ZS0004

Mike LeBlanc and Keith Faulk

May 25, 2022

Lafayette, 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 Mr. Mike LeBlanc and Mr. Keith Faulk, speaking with them for about an hour on their experiences as LGBTQ+ men in Lafayette, LA. There were two other individuals in the room who provided some input but wished not to be addressed. They will be known as Outside Interviewees.

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Interviewer initials [ZS]:

Interviewee (Mike LeBlanc) initials [ML]:

Interviewee (Keith Faulk) initials [KF]:

Outside interviewee initials [OI1] [OI2]:

ZS: Today is May 25, 2022. This is an oral history. If you wouldn't mind stating your names.

ML: My name is Mike LeBlanc.

KF: Keith Faulk.

ZS: Alright, thank you very much. And this is Zack Stein doing the interview. So, the first question I have for you is, please describe what it was like growing up LGBTQ+ in southwest Louisiana.

ML: Well, of course, everyone's story is gonna be a little different. But I grew up on a farm in Acadia Parish. My dad was—basically he was the Marlboro Man. My grandpa was a farmer. So we had horses and cattle and tractors and combines and stuff like that. So it was very closeted, the way my growing up was. I guess I realized at a pretty young age­­—maybe seven, eight years old, I guess—that I was a little bit different than the other boys, maybe not quite as tough as the other boys were. And at some point, maybe somebody says, “Sissy,” you know; you start hearing that word. And then you begin to hide, so then you start to, I guess, try to fit in, you know? So that was a big thing. So I had to try to keep up with the other boys, you know, who were obviously a little bit tougher or whatever. So that was my challenge as I was growing up.

KF: Well, my challenge was when I came to UL in 1968. I figured I was gay, but a friend of mine introduced me to somebody else and he kissed me and that was it. So I said, “Well, okay.” Within that first semester, my parents—I come from Kaplan, a small city. I was the first one to go to UL. And my parents were worried because I didn't go home one weekend. So they came down and checked on me, and they found my straight roommate had a book about gays. They thought it was mine (laughs). So but anyway, it was rough at the beginning. My dad tried to catch me at the gay bar to bring me home. And we were the only two—me and my lover at the time—that got out. He didn't speak to me for three years after that. And when I went home one day—I was at my sister's house—and my daddy was coming home for lunch. And he called in wanting to know what was for lunch. And Mama said, “It’s gumbo,” and she hung up. And I said, “You didn't tell him Keith was here?” She said, “No, if he doesn't like it, *he* can leave.” And that was the connection we had. It’s kind of emotional (laughs). But after that, I was one of his favorites. Because I went to UL, I became management at the phone company, and my daddy was impressed with that. So when he passed away, I was the one that he—so it was a complete 360 degree turn around, you know, from there. But it was rough at the beginning. The first five years, I guess— ‘68 to ’71, ‘72. But after that, everything was okay.

ML: My dad was more quiet. He never would say anything to me. Like my younger brother was more, I guess, fearless, you know. So he would jump on the horses with no bridle and just hang on, and they would swim across the canal and stuff like that. So, my younger brother was very fearless. And my dad sort of realizes that I was different. So, then he just wouldn't really talk to me much. So he would never say anything to me. But I was sort of, maybe, frozen out. And then when I was 17, my parents divorced, and my dad moved away. And my mother who was, I guess, a little bit more naive, she, I guess, never really picked up on it [me being gay]. And so things seemed to get a little better, I guess once my dad had left. Again, I was about 17 at the time. And when I was about 25, he came back to town and was in my life a little bit more. And the first time I ran into him was at a festival in Crowley, the Rice Festival. And when I saw him, he just gave me this bear hug, and he said, “I love you.” And from that point on, every time that I saw him or every time that he left, I would still get that bear hug, you know. And so I think at some point, he just realized… I mean, he saw that he wasn't around from that 17 to 25 age. And that's when I started working. I got a good job and, you know, things were going well in my life. And I had a partner at the time. And I think he realized that I was going to be okay, I guess is what it was. I mean, he was a Cajun man—a little Cajun boy—[and] his dad wasn't in the picture. And he was pretty much on his own, you know, so he was really tough. And I guess he saw people—gay people—at that time, and he looked at them and said, “Well, you know…” [He thought] I had no future or whatever. I guess a lot of it was he was scared for me, you know; he just didn't know. And then when he saw that I was gonna be okay, our relationship just changed, you know. He lived ‘til he was 85, and we had a really close relationship pretty much from that point on.

KF: All my aunts and uncles used to say, “When you gonna get you a little girl to marry?” And she says, “You have to have somebody take care of you.” They kind of—knowing the fact [that I was gay], but not just trying to say, you know, “You need somebody in your life the rest of your life.” And just like, we did [find somebody]—I did. It’s not like it's different.

ZS: Growing up around the time when you started to discover that you were gay, was there a community around? Like before getting into college?

ML: Absolutely not. No.

KF: No (laughs).

ML: No, it was just a little cocoon—a little bubble—you know, and I thought there was nobody else like me. Once in a while, you would see somebody who was obviously effeminate, who you thought were probably gay, and you’d think, “Well I’m not like that,” you know. So instead of opening up, that would put me more in the closet… Also because people would see that other [effeminate] person and say, “That's a queer,” you know, and they’d harass them, or maybe beat them up or whatever. And, you know, I didn't want to be that, so you just kind of stayed quiet. So, no, there was really no community at that point. I grew up in 1953. And I didn't come to Lafayette until ‘74, I guess, to come to UL. I didn't come out until probably 1977. I stayed in the closet. I was 23 years old before I ever came out. So, no, there was really no community up until that point.

