Ted Richard

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Church Point, LA

Interviewed by: Zack Stein

Transcriber: Gabrielle Hoffpauir-Rosatto

Editor: Zack Stein

Ethnographic Preface:

As part of an American Rescue Plan Humanities Grant from the American Library Association and National Endowment for the Humanities, Special Collections of Edith Garland Dupré Library and the Guilbeau Center for Public History are collecting oral histories documenting the region’s LGBTQ+ community. Head of Special Collections Zack Stein met with Ted Richard, speaking with him for about an hour on his experiences as a gay man growing up in southwest Louisiana, living with HIV, and becoming an advocate and organizer for AIDS education and LGBTQ+ pride in Lafayette, LA.

 TRANSCRIPTION

Interviewer initials: [ZS]

Interviewee initials: [TR]

ZS: Today is October 4, 2022. This is Zack Stein, Head of Special Collections at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette speaking with Ted Richard. Thank you very much. My first question for you is, could you please describe what it was like growing up LGBTQ+ in southwest Louisiana?

TR: Sure. I guess to start with, I was born back in November of 1962. So, I was in high school between the years of ‘76 to 1980. I really didn't come out until my senior year in high school. So, the way I grew up in the LGBTQ+ community then is totally different than the way it is now. Back then, I was still in the closet for most of my high school years. The closest I came to knowing a gay person was a good friend of mine got killed on his 16th birthday in a motorcycle accident. And I found out later that the person he was with on the motorcycle was his boyfriend. And it always traumatized me a bit that this guy was a really, really good friend of mine. And we were both gay, but we never had the guts to tell each other that we were gay. I don't even think we knew what the word was. We just knew that we liked men. But we didn't know what that meant or we just knew that we were different in some way or another. I did know other people in my class that were gay. And they got the brunt of the ridicule and the insults and all of that, you know, being called “f\*ggot” and “queer” and all of that stuff. You know, back then, in the ‘70s, queer was a bad word. When you called somebody “queer”, that was bad. I like the fact that the gay community has retaken that word to mean something more positive. But back then that was not the case. I guess that’s it on that. I did not get involved in the gay community as much as probably I wished I would have. Knowing what I know now, I wish that I would have been able to be more involved back then than I am now.

ZS: Kind of a follow up, you mentioned you came out in your senior year. What was that experience like?

TR: I guess (*pause*) that's a really tough question. The first time that I actually had gay sex was with a teacher of mine when I was in high school. Obviously, we kept that very much hush-hush and under the table; we didn't tell anybody because he could have lost his job or probably even gone to jail. But I was of age, and he was a young teacher; he was maybe only 25, 30 years old. So, I mean, it's not like I was being indoctrinated into the gay subculture of, you know, that kind of stuff. It wasn't that at all. And it was something that I initiated. So, I guess my high school teacher was the first person that I actually came out to, which was kind of cool in a way that he knew my secret, and nobody else knew. After him, I was dating this girl in high school—actually, she and I are still best friends to this day—and we were out on a date. It was about a month or so after my friend had died in that motorcycle accident. And that's when I told her, I said, “Look, I think I'm gay.” She said, “Oh, girl, I already knew that. I was waiting for you to figure it out.” So, it's kind of one of those things where you think nobody knows, but everybody knows, and you're the only one that doesn't know that everybody else already knows. So, my coming out to my parents was a little bit different. I would have guys over to spend the night at the house, not sexual at all, just friends sleep over. And the way my parents found out that I was gay was—this was after I was out of high school. I was already living in Houston. Right after high school, I knew that I didn't want to stay in Lafayette. Lafayette was not the place for me; I needed a bigger city. So, I moved to Houston in 1982. And my sister, who is four years younger than me, was getting berated and belittled in high school because she had a queer brother. So, that's kind of how my parents found out was because my sister was getting bullied in high school because of me. And the story that was told to me was that someone she that went to school with told her that they worked for a flower shop, and that they delivered flowers to me at this gay bar, and I was there to take the flowers. That's how they knew that I was gay because I accepted these flowers at a gay bar. Supposedly I got a dozen roses. Well, to this day, in my entire life, I am now almost 60 years old, I have never ever received a dozen roses from anyone ever. So, I figured out that the guy that told her this was one of her classmates who had made up this whole story because he had to figure out a way to describe how he ended up at the gay bar—underage at that—so the whole story made no sense at all. But I've always known who this person was, and I never told her that I knew who this person was, except… I know you know I wrote a book called *The 16th Second*. One of the chapters in the book is about how I came out without even coming out. I called it, “That Time I Didn't Come Out,” because really, I didn't. Everybody came out for me. How I socialized in the gay community back then when I was still living in Lafayette and going back and forth to Houston is I became a male stripper. And my male stripper name was Colt Michael, and I still go by that name sometimes. That's how I differentiate between who knows me as a stripper, and who knows me as real Ted Richard. If you call me Mike or you call me Colt, I’ll know okay, that's where you know me from.

