LGBTQ individuals [at that time]?

FP: Have no idea.

GH: You don’t know?

FP: I have no idea because I was not part of that community. I'm sure that there was a lot of... There were a lot of queer students here. I did not run in those circles. If they had a gay bar, I didn't go do it; I was just so immersed in the religious thing, trying not to be gay.

GH: I am curious, though. Being that your life in Lafayette versus your life in Baton Rouge were so staunchly different, I'm curious if you noticed a difference in the attitudes against being gay or queer in between cities, if there was a difference.

FP: Well, I got much more into the religious thing and the church thing here. So, I mean, there are plenty of religious fanatics and fundamentalist churches in Baton Rouge as well. So that doesn't change. But I never really indulged my sexuality here. That was something I did in Baton Rouge. Except for that one guy.

GH: Okay, so what inspired you to pursue LGBTQ+ history and activism?

FP: Well, you're skipping a lot there.

GH: Well then, let's back up. Go where you wanna go.

FP: So, when I got out of conversion camp, I came back here, earned a master's degree, and ended up getting a job in Texas. And if you think Lafayette is conservative, it's got nothing on Texas.

GH: So, I’ve heard.

FP: I went to graduate school to work on my PhD at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. And TCU, even though it says it's Christian, it's not really Christian. It's not a fundamentalist brand of Christianity. So, I worked on my PhD there and really started indulging myself and exploring my sexuality. You might even say "making up for lost time." And I ended up not finishing the PhD; I'm what they call ABD--all but dissertation. And it's really ABD.5, because I wrote half the dissertation, I just never finished it. But that's okay. I didn't like TCU. I just did not like it at all, and I ended up getting a job on a tenure track at a community college in Fort Worth. And that was a job I really thoroughly enjoyed. And so, when I started doing that, the graduate work just kind of fell off the backburner, which was fine to me because I hated the faculty at TCU. I didn't like the place; it just wasn't my thing. So, I was making good money. I was on tenure track, I figured, "What the hell; it's fine. I don't have a PhD, so what?" And so, I did that for a while and got involved with a young man who was also closeted; I wasn't closeted, he was very closeted. And so, that was kind of weird, but there was a very toxic attractiveness between us. And it was not a healthy relationship by any stretch. And that eventually blew up, went to pieces, and I became very emotionally distraught and distressed. I picked up my drinking and drug use. And I was just not in a good headspace mentally. And then [Hurricane] Katrina happened, which just pushed me over the edge. I mean, it was just a mental breakdown. And I thought, "I've got to get back to New Orleans," even though I had never up until that point fully lived in New Orleans. My mother had lived there, I have relatives there, and I have a lot of family around New Orleans. Because even though my grandfather grew up in Breaux Bridge, and I have family in Lafayette, Cecilia, and St. Martinville, his wife's family was from Bayou Lafourche, which is like, Larose down to Grand Isle. And we had a lot of family in New Orleans, so growing up as a kid, I spent a lot of my weekends and summers and a lot of holidays in New Orleans. So, I feel like even though I didn't grow up in New Orleans or go to high school there, I feel like I've always been connected to it. And so when I left Fort Worth, I decided, "I need some help mentally." So, I did a six-week--I think it was six, it might have been eight-weeks--outpatient deal here in Lafayette, lived in a home in Cecilia that my extended family had that no one was in, and just kind of got my head screwed on straight. And during that time, I was trying to figure out, "So do I resume my academic career? Do I go in a different direction? What do I do?" And I almost resumed the academic career, but then that would have meant, and the reason I didn’t do it was probably taking a job in Des Moines, Iowa, or someplace like that. And I just couldn't do it. I wanted to live in New Orleans; I felt drawn to New Orleans in some kind of psychic way. And so, I moved to New Orleans, got a job waiting tables at Commander's Palace, which is a very nice, famous restaurant down there. That didn't last long. I eventually got some part-time adjunct work at Xavier University. And I did that for a bit. And just various odd jobs until I could figure out what I really wanted to do. And what I wanted to do is give tours because I figured I love history, I'm giving tours, I’m teaching, but I'm also entertaining; and I don't have to grade papers, and I don't have to go to faculty meetings, and I don't have to deal with SACS, which is the accrediting thing every 10 years. So, I opened up a little business called the Crescent City Tour Booking Agency. And what we did was--we're still in business--we booked other people's tours; like if people want to go on a swamp tour, riverboat cruise, or whatever, we can make that arrangement for them and we get a little commission. But then, I got my license as a tour guide as well, and I started giving tours and I developed the Rainbow Fleur de Lis LGBT History Walking Tour, which had grown out of the first book I had written, which we can talk about in a minute. So, that's how I got to New Orleans. And one of the early jobs I had in New Orleans when I got tired of waiting tables, I took a job as a concierge at a hotel. And it was during that time that I became interested in local queer history. And I've always been interested in history, and there just wasn't anything out there: no books had been written, there was nothing. And somebody wise once said, "Whoever gets the vision gets the task." And so, I decided, "Well, let me start researching and seeing what I could do." My best friend at the time--still my best friend--is a bartender at the oldest gay bar in the United States in the French Quarter. And so, we were at the bar one afternoon and this really drunk woman came in; it was a slow afternoon, like a Monday or Tuesday. And she's bouncing around, completely obliterated out of her mind, wailing and drunk, and she goes to the bathroom and she's in there forever. And you know, we're getting worried if she's okay. And we're about to go check on her and she stumbles out, and we asked her if she was okay; somebody asked her if she was alright. And she drunkenly slurs, "I'm fine. But one of you bitches stole my husband last night," and then she staggered out of the bar. And we all laughed. And I don't know if I said it or the bartender Jeff said it, but we looked at each other and one of us said, "Somebody ought to write a book," which just dovetailed very nicely with all the research I've been doing. And so, we thought, "Let's write a book on the history of the bar." Which we did, and because nothing else had been written, we kind of had to contextualize that in the context of larger New Orleans queer history. And we did a mediocre job at best looking back. It's not a great book. There's some great writing; there's a lot of great information. I'm kind of embarrassed by it now, which is why my most recent project--and I'm jumping ahead--my most recent project is to do an updated version of that first book that came out; I think it was published in 2012. But I've had a very fruitful 10 years. I've written and published several books since then. But that's how--to answer your question--that's how I got interested in queer history.