KF: Me neither, not at home. But when I came to UL, it was like… there was a community, you know. I had a friend of mine that was older than me that was gay and so I got to meet people and I could communicate with people, and it seemed to be okay. Like, I said the first time that guy kissed me it’s like, “Okay,” you know, “I'm fine with it,” you know? So but yeah, and back home, though, there was not [a community]. In fact, I did a paper route when I was young. And my daddy was helping me one day, and we drove up to the paper box thing. He said, “You see that man? Stay away from him.” And that was the town queer at the time. So, [he said] “Stay away from him.” He knew about him…

ML: When I was about 18, I worked at this little clothing store for the summer. And I met a guy there, and we were friends. But he was a little effeminate; I wasn't sure that he wasn't gay. So one night, we were kind of on a double date, and we came out to Lafayette. And one of us had heard that there was a queer bar in Lafayette. And it was down there by Acadiana Mall, and it was the old Al Terry club. Al Terry was a local Cajun musician, and that had closed down. And it was actually a bar called C’est Gisele, which is a Lafayette famous gay bar. And we walked in, and it was terrifying (laughs), you know? The bar was full of people, and there was a drag show going on. And there was what turned out to be a pretty famous drag queen there named (looks at Keith) Naomi Sims, whose real name was Newman Braud. And that was her debut that night. She pantomimed a song called “Killing Me Softly” by Roberta Flack.

KF: I thought it was the first time I saw your face, but it was one of those that was—

ML: Yeah…

KF: --with a candle she had… [She was] sitting there with a candle.

ML: May have been, may have been. But that's stuck in my head. That moment right there. You know, and me and my friend and these two women, we're just like totally freaked out at this. So, we stayed till the end, and we ran out (laughs). But it was something I thought about for a long time… But then again, I looked at that [drag queen], and I'm saying, “Well, that's not me,” you know, “so maybe I have to stay in the closet, you know, because all these really effeminate men, you know, I don't feel like that.” So, again, it made me feel more alone. So that was helpful. And then, I guess in about 1977, some friends called me from Crowley and said, “We're going out to Lafayette.” And she just called to talk. And I said, “Well, hey, come on out.” And she said, “Well hang on a second.” And she said, “Well, we're going to a gay bar.” I said, “Well, that's okay. Hold on a second.” And she said, “Okay!” ‘Cause she really didn't think it was gay. So we went out to the gay bar, (smiling) and it was a fun time. And I guess about a month later, I met a guy there, and he turned out to be my first partner, and we were together for three years.

KF: I think that was the night he kissed me! (pointing to Mike and smiling) Even though he didn’t know he was gay! (laughing) We worked at the phone company together.

ML: (laughing, pointing at Keith) I was already working at the phone company, and we worked together for about a year, I guess. We’re not partners; we’re just friends.

KF: No… but it freaked me out. I think that was a Wednesday night. And my partner at the time worked at that phone company too, and I ran up to him and said, “Mike Leblanc just kissed me!” Because he had long hair, it was kind of hippie. He didn’t look gay at all. It was kind of freaky.

ZS: That actually transitions into next question: discuss how you got involved in the community and the ways you congregated together, like the bar culture?

ML: Yeah, in those days, I think that was mostly the only way in culture—

KF: That was basically the only way to do it, you know.

ML: Now, there was some communities though, and I think Keith was part of that. There was some apartments on Louisiana called Holy Family Apartments. And there was a lot of gay people that lived in that apartment, I guess maybe they were inviting their friends to go or whatever. And it was an inexpensive place to live, I think.

KF: Inexpensive, it was supposed to be for low income. But the girl that managed it, her husband was gay, and they were real good friends [of ours]. So she kept putting us in there. Me and my lover at the time, we both worked at the phone company. We were way above the scale to be able to rent there. But I mean, there was probably 10 to 12 apartments there at one time with just gay people. We played volleyball; it was something else. But that was that was in ’70…

ML: Probably ’75, ’76…

KF: ’75, ’76, somewhere around there. But I got involved with *The* *Boys in the Band* in 1972. We did dinner theater, at what was that?

OI1: Lafayette Little Theater.

KF: Lafayette Little Theater on Mudd. And it was so successful. We did another one, about six to eight months later, at the hotel that was the—

OI1: Travel Lodge.

KF: --Travel Lodge, and we had dinner theater; it was packed. That was 1972 and ‘73. So that was a way of really introducing it to the Lafayette community. And it was very overwhelming. I mean, you know, basically the only problem we had with the bars was trying to get in and out with the people that were so homophobic. At one of the bars, somebody threw a bottle and hit somebody in the eye, and they lost their eyesight. So that was the bad part about growing up and the way the bars were, you know, but other than that, I mean, I’ve always been open about it, you know, I was lucky. My work knew about it. My family knew about it.

ML: There was a club on University called the Office Lounge… No, the Offshore Club. And that became Frank's if I remember correctly.

KF: (to Mike) That was C’est La Guerre. By the underpass?

ML: Yeah.

KF: That was C’est La Guerre.