ZS: Where did that name come from?

TR: No one's ever asked me that. The name came from, Colt was a dear friend of mine who lived in Houston, a guy named Colt Thomas. And I'd always liked that name for some reason, and it just stuck with me. And I said, “But nobody would ever really be named that.” And then I met this guy. His name was Coulter, C-o-u-l-t-e-r, Coulter Thomas. And I said, “Wow, somebody actually really is named that with the nickname of Colt.” Michael is just a name that I came up with out of the blue. It doesn't reference anybody, it doesn't pertain to anybody, it's just a name that I like. Like if my name wouldn't have been Ted Anthony, it would have been Ted Michael. So, it's just a name that I liked, and Colt Michael just stuck. It just stuck. When I was living in Lafayette (*pause*) of course, everybody knew my real name was Ted Richard. That wasn't even a question. But when I went to Houston, because when I was still living in Lafayette, I would still go to Houston and perform in Houston a lot. Nobody knew my real name [in Houston], you know, so that made it kind of, it was really really cool for me. You know, I was working at JCPenney in the Northgate Mall back when the Northgate Mall was the Northgate Mall. And I would go to Houston on the weekends and do my little stripper gig and all that. I'd come back with all this money, and they'd be like, “You really doing well at JCPenney, right?” I'm like, “Yeah, yeah, let's go with that. Let's go with that.” So yeah, nobody ever asked me where I got the name from, but that's where I got the name from.

ZS: You mentioned Houston, what was that environment like? And did you live [there, or did you] only go there on the weekends?

TR: The way I ended up in Houston was, there was a bar in Lafayette called Fantasy. It was a nightclub called Fantasy. And they had male strippers there one night, and I just absolutely fell in love with one of the strippers. Go figure it would be me. And this is before I ever started dancing. This is before all of that stuff. So, I ended up meeting up with a stripper, and he took me to Houston for the weekend. We went back to Houston to his place, and I was still living in Lafayette, but I went to Houston for the weekend. And he introduced me to all kinds of people; you know, in the stripper world that really helped me out on my quest to become the next big male stripper in Houston.

ZS: So, what were some of the things that they taught you?

TR: They taught me about perseverance. They taught me that I'm not always going to be the best. They taught me the most important thing was… A dear, dear friend of mine named Naomi Sims. Naomi Sims is a former Miss Gay America- Miss Gay USA, Miss Gay Universe. She's won almost everything. And she, his real name was Newman Braud and he's from St. Martinville. He died in the early ‘90s unfortunately, but one of the things that he taught me was that there's a difference between friends and acquaintances and you have to know the difference. And that always stuck with me that you have friends that are friends, and you have acquaintances that are acquaintances, and you treat them as just that. And that's not to say that people that are acquaintances cannot somehow become friends, and how sometimes friends can down the road become mere acquaintances. But the difference is, you have to be able to spot what the difference is and treat people accordingly. Because not everybody is your fan.

ZS: So as far as like difference between friend and acquaintance, how would you describe that?

TR: Friends are people that I hang out with on a fairly frequent basis. People that know me, that have been to my home, that call me not wanting anything, just call me to check on me, that's what friends are. Acquaintances are the people that you meet at the bar. This is back when I was drinking—I used to drink a lot—and you had bar friends. And that's all they were was people that you would drink with. Well, those people are not really your friends. They're your acquaintances. The people that tip you, they're your acquaintances. You want them as a fan, but sometimes you don't want them in your personal life. Friends are people that you allow into your personal space. Acquaintances are the people that my professional image is what you see and that's where you stop. That's probably not what you wanted to know. (*laughs*)

ZS: No, actually, that was very interesting. So, during this time, can you describe the cultural environment that you witnessed for LGBTQ+ individuals?

TR: Yeah, you know, I'm going to speak about this from a standpoint of, I've lived through this, and now I'm on the other side of it, so I could better acquaint myself with what it was like back then. I guess that's the best way that I have to describe it is that, I had friends, and I had acquaintances, and I had people that I counted on, people that counted on me; we had those types of friendships back then. The people that I knew in the bar scene turned out to be friends of mine because we were all very, very close. But the one thing that we had all in common—the only thing that we all had in common—was that we were all gay. And that made for a good bonding experience, because we knew that we could go nowhere else to have these conversations with other people. And unlike what I think a lot of people think, not all gay people sleep with each other. People seem to have this misconception that everything about gay people is sexual, and it's not. I had to learn that, but it’s not. I wish that back then, I wish that I would have been more supportive of the people that I knew as being bullied. Because I knew there were other guys being bullied, and I was never bullied like that. Because there was always a scapegoat. I was never the target; there was always somebody else they could pick on. And I wish that I would have had the guts back then to stand up for some of those people. I kind of regret that, I really do regret that. In the Lafayette scene, I became Mr. Royal Order of Unicorn, I was pretty well known in the gay community back in Lafayette. And I was also really well known in Houston. More so than I ever was in Lafayette, which is kind of weird. Because you know, you would think in Lafayette, you're a big fish in a small pond. In Houston, I was a small fish in a big pond, but still, I was more recognized there in Houston than I was ever in Lafayette, until recently, but we'll get into that later.