GH: So, let's talk about the activism side of it.

FP: Sure.

GH: So, what brought you to wanting to be more active in the communities; is it just your love for New Orleans? Or is there more to that?

FP: I never know how to answer that question. What I can tell you is this: when the first book called *In Exile* came out, the owner and publisher of the queer magazine in New Orleans, which is called *Ambush*, which had at one point a footprint across the Gulf South--I don't know if you have any here, *Ambush* magazine--he asked me to write, if I'd be interested in writing a history column. And I thought, "Sure, I would love to do that." And that was in 2012. I'm still writing it, 11 years later. And so, I got to know the owners of that magazine. And so, at the end of 2012--I want to say it was around Thanksgiving maybe, maybe Halloween--they said, "Next year is the 40th anniversary of the Upstairs Lounge arson." And for those who may not be familiar, the Upstairs Lounge was a gay bar in the French Quarter in the early '70s that an arsonist set fire to and killed 32 people. Very tragic, very seminal moment in New Orleans queer history. In any event, Rip, the owner of this magazine, says, "Marsha and I would like to celebrate, honor, commemorate, do something for the 40th anniversary, but we're really busy. Can you head this up for us? We're going to underwrite it; we'll pay for everything. We just need somebody to coordinate it." And I said, "I would be more than happy to do that." And so, I organized the 40th commemoration of the Upstairs Lounge on behalf of Rip and Marsha Naquin-Delain, who are both gone now. And it was a speaker event, followed by a jazz funeral, and a little ceremony at the site of the fire. And so, it wasn't long after that that one of the people in attendance and who I had interviewed for my first book, *In Exile*, is a man named Stewart Butler. And Stewart Butler had been an activist for a very long time. And he knew that I was interested in history. So, in 2012, he called me and maybe a dozen other people who he knew were interested in queer history together. And we got to his place, and he shows us all these bankers boxes--had to be 30 bankers boxes of just papers. And we're like, "Stewart, what is all that?" And he's like, "These are all the minutes from board meetings and agendas and flyers for drag shows, and all the organizations I've been a part of: membership rosters, everything an archivist wants." I mean, it was like, jackpot. And he's like, "I'm 80 years old, and I don't know what's gonna happen to this shit when I die. And you got to help me figure out what to do." And it really struck us as a group because we're like, "He's probably not the only one." And we thought about it, and we started meeting once a month at Stewart's house just to brainstorm on what we could do. And most of us were laypeople; we had one museum curator, we may have had one archivist or two. But for the most part, it was about 9-12 people every meeting; sometimes it would grow to 15, sometimes it would shrink to six or seven. But it was a core group of us that were interested in preserving queer history. And we decided to form what is now called the LGBT+ Archives Project of Louisiana, which is a nonprofit statewide collective really, where we don't operate our own repository, we don't run a museum; we basically reach out to the community and say, "If you're interested in preserving your papers or whatever it is you have--your Carnival costume or business records or organizational records--let us help you get that somewhere." And so we're kind of a middleperson between the archivist and the donor. And we spent that year when we were brainstorming going to every institution in New Orleans. And New Orleans is a city in love with its history, so it's got a lot of places; there's the university archives at UNO [University of New Orleans], at Tulane, at Loyola, and so forth. There's also the Historic New Orleans Foundation, which is private; there's the public library; there's state museums; or all these other places that are collecting stuff. We went to every single one of them and said, "Do you have queer stuff? And do you want more? Or do you want any?" And to our surprise, they were all very, very much interested in acquiring LGBT material. So that's kind of how we got started. We didn't mean to at the beginning, but now that I look back, we're also an incredible resource for researchers, whether they be documentary filmmakers, or grad students, or authors or whoever. They contact us all the time, "I'm interested in ABC." And we're able to say, "Here's what's available; here's where it is you need to go to Lafayette, third floor, talk to [Archivist] Zack Stein, whatever it may be." So that's how the Archives Project got started. But Stewart later told me before he died that originally, about a year before we started meeting, that he and two other men--Mark Gonzales, who was an attorney who had done a lot of AIDS work and activism, he was in ACT UP in New Orleans, and then also another gentleman by the name of Otis Fennell who owned a queer bookstore on Frenchmen Street near the French Quarter. Those three men had gotten together, and they wanted to do oral histories. And they called it the Legacy Project. And they only did one oral history with Stewart. And they realized they had no idea what the hell they were doing because they were not trained, they didn't have the proper equipment, and they just realized that "This is too overwhelming for us." But out of that desire to preserve oral histories is where the Archives Project came from. So what does that got to do with me being an activist? I don't know. But maybe because I had written a couple of books and because my name was in the *Ambush* magazine twice a month, people started calling on me to speak at events and to do this and do that. I never set out to become an activist. I've never done it--I don't mind. But it's not what… I never intended to be a queer historian. So, I guess you could make the argument that preserving history and doing memory work and archival work is a form of activism. So, there you go, I don't know.