ML: It became John’s C’est La Guerre later, but before that it was Offshore Lounge… if I remember correctly. (to all) Right? Correct? It was on a corner, and the door was at an angle, and the drag queens would hang out on the front porch. And then people, like Keith said, would throw bottles and that kind of stuff. So they finally ended up putting chicken wire around it, so the drag queens wouldn't get hit by the bottles (laughs). So that's the way they remedied that. But there was a lot of harassment—

KF: --At the doors. Once you got in, you were okay, you felt comfortable. But it was to get from your car to the door is where a lot of that, I guess, animosity toward gay people was. A lot of times they’d throw beer bottles, no matter what, but we dodged in, had a good time, and left, you know.

ML: There were some worse things that happened around town, not so much at the bars. But I remember there was a drag queen, and I can't remember her name (looks to Keith). Tammy… Faye, maybe she went by? But she wasn't your normal, outrageous type drag. She’d dress in these high collar clothes, and she almost looked like a schoolmarm, you know. And she would sit with her hands (gestures to his hands in his lap) like that. She ended up being murdered actually. She was found in a field around Duson, if I remember correctly.

KF: (to OI1) I think Tammy Faye’s the one they swept under a canal by Teurlings. I think there was a ditch…

OI1: (to Keith) I think you’re right.

KF: (to Mike) Yeah, the ditch by Teurlings…

ML: (to Keith) Is that where it was? And I don't think they ever found out who did that, did they?

KF: No, I don't think so.

ML: You know, and I don’t know how hard they looked to find out who it was, but I don't think it was ever solved. But those kinds of things went on.

KF: Going back to Gisele’s in the country. The bars stayed open all night, Gisele’s on Sunday. Everybody would close on Sunday, but she [Gisele] would stay open on Sunday nights, and she had bands there on Sunday nights. It was packed, like people from Baton Rouge, Lake Charles all these [bars, on] Sunday nights, they were closed. She had probably 800 people there on a Sunday night. And a lot of the bands that were popular played there, you know. So I mean, that was another way the weekend thing kept going, not just stopped on Saturday. And it was all night long. When I think [I] turned 21 is when they moved the [legal drinking] age to 21. They moved the age to 21 and started closing at 2… I think it was around that time.

ML: I had a bunch of photographs from the early days. I took a lot of pictures. I always had a camera and like, they would ask me take pictures at parties and some of the Mardi Gras balls and things like that. So I started this, this Facebook group called “Gay Lafayette, Louisiana,” I guess, maybe three or four years ago, something like that. And people started sharing pictures. I saw some really good pictures on there of things back in the day, some of the earlier bars. And so people started sharing. My question was about how the gay bars began in Lafayette. And people shared some experience. There was a bar called “Lily’s,” I think. Is that right, Keith?

KF: Lil’s on Jefferson.

ML: Lil’s on Jefferson?

KF: It was a straight bar, but they on one Saturday night, maybe every two weeks, they’d let the gay people go in and dance. And they had a record player. That's what they would [do]. And that was two doors down from Dwyer’s. And for some reason, something happened, and all the guys started walking down to Gisele’s downtown. And that's where Gisele’s opened up in 1968. She was downtown in the Oak Lawn Hotel, and then she moved out in the country probably a year later. But yeah, the bars were downtown, basically. Before my time there was the Peppermint. (to self) And what’s the other one? (to all) La Cambre, were the two bars that were [in Lafayette]. And they ended up, basically that some of the bars just changed names. They were still the gay bars, you know, it was just they just changed names.

ML: But they never advertised as gay bars.

KF: ­--Back then. That was before—

ML: --You could say it was a gay bar.

KF: --In the early ‘60’s.

ML: Right, yeah. And I heard stories about the bartenders had to watch and make sure no one danced together or touched each other because the police would come in and close them down. You know, because, you know, you could be gay, but you couldn't show any affection.

KF: I think that’s what happened at Lil’s. They were dancing or something. Then they [the bartenders] said, “No, you can't do that.” And the guys got mad. They walked down to Gisele’s.

ML: So the early bars were mostly mixed. There was a bar called the Buck Horn Lounge downtown. And that may have been…

KF: That was Gisele’s.

ML: (nodding) That was Gisele’s, okay.

KF: Before Gisele’s, it was the Buck Horn Bar. And I think she might have been working there, and that's why I think that's how it converted to [Gisele’s].

ML: (nodding) Ah, she was an employee there.

KF: Yeah, I think that’s what [happened]. I'm not sure.

ML: And I don't know if you've read any of Gisele’s stories, but there's a guy named Dennis Ward, I think that wrote a book about her. She was a war bride from, I think, France. And she opened up, not the first gay bar, but the first I guess, disco-type gay bar and the first drag bar I think in Lafayette. So she was…

KF: The first video too… There was a jukebox. And if you'd press a button, there was a little screen that would show a video. I can remember the song. It said, “Come along if you can.” And it was some lady in some tights, and she was climbing up the steps and when she got to the top, it ended. So that was the first videography I saw, and it was in the jukebox itself. (laughing)

ZS: Just curious with some of these bars. First of all, were these bars close together or were they mostly [separate]?

ML: Initially they were all within downtown Lafayette, which was Jefferson Street and, of course, Lafayette was much smaller back in those days.