ZS: You talked about how you did stripping work in Houston. Did you do it in Lafayette as well?

TR: I did it in Lafayette as well. I started off in Laf- let me rephrase that. I started off in Houston. I tried to get a gig dancing in Lafayette, and I was told by one of the bar owners that number one, I wasn't good enough. And number two, nobody wanted to see me naked. So I was like “well.” When I started dancing in Houston, and I won the Stripper of the Year contest in Houston, I came back to that same bar owner and I said, “Am I good enough now?” And that's what it was. It wasn't that he thought that I wasn't good enough. He thought that I'm a local guy; people will pay to see strippers from Houston, or Dallas, or Las Vegas; they'll pay to bring strippers in, or any kind of entertainment, whether it's strippers or drag queens or whatever. You bring people in from out of town, people gather to want to go see this phenomenal performer. But I was this phenomenal performer that already lived here. So, I didn't have the same following that somebody from out of town would have had.

ZS: Would you say you had more success in Houston than Lafayette?

TR: Oh yeah. (*laughs*) Yeah, in the beginning, I had more success in Houston. I never knew (*pause*) God, I hate to use the word famous, but that's kind of what it is. I never knew how well-known and well-respected I was as a stripper, until I was living in Houston, and they [the bar owners] wanted some strippers in Lafayette, so I brought some strippers that I knew from Houston. I brought them over with me to Lafayette to do a show. And they did the whole show; everything was fine. And at the end of the show, one of the dancers came back and said, “Mr. Ted, Mr. Ted, you got to come. You have to perform.” I'm like, “No, I didn't bring anything; I'm not performing. I brought y'all.” He said, “You gotta come listen to this.” And they were chanting, “We want Colt Michael! We want Colt Michael!” and I'm like, “Holy cow, I had no idea that the reason they all came was to see me, not the other three strippers that I had brought.” And they were disappointed that I wasn't even going to show. So anyway, one of the other dancers had an extra costume that I was able to wear; thank goodness I was able to wear it. And they started the music for me, and I made like over $400 or $500 in tips on that one song. And I was like, “Holy cow.” I felt the love, but I felt the respect that I always thought I was missing in Lafayette, and I finally felt it then. Like I said, I try to steer away from the word “famous.” But that was the first time that I knew, “Oh my god, these people know me, they know who I am. And they know what I do, and they know what I can do.”

ZS: Going back to the cultural environment, you mentioned how you were never actually a target of [bullying].

TR: Right.

ZS: You mentioned bullying; what did this entail? Like was there violence or harassment?

TR: I saw straight people throw beer cans at the drag queens, you know, just things like that. Unfortunately, this is difficult to say, but the most bullying that I saw was within the gay community itself. People either [saying], “You're not acting straight enough,” or “You're acting too feminine.” Or, you know, “You're not like the rest of us”; it was kind of sad. It was sad to watch, because it's just like in the straight community: people don't like you if you're a little bit mentally disabled, if you're a little bit too short, If you're too tall, if you're too skinny—too skinny was the worst—too fat, those chubby chasers. People- that’s the thing that I found most, maybe most distraught about going out to the gay clubs was that there was discrimination within the gay community. And I'm like, “Hold up, we're supposed to all be in the same boat here.” And so, as for anything specific, I can't name anything specific like that, other than seeing straight people throw beer cans at the drag queens. But they were kind of used to it, I guess. But, you know, that's the other thing is some people love drag, some people hate drag. If you did drag, people liked you or they didn't like you. Distraught is just the best way that I can surmise it. It just made me kind of sad.

ZS: That is interesting. That infighting, where do you think that came from?

TR: It was a seniority kind of thing. Like, now I'm one of the older gays. Back then, I was one of the younger gays. And you know, there's this ageism thing, and there always is and there probably always will be. I'm not one of the young studs anymore. I'm one of the older generation now. But back then, I was one of the young studs. So, I got accolades and recognition that other people who didn't look like me got, which was unfair to the others; not only unfair to me, but unfair to the others, too, that you get treated a certain way because you look a certain way. And that just didn't sit right with me. Of course, I was the beneficiary of a lot of those accolades, too. So, it's kind of like I’m being hypocritical by saying that, but that's the way it happened. That's the way it happened. I don't know how to describe it any other way than that.

ZS: Do you still see some of this? Or do you think it's gotten better?