GH: I mean, I think that's a pretty linear answer. I think that's pretty good.

FP: Okay. I try to be linear.

GH: So, we talked about how the LGBT+ Archives Project was formed. So, before I jump into the Rainbow Fleur de Lis Walking Tour, I want to take a quick detour into your position on legislation going on right now. Aren't we having a veto session right now for the LGBT bills?

FP: Right. The legislature is currently in session. They have to do something by Saturday. So, the Governor vetoed all the anti-trans bills, but they're going to override him, and they have the votes, so they're probably going to override him. And I think it's horrible. I mean, it's stupid because they don't need to do that. The religious people are gonna vote for them no matter what. They could not take any action, let the veto stand and still say, "We voted against this." So, it's just hateful. But our legislators have never been known for their wisdom.

GH: That's a good answer. Let's talk about the Rainbow Fleur de Lis Walking Tour, let's talk about how you came up with it. Describe it and how you developed it.

FP: Sure. So, before I got my tour guide license, I had started this tour booking agency. And I got real familiar--and I had been familiar because as a concierge, you sell a lot of tours. I had been familiar with all the tour offerings in New Orleans, and there are a lot, but there was really nothing queer. There was not a gay tour. There had been one years earlier, a man by the name of Roberts Batson had started one in the '90s or 2000s. But he was getting very advanced in age, and he kind of quit doing it. So, I thought, "I'm doing all this research for the articles in *Ambush*; I would love to be able to share this on a tour." And the more I learned, the more I was astounded not only at how rich the New Orleans queer history was, but all of the unattributed contributions queer people had made to the city: culturally, architecturally, historically, artistically. And I thought, we got to recover this; we got to claim this. And so, maybe that's a form of activism as well, I don't know. So, I put together the tour--I wrote it and put together a skeleton idea of what it would be. I didn't have my tour guide license, so I had to hire someone to give it. And then when I got my license, I started doing it myself, although, occasionally, I still hire other people to give the tour. But it's a different tour every time. Just when I was driving over here today from New Orleans, I got a call from a group of young trans women who were interested in the tour but wanted to learn about it. And they were trying to figure out: was it for them? And I assured them, I said, "You know, I offer it by appointment only, so it's going to be a private tour. And I try to customize it to whatever the interests of the guest is, right?" And I said, "A tour for five young trans women is going to be a very different tour than it would be for five cisgender old white gay man." So, I try to customize it to meet the needs and interests of whoever's taking it. And there's a lot to work with, a lot more than people realize. There's bar history, there's activist history, there's political history, there's the French Quarter Renaissance of the '20s. You wouldn't have a French Quarter today if it weren't for gay men 100 years ago. So, there's a lot--there's drag history, there's a lot to talk about--Gay Carnival, Southern Decadence, on and on and on, the [Upstairs Lounge] Fire. So, you know, there's only so much you can cover in a couple of hours. So, I try to fit it to whatever they want. It's easy if it's like a school group or a class, which I get occasionally, the teacher just tells me what to say. So that's easy.