KF: Frank's was downtown. Gisele’s was downtown…

ML: --Until it moved out in the…

KF: --Until it moved out in the country. And then C’est La Guerre, which means “war” … he got mad at Gisele, so he moved downtown. And, you know where the water fountain is in downtown Lafayette? Where the Park Lafayette, Parc Sans Souci is? He moved across. That's where he was. It burned on a Friday. And I remember KVOL was playing, in honor of the Queens burning downtown…

ML: (smiling) “Dancing Queens.”

KF: (laughing) They played “Dancing Queens” in honor… the bar was burning downtown. And then he opened up across the street, which is where Agave is. And at that time, it was a small bar, as it was actually a service station before. And when they had drag shows, they would close the garage doors, and it was a dirt floor (laughs). And they had a stage where the garage doors were. And one of the guys was doing her number, and everybody was killing theirself laughing and clapping, and she was just going to town. And there was a rat that was running across the top of the garage door that everybody was looking at, not her (laughs). But yeah, so basically downtown… I guess because most of the bars were downtown, maybe Gisele’s [moved] out in the country. And then Rod opened the bar out in the country. And then there was one at the Gallopin’ Jugs, but more so others were downtown.

ML: Yeah, as the ‘80s came maybe they started moving more downtown. Well, Gisele’s had moved out there.

KF: But then again, they were cracking down on the alcohol. So we were at Rod’s. Rod’s was the Cadillac Bar. And a lot of people didn't go because it was out of town, and you had to come back into town and after drinking, you know. They were scared. So, it didn't last that long. Maybe a year or two. It didn't last that long.

ML: Yeah…

KF: That's, I think, the reason why some of the bars stayed downtown because when you went home…

ZS: During this time, going to the bars... was there still an urge to be closeted or was there more willingness to come out? And [to] kind of [add] onto that, did, for example, like the Stonewall Riots, did that have like any influence on the bar culture in [Lafayette]?

ML: It probably did in the big cities, but in little conservative Lafayette, it took a while.

KF: Yeah, because I remember Stonewall when it happened. Now I do remember in Houston the cops used to [harass gay people]… I think Stonewall became of that. Because the cops were harassing all the queens, they were killing their [animals]. They’d go in and kill their [animals]: cats and you know, harassing them totally. But I came out in 1968, and I don't remember, Stonewall was in ‘69. And until, I guess, the Gay Pride Week, that's when the story… because of Stonewall, but that's when I started associating Stonewall with gay pride.

ML: Because, I think, it was more of a slow thing. I mean, Stonewall happened, but it wasn't a big thing. They locally talked about gay people fighting back, and then the movements, I guess, began to grow. I remember in like ‘72 or something, I was watching the show called *Tomorrow* with Tom Snyder—he was the host of that, I think he went on at 10:30 at night. And it was a talk show, and he would interview these people that were pushing LGBT rights back then. That was like, shocking back in that time to see something like that. I would watch it late at night when nobody else was around (laughs). So yeah, it was a slow process before that ever happened around here. It's still happening to some degree, I think.

KF: Yeah.

ZS: And certainly in the bars, what were the demographics? Like was it mostly white gay men or were there many different races?

ML: It was probably more white gay men. But I think it was a pretty diverse…

KF: White gay men, not lesbians. Because I know, for some reason, a lot of the lesbians were teachers. And so, they never would come out, that I can recall. And as far as for other ethnic groups, I don't remember…

ML: I know, at some point, the lesbian bar started, but it was probably a little bit later than that. Maybe it was the ‘80s or late ‘80s, maybe.

KF: In fact, the lesbians started a Scratched Record Party, which it was a private party, so they could all go out and dance together and stuff, you know. But nowadays, everybody's okay. The schools have, you know, programs for the lesbians and the guys and stuff. So, it's a lot easier for a lot of people nowadays. Which looking back, it didn't seem to be too hard for me. And I guess I was always okay. You know, I had that confrontation with my parents, and other than that, it didn't matter to me who knew. I don't flaunt it, but I'm okay with it. I was always okay with it. In fact, in *Boys in the Band*, I was in the play. And I mean, to do that in 1972, you know… At Little Theater it was basically a lot more straight people than gay people. Because back then a lot of gay people didn't want to go and say, “Oh, they're gonna associate me as being gay because of the thing.” In fact, one of the guys that we talked about coming over here—that had one of the bars—in the play, she was in drag. And from the play, you had lights on the stage and you don't feel too much. All I could see was that flashy silver thing, and the lights would catch on it, and I’d say, “Okay, you got to remember your lines.” Because I had maybe three or four lines in the play that I had to follow. You know, it's kind of hard for me because everybody else is just kind of flowing. But I just remember her, maybe one or two. But back then she was in drag. But most of the people at that theater, were basically straight people.

ZS: And that includes the audience too, right? Because this was a really popular play at the time.

KF: Yeah, yeah. It was back in, I want to say ‘72 and ‘73. Lilette Renee and, what was her name?

They’re both gone now, but she's the one... (to someone offscreen) Was it Girouard? The teacher? Northside painter…

OI1: Russel?

KF: Terry Girouard? I think he was the one that kinda… He wasn't out yet. But like I said, he kind of helped Lilette find people to be in the play. And everybody in the play was gay, I think. I think there were, I don't think there was a straight one.