TR: I think ageism still exists. Yes, most definitely. I think that people still are attracted to the pretty people, whoever the pretty people think they are. I don't know who the pretty people are these days, I don't know. One of the things we'll get into later when we're talking about Acadiana Pride that then, when I took over Acadiana Pride, it was like the ageism just went away. It's like even the youngsters, the young kids are like, “How do I get involved? What do I need to do? Da da da,” you know, it was all of this. But I mean, you go into any gay bar, even today, and you will see the divisions. You'll see the cliques inside the bar—all you have to do is walk in, and you will notice this clique over here and this clique over here. And you'll notice that the gays aren't supportive of the lesbians because they don't like the lesbians. And it's the same thing. Really, sadly, not much has changed. I want to tell you that it has, but sadly, I don't think so. I don't know why, but I don't think it has.

ZS: So, can you describe your experiences during the AIDS crisis, and how the political climate in Acadiana changed?

TR: Yeah. When I tested positive for HIV, I was living in Houston, client number 026415. And I tell you that number because it's etched in my brain. Because back then, you went to get some blood drawn, and they called you on the phone if you tested positive. If you didn't get a phone call, then you were negative. If you got a phone call, then you were positive, and they posted it in the local newspaper. Not your name, just your number. So that way, if you tested, you needed to know your number. And if your number is 026415, well then you tested positive and you need to call your doctor right away. So, I went to get tested with an ex-boyfriend of mine, who we remained friends even after we broke up. And this was a boyfriend that I had in Houston. And we went to get tested and he got a phone call. And his phone call said, “You need to come back in, so that we could retest you so we could be sure.” Well, be sure of what? Well, we know what “Be sure” means. So, I never told him, but I got the same phone call. We both tested positive at the same time. But I never told him because I figured he was dealing with enough on his own. And I didn't want to be like, “Oh, well guess what? I tested positive too.” You know, I didn't want to be that friend that made it all about me instead of about him. So, I was like, you know, that's it. And the AIDS crisis in Houston was horrendous. I lived in a gay complex called Westmoreland Square. And it was all gays. You know, speaking of discrimination, it was mostly all white gays. I didn't see it at the time, but looking back, I'm like, “Well, holy crap. That was kind of a racist thing to do.” But yeah, there was maybe one Black person, one Hispanic person, and one Jewish person that I knew. Everybody else was white men. Right? Looking back on it now like, “That's damn racist,” but I lived there, so I can't say it wasn't what it wasn't. The horror of living there was we got to see our neighbors die every week, to where at the end, the complex was only about half full, and they couldn't get anybody to move in. Because you're either gonna move in, and you're gonna die, or you're going to move in, and you're gonna see your neighbor die. So, it was a very, very desolate place to be. And I lived right next to the swimming pool, so I got to see everybody come in and out, and all of that. And it was just horrendous. I had this one dear friend of mine. Speaking to friends and acquaintances, you live in a complex full of gay men, half the people there are your acquaintances, they're not really your friends, but you do make friends with some of them. And one of them was this friend of mine named Dennis Reisberg. And we had dated a little bit, but then we decided, “No, let's not date; we're better as friends.” And he called me one night to say, “Can you come sleep with me?” And I'm like, “Well, Dennis, I thought we kind of decided…” “No,” he said, “No, no, no,” he said, “I just want you to hold me. That's all.” This was a former bodybuilder, who has now dwindled down to skin and bones. And he said, “It hurts when people hold me.” He said, “I just want you to hold me, so I can sleep tonight.” He said, “Nobody wants to touch me.” And I didn't realize how that feeling of touch meant so much to somebody. And he was like, “I just need somebody to touch me.” Like, wow. So, I did. And I got up the next morning, I went to work. And when I came back the ambulances were at his house, at his apartment. So, I knew; I'm like, “Crap, another one.” I didn't tell my family that I was positive. I didn't tell them until… I moved to Boston from Houston. I moved to Boston in 1992, no I’m sorry, yes in 1992, that’s right. And I started getting sick when I was up there. So, I went to the local clinic. And I got tested for HIV again, even though I knew I was already positive. I said, “Well, maybe they made a mistake all those years ago.” I got tested in Houston in July of 1987. “So maybe they did make a mistake back then. So let me go ahead and get retested.” Sure enough, the results were the same. So, I started seeing a doctor; they put me on a medication regimen and all of that. And I stayed in Boston for another year, another almost two years, until I got so sick that I had to tell the people at work, I had to tell my boss at work, and they fired me the next day. I did get a severance package, but it was like, they didn't want to deal with me. These days, you can't do that. Back then you could. Nobody even questioned it because it was a double-edged sword. Because if they say, “Well, why'd they fire you?” I would have had to say, “Because I'm HIV-positive.” So, I would’ve been blowing my cover too. I'm just glad I got the severance package, and I moved back to Louisiana. I moved back in with my mom and dad who lived next door. You know, and I had to tell them. So one day my dad asked, “So, you have AIDS now. Right?” And I said “No, no, no,” I said, “I'm HIV-positive.” But HIV-positive turned into AIDS very quickly, and my T cell count had dropped down to about 10. And I mean, a normal T cell count is about a 1100 to 1200, and my T cell count was 10. So, I had an AIDS diagnosis, and I didn't even know it. I didn't even know it. So, it was difficult for my family. Obviously because I started having all of those same symptoms of losing weight. Your skin's dripping off your bones, your skin starting to turn gray. If you ever see somebody really sick and their skin looks gray, that was me. I mean, you could see my cheekbones. It was just—it was really horrible. It was really horrible. So, I had to live through that, and I saw myself looking like some of the people that I had seen dying in my apartment complex. I knew what that looked like, I knew AIDS looked like, and they looked like me. Can we take a break?