GH: We haven't really talked about this. Do you see the different difference in the way LGBTQ+ folks live now versus when you came out?

FP: Yes.

GH: Let's talk about it.

FP: That's a quick answer. Well, it's much more open and out now. And so, the main difference, I would say, has to do with bar culture. Because when I was young—this is before the Internet--if you wanted to meet other queer people, you had to go to a gay bar. If you're lesbian, you went to a lesbian bar. Because there was no Grindr, there was no social apps, no media, no Internet, nothing. There were parks that were very dangerous. But maybe you want to meet someone without having sex. A park's not going to help you there. So, people used to go to bars to meet other like-minded people. And today, that's not necessary at all. It's okay to be gay, and a lot of people are out. And so, not only is it easier to be gay now, but the public spaces of it have changed as well. So, for example, there are no lesbian bars left in New Orleans. At one point, there were probably a dozen or more; none left. And that's not unique to New Orleans--that's happening everywhere. The oldest gay bar, the subject of my first book, Lafitte in Exile, Café Lafitte in Exile, you would never even know that's a gay bar half the time you go into it now. Because it's mostly straight people. That's kind of a result of the political advances we've made. And every now and then, you hear old timers, like gay men older than me, complaining, "Why are all these straight people in our bar?" Well, be careful what you ask for. So, the bar scene has definitely changed. I think it's a lot easier now to get laid, certainly less dangerous. And a lot of the answer to your question depends on how you're defining "being gay." I mean, if you go to a gay bookstore, are you just shopping gay or are you being gay? When I was young, that would have been an expression of being gay. You know, you're at a gay space. Now, you can just order a book on Amazon.

GH: Before I get to the next question, I want to ask Zack's question he just wrote down. It's very interesting. What parts of queer history have yet to be written or learned. Or recorded?

FP: Most of it. Much of queer history remains in the closet. Lesbian history has yet to be written, of New Orleans anyway or Louisiana. That book needs to be written; that probably should be several books. And I'd be happy to talk to any graduate student who wants to write a dissertation about this, look me up if I'm alive, and I can give you a list of names. Drag history, there have been a few dissertations on drag history. But not really history, it's more like aspects of drag. But trans history needs to be written. Bar history needs to be written. Rural queer life needs to be covered. I mean, so much of our history remains in the closet. There's been a lot done in the last 10 years, mostly on Gay Carnival, Southern Decadence, the Fire. Those are three important topics that a lot has been done on. But those pale in comparison to the number of topics that are still out there that I mentioned. So, there's a lot of work left to be done. The AIDS crisis could merit a whole series of books. How did Louisiana handle that? How did Lafayette handle it? Who are those activists? And [there are] a lot of stories left to be told.

GH: What is your hope for the future of the queer community in Louisiana?

FP: My hope for the future of the queer community in Louisiana. That's not something I give a lot of thought to. But since you asked I would say that we get to a point where we don't have to deal with political bullshit. I would like to see our society evolve, advance, grow to the point where the anti-queer sentiment in Louisiana is not as widespread as it is, and whatever of it remains is not exploited for political purposes. This legislation that's going through now, it's very harmful. This is going to literally kill people. And so, my hope is that we get to a point where the state is not so politically conservative. Maybe you can call that a dream, I don’t know. I guess the clichéd response to your question would be that we can achieve unity. But I'm a realist; we're never going to achieve unity. The queer community, LGBTQIA-add-50-letters is as diverse as the straight world, right? We're not a homogenous group. And I guess I could say that, in the meantime, until society evolves, we within the queer community--and I use that as an umbrella term--don't need to be fighting amongst ourselves. We have enough enemies on the outside. So, I guess my hope is that we can get along and fight the people banging at our gates.

GH: Is there anything else we haven't touched on that you'd like to share? Parts of the story you feel we left out?

FP: No, I think we covered quite a lot.

GH: Okay. All right, then that's all I have.