ML: The pressure for me was mostly internal, I guess, because of the way I was raised. Because this was the way I was supposed to be [straight]. And I wasn't that. So I guess that [pressure] may be heightened, I think, to some degree.

KF: (to Mike) You were from a good Catholic family (laughs).

ML: (to Keith) No, actually, we were Methodist; we weren’t Catholic. (to interviewer) But it's just… my dad was just such a man's man.

KF: Well, yeah, of course he was.

ML: He's, you know, he could do anything.

KF: And that’s how everybody grew up.

ML: He was a Clint Eastwood, he was a John Wayne kind of person, you know, so… And I just felt like I should have been that, you know? And I wasn't that, so I had to hide it, you know.

KF: (to someone off-screen) That's why you're attracted to him (laughs).

ZS: That kinda goes into the next question. Describe the cultural environment, and especially the hostile attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals at the time. Because you mentioned the throwing bottles at the drag queens… I mean, were the police any help at any time?

ML: I never really got involved that much… One night, we were at the bar. It was a bar called Leaping Lena’s, it was out on Highway I-49, at one of the exits. And Wesley was one of the owners. And these young guys would come out wanting to harass gay people. And a lot of times, it was because they were gay themselves, and they were, you know, dealing with that or whatever. And I remember one would swing a chain, you know, and we had an altercation. I happened to be outside when it happened, that kind of thing. So, there were things like that, but I don't remember the police being there. Maybe there are some stories that I'm not aware of.

KF: In all my days, I don't think the police were ever called. Because I don't think anything basically happened inside; it was always outside, I guess. You know, and really, Leaping Lena’s and Southern Comfort—that was another one—and the Owl’s Perch were the three that were kind of well-known for people throwing stuff at them.

ML: There was a lot of people… There were a lot of men who were gay that, because of inner or external pressure, got married, had wives, or whatever. And they would go out on weekends, and drive around the bus station in downtown Lafayette to look for guys. And a lot of the guys from the bars or whatever—a lot of the gay guys—would go out, you know, to meet these guys. They would stand there, and the guys would drive around. And sometimes policeman would go undercover, and drive around and proposition these guys, and then they would arrest them. Because I remember that going on. I knew somebody in Lafayette that happened to. But I don’t remember very much about that…

KF: The cops… not that I can recall.

ML: I'm sure other people maybe had that kind of experience, but I just never did or never saw it.

ZS: They wouldn't raid the bar, like harass [anyone]?

ML: No, by that time that had already ended.

KF: I used to go out every weekend, and I don't remember ever having it raided… that I can [recall]…

ML: That may have been…That was going on during Stonewall. And that's when Stonewall happened, because they started fighting back. But I don’t remember that after… Because Stonewall was in like ’69, and my experience were most like ‘77 forward, so that had probably stopped happening.

ZS: At this time, were there certain homophobic individuals or groups that were coming out—like Anita Bryant or something—threatening the community, specifically in Acadiana?

ML: Oh, yeah. I mean, I don't know that I noticed it too much in Acadiana, but it was on national news a lot, so you know.

KF: Yeah, but I don’t think we had any groups here that, you know, formed to try to push the LGBT community out.

ML: Not at that time. Because Lafayette was so conservative that it was almost useless to try to fight it at that point.

KF: Maybe the Krewe of Apollo might have been a certain way of doing it. They started in 1976, I think, huh? (looks to Mike)

ML: I think so.

KF: ’76, yeah. So the Krewe of Apollo might have been a way of, you know, starting that as far as for… But it still was a private Krewe for a good 10, 15 years, it was always by invitation. But a lot of straight people would come. So I mean, we were conservative, but there was still a lot of people that were okay with enjoying the fun of it.

ML: I don't remember very many people getting together until AIDS happened. And that's when people I guess, maybe got a little angrier. And then that's when maybe some groups started forming. AIDS was like ’83, ‘84, something like that.

KF: Lafayette CARES started, and that's what Claude would help with… We used to meet at the UMC in one room, and then they started with the buddy system. [There were] people that were sick, and their families would disown them. We had what we would call the “buddy system” that we would go talk to them, and maybe get them a hamburger or something, and try to comfort them… It wasn’t that much. But that was started in, I wanna say ’83…

OI1: (to Keith) St. Luke's.

KF: (to OI1) St. Luke’s, yep. It was at UMC and then went to St. Luke's by the… You talking about Lourdes?

OI1: By Lourdes.

KF: Yeah, that's when there was no place to meet, but they finally got a group. It was on the second floor at St. Luke's, that they were finally able to get a place to congregate.

ML: Now, tell me again where St. Luke’s is.

KF: The orphanage—

ML: On St. Mary?

KF: On St. Mary, yeah.

ML: Oh, okay.

KF: It was on the second floor. The one… The building they kept. It was on the second floor. And there again, we probably go through the back, because of, you know…

ZS: Yeah, I'll get to that period in a little bit. But you started mentioning Krewe of Apollo. Can you describe the different Pride events in Acadiana? And like the different like gay Mardi Gras Krewes? So like, Krewe of Apollo, Krewe of Yuga.

KF: The Krewe of Apollo started in ’76, and then Unicorn started maybe 10 years later (looks to someone off-screen)

OI1: At least 10 years.