[Recording is momentarily stopped and then restarts]

TR: So, now we’re up to AcadianaCares, right?

ZS: You were talking about how you were sick.

TR: Right. I was sick, and I moved back to Louisiana. So that leads me right into AcadianaCares. That's how I got involved with AcadianCares. Do we need to touch on something else before that?

ZS: So, you said you were very sick. And then did you get involved with AcadianaCares right then?

TR: Yeah.

ZS: Okay. Yeah, so could you…

TR: Well that could be your next question. So did you get involved with AcadianaCares, is that what you…?

ZS: Yes.

TR: Are you ready?

ZS: Yes, go ahead.

TR: So, that’s when I got involved with AcadianaCares. Now AcadianaCares, the backstory is: back at the beginning of the AIDS pandemic (it’s what it was), there was a group of people called, they called themselves Lafayette CARES—Concerns for AIDS Relief, Education and Support. That's what the CARES stands for. And they were just helping people out of the back of cars. They were bringing people food, they were bringing people blankets, they were bringing people whatever they needed. Well, as it turned out, just working from the backs of people's cars wasn't working anymore. There were so many people sick, so many people dying, that they developed this nonprofit organization called AcadianaCares, because Acadiana serves all seven of the parishes, not just Lafayette and Lafayette Parish. It serves all seven of the local Acadiana parishes. And the way I got involved with AcadianaCares was I was a client. Or should I say almost a client. You know, doing well in the executive world is a two-edged sword. I made too much money to become a client of AcadianaCares. (*laughs*) Because I had worked so hard in the executive world, I made quite a bit of money. And so, my Medicare disability, and all of that stuff was more. You have to live below a certain poverty line or something like that. And even with my Medicare disability, I made too much money to become a client. But I knew that I wanted to do something to help, not even helping myself. If helping others helps me, well, then that's what I'm going to do. And there was a volunteer coordinator there at the time named Bunny Angers, who said, “Why don't you start to talk?” She said, “You're a really good public speaker. Why don't you tell people your story?” And I said, “Well, I don't think my story is any different than anybody else's.” And she said “No, but the problem is, we don't have anybody that wants to tell their story.” They didn't have anybody with AIDS that was willing to teach people about AIDS. Everybody was dying. And I figured I was dying, too, so, what the hell, it can't get any worse. And I started doing public speaking a little. The first, I’m trying to remember, the first one I did was at the Psychology Department at UL in Hamilton Hall. I remember it was Hamilton Hall and forgive me because I forgot the professor's name. But I would always start off the speech with, “Does anybody know somebody who has AIDS?” And very seldom, I mean most of the time, nobody would raise a hand because they didn't know anybody. And I said, “Well now you do. Because I'm standing right here in front of you.” And they’d go “ah”, you know like that. And I would tell them this is what somebody with AIDS looks like. And most of them had never seen anybody [with AIDS]. You know, and here I was, you know, and people said, “Oh, that was so courageous. That was so courageous.” And I'm like, “No, it wasn't. I was scared as hell.” Every time I got up to do this speech, I was scared as hell because I didn't know how I was going to be received. After every single class, Oh, wait, you might want to stop [the recording]. I’m going to get something.

[Recording is momentarily stopped and then restarts]

TR: So, I’m still helping out with AcadianaCares. I'm doing all of these talks all around the state. Because of my work with the state, I got invited to be on the advisory board for the University Medical Center, which is here in Lafayette. I was on their advisory board about how to better treat, not actually treat medically, but how to better treat on a personal level, how to treat people living with AIDS and living with HIV. Because obviously, back then nobody wanted to touch you. So, we had to give in-clinic seminars to the staff of the University Medical Center and say, “This is how you should be treating our clients.” That worked out really well for me because I got to know a lot of the other people living with HIV. Because we had a sign on the board of AcadianaCares that just because you’re in here doesn’t mean you have AIDS; you can be a volunteer, you can be a staff member, you can be a volunteer, you can be just anybody wanting to come in and help. So, they didn’t want people to assume that just because you were there was because you had the virus, or the bug, like we called it. I got really involved with AcadianaCares, doing the talks and doing all that. And then slowly, I became involved with a group called Acadiana Community Cares. And it was a group of HIV-positive individuals who worked closely with the staff of AcadianaCares to say, “This is what we need; this is what we're hoping for; this is what we want.” And it wasn't a list of “you got to give me this, you got to give me that,” we were trying to be helpful to each other. Because obviously, if you're living with the virus, you have a different perspective on things than somebody who's just trying to help. And what they want to know is they want to know how to help. So, it was a good compromise, a good conglomeration of people that were all together. And because of that, I became the first chairman of the board of AcadianaCares that was HIV-positive. And that was 30 years ago. Yeah. (*laughs*)

ZS: How long were you the chairman for?