ML: Which is the Royal Order of Unicorn, that was the second…

KF: --Second gay group. But that's all that I know of, as far as group of people—gay people—together. I don't think there's any other type of group that would have been… and their meeting was still private, for a good 10 years, by invitation only. But it was a way of inviting, if you had straight friends, to come and enjoy it, you know, and it was very festive. And as it went along, people would say, “Wow, I want to go, I want to go,” you know. So that's the only groups that I can think of back in… And Unicorn was 10 years later.

ML: Yeah, I don’t remember any Pride festivals, or any Pride things in Lafayette until the recent years. Until I think Ted in Carencro…

KF: Ted Richard.

ML: --and Ted Richard started a Pride a few years ago, and then a lady named Wendy… I can't remember Wendy’s last name. She owned a shop downtown, but she did the first… she did a really big Pride last year. And there's another one coming up this June. And she's really amped it up a lot. I’ve actually never been to one before in Lafayette.

KF: I went to the first one. It was very not crowded at all. Because there again, people still… it's okay to be gay. But it's like if you go in, you're associated with that group. So you know, they know you’re gay, so it was not that successful. In fact, Geno Delafose played that year. And they had a few shops and stuff, but it still was like, okay… So it's getting better. Like downtown now they… for Pride Month, everybody puts flags up now. So that's all okay. And I think it's coming out to where, you know… Now back when it [Pride Acadiana] first started, it was kind of slow.

ML: And in a lot of people's defense, they could lose their job because Lafayette’s such a conservative little place that it's also, they don't want to be known just for whatever reason. But they also don't want to lose their work, their job. So I understand that. What really helped those people coming out: the more people actually came out, the more accepted it became, and the more people were able to come out so that, I guess, kinda fed itself.

ZS: Do you know roughly when that happened? Was that more recent years?

ML: What was?

ZS: When you saw more people starting to come out?

ML: Well, I mean, it's still to this day, I mean, there's some… But I guess, was it maybe the late ‘80s, maybe ‘90s, when people started to maybe be a little less [afraid to come out] …? There was an article in *Times of* *Acadiana* about a gay couple, Tommy and… They owned a flower shop…

KF: Tommy Champagne.

ML: Tommy Champagne and his partner is still around, I can't remember his name. But there's—and I think I have the article here. It's about Gay Lafayette, and there was a gay couple on the cover of that, and it was like, shocking for the time. And was that late ‘80s? Maybe? I think I still have the article. I may have put a copy of it on the Gay Lafayette Facebook group. I don’t remember when that was.

KF: We’re starting to not remember (laughs).

ML: But that was kind of… That's when things maybe kind of begin to turn around. Because people would actually come out and do an interview and say, “Yes, I'm gay; here's my partner.” And before that, I don’t remember seeing that in Lafayette before.

KF: And the Krewe of Apollo helped, you know, because back when I was staying across the street from his (points to someone off-screen) house, it was only about 800 people; now it’s what 2000?

OI1: 2 or 3000…

OI2: That go?

KF: Yeah.

OI2: Yeah. And then they trimmed it back, because they had so many people that wanted to go with it was…

KF: Yeah.

OI2: I mean, they rented out the Cajundome.

ML: Apollo sells out now. It's a hot ticket. And you know, back in the day, pretty much, I guess, anybody could go.

KF: And then Acadiana CARES is helping too, because now Acadiana CARES also helps with drug... And it's not just HIV people. So there's a lot of community in that. I’m associated with some of them because I manage some property. And they rent the property for some of the people, and it's not just HIV. So, it's helping just to kind of get people to get together that have problems: drug problems, marital problems, anything of that nature. So Acadiana CARES helps. That's another, I guess, a group—you want to maybe say a gay group, because it started off as HIV. But it's expanded so much. And it's a big organization now, it really is.

ML: I mean, we would go to Pride events in Houston, or New Orleans or whatever, but you know, just not—Lafayette wasn't ready for that.

KF: I mean, we did have Red Ribbon Day. And that was through CARES—Acadiana CARES. It was games. Some of the people, after they started dying, they wanted to do something in memory of certain people. So some people did T-shirts. But still again, that was still a little conservative, I guess, if you want to say.

ML: Was the news there for that? Did they cover any of that?

KF: I don't know if they did or not. Honestly, I don't remember. But it was called Red Ribbon Day. They had races, and different things to do. [They had] little family get-togethers of families that had HIV people that died of HIV and stuff. So there again, Claude could help you with a lot of that.

ML: I remember even, like at some point, it got to a point where the news stations would cover the Apollo Ball. And I remember one of the guys who was in the Apollo Ball, were photographed and they put that on the news. And he was furious. And his partner [was] a guy in Lafayette. And I assumed that people knew that he was gay, or that he was out, but he was really upset that he was on the news.

KF: Well I don't—I’m a past King of Apollo, and I still don't want the name or my picture in the paper. I do a lot of volunteer work for kids’ shelters and stuff. And I don't want the idea of some little kid saying, “That's the guy that molested me.” So I'd rather not be in the news. This [motions to camera] is okay. Because the people that that are going to go look at it want to see it, you follow what I'm saying? But just putting it out in the paper—I stopped that about four or five years ago because I'm just… And there again, I'm okay with being gay. I just don't like… some things I just don't like to be in the public and the newspapers, one of them. It's just there. I mean, let me allow you to say, “Okay, you're gonna put it in.” Don't just put it in, you know, and expect I'm not gonna… I would still get mad. Because that's something I don’t want, you know, so… Yeah, they know, of course, [they’ll say,] “Come take a picture,” [and I’ll say,] “Nope.” [They’ll say,] “We’re not gonna put it in,” [and I’ll say,] “Nope.” Because somebody else is gonna take a picture and put it on Facebook. You know? So it's like, I just stay away from it. You know, but that's my choice. You know? I would help anybody out, don't get me wrong, but it's just that I'm not… Social media and stuff like that, I just don't like it.

ZS: You started talking about Acadiana CARES. Can you describe your experiences during the AIDS crisis, and how the political climate in Acadiana changed?

KF: I was a buddy in the system, I was on the board for about two or three years, and I was a buddy, which [would] go to help people. And it was so heartbreaking to go to somebody in UMC. I remember there was one patient that was laying there and had--not one point his body didn't have scaling, whatever it had… Face, everywhere, you know. And it was scary to touch somebody, but I still did it. Because I figured, you know… but just that touch, I mean, made him feel good, [because] his family disowned him and stuff. And then there was another one I was a buddy with, which ended up to be a Black lady, a girl from New Iberia. And I’d take her out to eat hamburgers and stuff. So you know. But the crisis back then, when it first started, and nobody knew [about AIDS]… I mean, I think it was ‘84, it was Faira, and she grew up in New Orleans, and they were afraid that she got HIV from a glass in the bar. So they started serving in [disposable] cups. And that's basically why they serve in [disposable] cups now at the gay bars… It might be cheaper anyway. But they did start doing that instead of washing them, because they were afraid--they didn't know if the gay disease was from poppers--they didn't know where it was coming from. So for the first 5 to 10 years [they didn’t know what caused AIDS]… Now they know basically how you catch HIV, you know, and there's medicines and stuff for that. But back then, it was really bad as far as for the families, because they didn't want to even hug their kids. You know, and they disowned them. It was sad. But thank God it’s come around.

ML: They called it the “gay cancer” back in that day. They didn't know what was going on. Poppers are amyl nitrate, which they would inhale during sex and that kind of thing. And a lot of people thought that that's what was giving them the gay cancer. And just, no one knew at the time.

KF: And I think, at the time, there was a lot of drugs going on. And your immune system was down, and sex, and party sex, and sex, and, you know, it was… I think that's why it spread so fast. I think if people would have realized what was going on, they might not have gone to the extreme of what they did [partying and drugs] back then, you know. But, just the drugs made your system go down [so that] it's easily attacked, you know; your system that way.

ML: And I was partnered; I’d pretty much been partnered from the time I came out—I had three different partners. And I was kind of away from that scene. So I wasn’t really involved with it.

KF: I’m lucky I’m still here, you know. But when I went to party, I was dancing. I was having fun dancing. It wasn’t a sexual… [It wasn’t] to go out for sex. I was a dancing person. So that might have saved me too.

ZS: Was there a fear that you could get it? What was that like?

KF: In fact, Cheryl lived with me in 1982, I think. And she told me one day, she says, “You better quit worrying. You look sick.” I was so worried about it, that I lost weight and I looked sick. She says, “You look sick. I know you're not sick, but,” she says, “you look sick.” And that's basically from worrying about where was it coming from? So this was ’83, ‘84. So it had to come out in the ‘80s. Yeah, it was 1980 I think.

ML: I think it was very early in ’81.

KF: So ’83, ’84, when I didn't know what was happening. So I mean, I lost a lot of weight. So yeah, I was totally worried because we didn't know what it was.

ML: At the very beginning, it was just really scary not to know if you can get it from touch or from drinking after someone or whatever.

KF: And I didn't do drugs. So you know, you hear that but then you didn't know any different, so it was a little rough for about two or three years.

ML: We lost a lot of friends. A lot a lot of friends.

KF: So me and him (points to someone off-camera) one weekend, we counted.

OI1: Over three hundred…

KF: Over three hundred people that we knew. I think I still have that list.

OI1: I remember that night.

ZS: So with all with this going on, did it lead to you wanting to get involved in activism and such, like LEGAL or LAGPAC?

KF: I got involved with CARES. I was with CARES, I was on the board. I was Treasurer so that was my way of getting involved with it. And then we started a Christmas thing through the phone company. I was with a volunteer group, and we started a Christmas thing. We started buying them presents, because some of these kids [and] some of these families didn't have anything. So that was my involvement of getting to help out some of the sick people and their families, you know. So that was my part with Acadiana CARES. It started as Lafayette CARES, then it went to Acadiana CARES, because it opened up the region. So that was my involvement.

ML: Yeah, I wasn't really involved in that part of it.

ZS: Can you describe LEGAL and LAGPAC? Were you guys affiliated with that at all?

KF: The only involvement I had with LAGPAC and LEGAL was one time I had trouble, something wrong with my job. And that was the only time I contacted them. And that was it. I mean, basically, because that was, to me, that was almost secretive. The LEGAL… because Mike was involved with that. So I didn't know too much about it. But that was the only time I ever had an association with it. Are they still [active]? I don’t think they are.

ZS: No.

ML: (shakes head)

ZS: And finally, how do you feel things have changed for LGBTQ+ individuals in Southwest Louisiana?

ML: I think we've come a long way. (looks to Keith)

KF: Yeah.

ML: There are still a lot of closeted people, you know. Some people are still worried I guess about their job, but not nearly what it was back in the day.