TR: I was the chairman for about a year. The job I had in Lafayette… I took another job working in Austin. So obviously, I couldn't stay on the board of AcadianaCares. So, I let them know, “Hey, thanks for everything, da da da. I'm moving up to Austin.” When I moved to Austin, I was not involved with HIV community at all. I was totally into my work. I had gone back to work. Oh, I skipped that part, I’m so sorry about that.

ZS: No, it’s fine.

TR: In the meantime, while I was at AcadianaCares, I went back to work, which a lot of people with HIV and AIDS never get a chance to do. My health was doing okay. And I actually went back to work. And when I went back to work, it was in Austin, and they were fully aware of everything, and nobody questioned. So yeah, that's how I ended up back in Texas.

ZS: I guess I’m curious, what do you think changed? I mean, because you mentioned in Boston, they fired you for having HIV, and now it's all good. So, what do you think changed?

TR: I think education changed. I think that’s what changed, is they figured out that just because you were HIV [positive] doesn't mean that you couldn’t be productive, that you could still be a productive person in life as well as in work. You know, and I'm very thankful for that. As for how it is now, I don't know because I haven't worked since 2007. I retired in 2007. I have no point of reference for that.

ZS: Okay. Going ahead, can you talk about how Acadiana Pride formed and what support and challenges you encountered?

TR: Acadiana Pride started with a dear friend of mine named Louis Tolliver. He was contacted by some bar owners in Lafayette, the owners of Bolt and the owners of Tonic, Ty Hebert and Joe Spire and Justin Menard. They were friends with Louis and Louis used to work at a place called the Shed, which my brother was the manager of at the time. And so, Louis and I kind of got familiar with each other then. And when the subject of Acadiana Pride showed up, he contacted me immediately. He said, “Hey, can you come? We're gonna have a meeting about Acadiana Pride.” I said, “Well, what are you going to do?” He said, “We're gonna have a Pride festival.” So, they knew that I used to live in Houston and Austin, and I used to go to the Prides in Dallas and Boston and all of that. They knew that I was very familiar with Pride festivals across the country. So, when he contacted me, I went to the first meeting, and everything was in the infancy stages. And they hadn't really started hardly anything. So, I came onboard, and I became the vice president and Louis was president. I became the fundraising chair; I did everything from promoting the festival, I booked all of the acts for the festival. I paid all the acts for the festival; I did the bulk of the fundraising. And I say that not to toot my own horn, but I say that because we were only like, seven or eight people. Everybody had their own little thing to do. So, the fact that I was really good with fundraising, that just made sense for me. Even though we had a fundraising director, I was the one that was the point of contact. And I was the one that had the contacts in the Lafayette area. So, it just made sense for me to do most of the fundraising. (*pause*) We put together a thing called Acadiana Pride Idol, which is similar to *American Idol* where we'd have a singing contest every year. And what that did is it kept the public involved in Acadiana Pride throughout the year. So, it wasn't just “We're having an Acadiana Pride festival from this day to this day, please come.” It was one of those where we had some type of event every single week, whether it was a Bear dinner, or we’d bring in entertainment from out of town to raise money. We did Acadiana Pride Idol. We did an event called Rhythms and Visions, which was for artists, both visual artists and performing artists. And they would donate their time, and we would raise money that way. So, every single week, there was something to do with Acadiana Pride. So, it kept it in the forefront of people's minds throughout the year. It got them excited for “Oh my god, that festival is finally here. The festival is finally here.” And we got a lot of support from the local media, which was very surprising. We got a $25,000 pro bono from Cox Communications to do commercials for us. I mean, it was big time, and I remember having a meeting with Ben Berthelot at the Lafayette Tourism Bureau. Because I wanted somebody from the Tourism Bureau, because I figured if we could get the Tourism Bureau to donate some money, then we would have some kind of clout to go to other places and say, “Hey, well, the Lafayette Tourism Bureau is helping to sponsor this.” “Oh, they are okay. Well, let me give you a little bit of money.” So, I remember having this meeting with Ben Berthelot. And I showed him the budget. My budget was $100,000. And I showed him, I said, “This is where this money is spent, this is where this money's going, da da da.” I mean, I had a spreadsheet of everything. And he said, “Well, what's your plan B? What happens if you don't raise this $100,000?” And I said, “I don't have a plan B.” And the next week, we got a check. He told me later, “When you told me that you didn't have a plan B, I knew that you were serious.” I said, “Yeah.” And we ended up raising over $125,000 that first year.” And we spent it all. I mean, it costs a lot of money to put on a festival. It costs a lot of money, especially four days—we did four full days of festivals, for the first festival. I mean, we were kind of out there because people thought we were crazy. And maybe we were. And so, for the second year when I was president, we did the same thing. We did four days of festivals. And we did just as well the second year as we had the first year.

ZS: Do you know how many people attended roughly?

TR: Roughly between 5000 to 6000 people, over the course of the four days, because we had counters and all of that.

ZS: Were there any challenges that you experienced?

TR: No, I'm glad you asked the question, but the answer is no. I thought that we would have; we were getting ready [for it]. We had the police called in, we had police on guard and all that because we thought we were gonna get protesters and all of that stuff. But we had none of that. Everybody that showed up was supportive. Everybody that showed up was happy. They were just happy to be there. They were happy that we were having a Pride festival. I mean, it was 2014 and Lafayette had never ever had a Pride festival before, ever. So, they were just happy to have one.

ZS: Why do you think that is, that they never had a festival before?

TR: I don't know. I guess just no one organized it? I don't know why there was never a Pride festival, I don’t know. Remember, we grew up back in the ‘70s and ‘80s and ‘90s, where you had gay bars everywhere. I mean, everywhere. I mean, at one point, Lafayette had seven gay bars. I guess they figured there was no need for a Pride festival. You just go out to the bars. Well, now in these days of social media, you have Instagram, Facebook, Grindr, Growler, Tinder, all of these apps and all of that for your phone that you don't even need to go to a gay bar to get a date. So having a Pride festival was something that we thought, “Well, let's do something to get people to come out of their houses and get off of Grindr and Growler for the weekend, and come out to a festival.” And I think that's what really worked. It was something that the people could do, that they could meet people just like they were and not have to go to a bar.

ZS: Are you still involved with the Pride festivals now?

TR: Yes, yes. Wendy Dorfman started up a new Pride festival. Now, when she started it up, she had no idea that there was a Pride festival before. I had to step down from Acadiana Pride when… this is really not part of the story, but a car hit my house, right there. And I jumped out of bed, and I hurt my knee whenever I jumped up out of bed, so I ended up having to have hip surgery and all of that stuff. So, I stepped down from Acadiana Pride. And they had Pride for another couple of years after that. And then it just kind of went away. We don't know where it went away to, it just kind of went away. It just kind of dissipated into nothing. So, when Wendy Dorfman came into town, she was not aware that we had already done a Pride festival. She said, “Well, we need to do a Pride festival.” And I was all about it. I'm like, “Yes, sure. Let's, you know, da da da.” So, I contacted her during the first Pride festival, her first Pride festival. And I told her about the Prides from before she said, “Oh, I didn't know.” I said, “No, I know you didn't know, and I'm so excited that somebody's doing this again.” So, this year, I was a little bit more involved. Not necessarily in the planning. But I was involved because I did a book signing during the Pride festival for this year.

ZS: Actually I want to briefly talk about that, but before that, do you feel like the Pride festival has changed or evolved since the first one or is it more the same?

TR: No, I think it's changed a lot. I think the Pride that we have now, it's a lot more younger people, a lot of the younger generation, which I really, really love that. That's one of the things that caught my attention right off the bat was that I noticed all the young people and people still in high school. And I just really, really appreciated that. Somehow what we did on the four-day festival didn't bring out the young people. Maybe because I was older, and so, it was most of the people of my generation that came to our Pride festival. But the Pride festival they have now, the newly revised Pride Acadiana, has a lot of the younger generation and I really, really, really appreciated that.

ZS: Okay. Now, you briefly mentioned your book. So, you've written a memoir. I’m curious, what inspired you to write the memoir now?

TR: Actually, what happened was that I've been journaling since I was in first grade. And mostly because the teacher would tell me to shut up. I was always a little bit boisterous in elementary school. So, she’d [the teacher] say, “Shut up and write something.” So, I’d just write something or other. I just started writing and writing and just compiling my journals and compiling my journals. And one day, I was sitting with my mom [when I was older]. And I told my mom that I was writing a book for when I died. I was writing a book so that after I was dead, everybody could go in and say, “Oh, Ted did this, and Ted did that, and you know, he was famous for this and da da da, and all that stuff.” But it was very PG, or even G-rated, I'm gonna say, and my mom said, “No, I want to know what really happened.” I said, “Do you really want to know what really happened? She said, “Yes, I think it's important.” So, I started redoing my journals and rewriting a lot of the stuff that I had written before, and it got to be fairly graphic, but I mean, not X-rated, not R-rated, but it's kind of graphic. Because the things that happened to me happened to me, and it didn't happen to anybody else. The way they happen to me is the way they happened to me and not the way they happened to somebody else. So, I felt that it was important and my mom wanted to know exactly what happened. I said, “Well, I'm gonna say what really happened,” and ended up putting up one of my chapters on Facebook. And I reached out to this publisher in Nashville, thinking I wasn't gonna get anywhere with a publisher, anything like that. And within the next day, the publisher contacted me, she said, “Have you written anything else?” I said, “Yeah, I've kind of written other things, but it's not a book or anything. It's just a bunch of my writing.” She said, “Well, send me a little bit of what you have.” So, I sent her every other story. Because I’m not gonna send somebody my whole life story. I said, “Well, let me just send every other chapter, every other little story in between.” And she called me back within the week and said, “Oh, no, I need to know what happened in between those.” And so, we started a book; that's how I got started writing the book. And the book is called *The 16th Second*. And it's about everybody having 15 seconds of fame in their life, everybody no matter who you are, and you can decide what fame means for yourself in your own life. But what happens in the 16th second, what happens after your 15 seconds of fame are over? What do you do then? You just go, “Holy crap. I got to start this all over again. Or what do I do?” You know, what you do with the 16 seconds? It’s literally the rest of your life. And so, my book is about how I took my first 15 seconds of fame and made the next 15 seconds of fame mean something different in my second life, and now I'm working on my third life.

ZS: And after having finished it and published it, how does it feel?

TR: I feel exhilarated that it came out. I feel exonerated because I know that all of my life, I would tell people stories about my life. But I always stopped at a certain point because I've never wanted them to know what really happened after that. This book gave me a chance to tell them what really happened after that. And so now, all of my true friends have a better understanding of, “Oh, this is why this happened. Oh, this is why he did this at this time. Oh, this is why… Oh, now I understand.” They have a much better understanding of who I am as a person. And these are my good friends who I'd been lying to my whole life… Well, not lying to them—I just wouldn't tell them the whole story. Because the whole story hurt. And now, they know the whole story. They're like, “Holy cow. I wish you had told us,” and I said, “No, I couldn't tell you. I just couldn’t.” So yeah. So, I mean, I feel exonerated is a good word, but it's not the best word I can use. It's just the only word that's coming to my mind right now. But it makes me feel better, knowing that other people know the true story about “Oh, now it all makes sense.” I'm glad that my friends can understand now, why I never told them the whole story back then. And we became closer friends.

ZS: Okay. And just as a final question, how do you feel things have changed for LGBTQ+ individuals in southwest Louisiana and what work do you feel still needs to be done?

TR: That's a difficult question. Because sadly, I think that not much has changed. I still see the bullying going on within the gay community, as well as outside of it. I still see the same cliques forming in the bars; you have the lesbians over here, the muscle-bound bears over here, the pretty boys over here, the fatsos over here, and I'm using those terms because that's the terms that they use, not because I feel that way, on a personal space. I still see people that hate drag queens. I see people that love drag queens. I have to say that RuPaul’s Drag Race made a big impact on how straight people view drag queens. So, I guess that's a positive thing that I can see. But as for what I see when I go out into the gay bars, I don't see that much has changed; I don't see a whole lot of community. I see a lot of community at the Pride events, like when Pride Acadiana holds an event, I see a lot of community there. But as for in general, I don't see a lot of community. And I don't know how to describe this community like that. One thing that I think needs to change… I got involved with a group of people called it Equality Louisiana and also a group called (*pause*) Forum for Louisiana [Forum for Equality]. And they do a lot of work with the legislature to get bills passed that help not only the LGBTQ+ community, but also, they work with Louisiana Trans Advocates. They work with a lot of other nonprofits to get laws passed that not only show equality for LGBTQ+ people, but equity for LGBTQ+ people. And that means two totally different things. A lot of people don't understand that equality does not mean equity. We want equity—we want the same as everybody else. We want the same opportunities as everybody else does. And even today, I find that LGBTQ+ people are not getting the same opportunities as the straight community. That's especially vocal in the trans community. I think a lot of people in the LGBTQ+ community forget that T stands for trans, and they are part of our community also. I think that's where a lot of work needs to be done. I look back at my time when I was younger, and I knew nothing about the legislature. I mean, I knew about voting—we learned about voting and civics and all of that—but I'd never put into practice that voting had something to do with being LGBTQ+. In my older generation, now, I know I need to go vote this person out of office, go vote this person in office, vote for this amendment, vote against this amendment, know what all of these things stand for. One of the things that I wish the younger generation would get is the importance of their vote.

ZS: Do you see any hope or optimism with regards to that with the younger generation?

TR: I do. As a matter of fact, at the last Pride Acadiana event, I spoke for a little bit, and it was a large group of young people. And I told them, “You've always asked me what do we wish for the younger generation? I wish the younger generation would vote. That's it. I'm not telling you how to vote. I'm just saying, have your voice heard. And when you have your voice heard, you will know what voice needs to be heard. And that's going to come from your heart and you're going to vote your heart.”

ZS: Okay.

TR: Anything else?

ZS: Well, is there anything else that we haven't discussed that you want to talk about?

TR: Read my book. (*laughs*) No, I think I think we've touched on everything, Zack. I mean, we've come a long way. As much as I say things have not changed, things have changed a lot. But there's still more change that needs to happen. So, I guess that's what my closing line would be—even with change comes more change, and that change is needed.