KF: For me, it's changed a lot. Some of the changes, I’m not particularly okay with. The fact that sometimes they throw it down somebody's throat, you know. I have a family member that kinda is like that. And it's okay. That's his thing. But I just don't like the fact…To me, if you push harder, you're gonna get more resistance. If you just let it flow and just be okay with it, you know… My thing is, we’re gay people, but we’re all people. We shouldn't have to be fighting in that way. We shouldn't, but that's the way society is. But the way things are now, it's very open. You know, I'm okay with it. But sometimes it can, maybe, be pushed a little too hard. (laughs)

ML: Yeah, I think it's much better now. Because people can be themselves. And that's the important thing, you know. Because back in the day, you can easily learn to hate yourself, if you have keep hiding who you were. And now you don't really have to. And that's awesome. You know, you'll see women now with real short haircuts, and, you know, the lesbians, they've always had to dress differently and not dress how they feel and, and now they can, but that's just really great. And you don't really see as much resistance to that anymore. I guess you still see some of it, but not really a lot. You know, I know a lot of businesses, people hire, you know, they don't look at that kind of thing when they hire and that's just great.

ZS: What work do you feel still needs to be done?

ML: Well, a lot of it’s legislative because the laws seem to be backtracking. You know, and lately in the news, you can see how, you know, the Supreme Court's trying to back up on things. I mean, we could lose gay marriage; you know, it could happen at any time. So with the abortion issues now, you can see where the Supreme Court's heading. So we just need to get people out to vote and we need to spread the word about that kind of thing. There are so many people that if they voted, this wouldn't have happened, but a lot of people just don't vote. They think that things can continue as they are and not… You know, [they think], “I don't need to worry about it.” But we do, because we can easily lose it and people don't realize that.

ZS: Do you see that as kind of a trend in younger LGBT individuals?

ML: With not voting, I'm not really sure. I don't really know.

ZS: Either that or are [younger LGBTQ+ individuals] being complacent with the way things are right now?

KF: I don't think the young kids realize that some of the decisions they make now is for their future. They’re having a good time. You know, and that's all that matters [to them], you know. But I think there’s a little bit more young [people] involved, don't get me wrong, but I think a lot of them just don’t [think]… You know, that's how I used to think, you know, just eh (waves hands). But now I make sure I go and vote, you know, but I would hope they would start thinking about their future, you know, but there again, to me, sometimes some of the young kids just shove it down everybody’s throat, you’re gonna get that much resistance, that's how it is, I mean, you know. I'm not gonna, you know … Excuse me (laughs). But, you know, that kind of thing.

ML: Yeah, I mean, we go back to bad times, you know. I tried to be involved a little bit politically, and I probably need to do more. But we need to really get out there and make them understand what you know, what we can lose. You know, I think you take things for granted after a while, and we can't do that, because it's very real that we could lose a lot of important rights.

KF: I think if they [legislators] took religion and government and make sure it's separate, [things] might be a little bit better. You know, but it's hard to do that. I mean, you know, it's not supposed to be because everybody has different beliefs in their religion, but the law is the law. So, until that happens, I don't think too much is going to change. So, I'm on my way out (waves, laughs). But the younger people need to think about that for their future.

ZS: Do you think there's hope with the younger generation? Do you see things that they're doing that you feel is like inspiring?

ML: I see some things. Like this Lafayette Pride looks like Wendy’s getting a lot of people together. She’s getting a lot of good press about it. She got an Undercurrent Award for…

ZS: Sorry, who’s Wendy?

ML: Wendy is involved in Pride. I was trying to remember last name, (looks to camera) I’m sorry, Wendy. I can't remember what it was. But she worked downtown, and she worked next to the bike shop. Inside the bike shop, she had a place that sold secondhand camping equipment and things like that. And when Ted wasn't able to do much with Pride anymore, Wendy got involved. And she put on Pride last year, and it was very successful. And she got an Undercurrent Award. The Current gives these awards for people who did really good things in the area, and Wendy won an award for that. And I think this year is going to be even better. I think there's going to be a Pride parade and things like that.

OI2: She’s a grad student at UL.

ML: Apparently, she’s a grad student at UL, so she’s a really sweet lady. And so yeah, I see some people getting involved and trying to make things better. And she's getting other people involved that weren't like [involved before] … Like I'd never really gotten involved. I'd never been to a Pride before in Lafayette. I've been [to Pride] out of town, but not in Lafayette. But so yeah, there are some positive things happening.

KF: Does she own the bike shop?

ML: No, Megan owned the bike shop, and she had the shop inside, on the other side with the camping equipment.

OI2: She closed her shop.

KF: Oh, I was gonna say, I didn’t know about that.

OI2: Well, she had a lot of flak from straight people like opening the door and screaming at them because they had gay flags hanging in there and stuff like that. So, Wendy’s the one to talk to about people's attitudes here.

ML: Yeah, she would be a good one to talk to.

KF: Yeah, she might have different perspective, a different experience.

OI2: Yeah, and I think in some way, she's a little extreme to the negative side, not seeing how it's progressed since they were young.

ZS: Is there anything else that we haven't spoken about yet that feels important to discuss?

OI2: Like the political side of things. The older gay guys that vote against their own best interests happens a lot. And nobody can explain why. You know, they’ll pick one area that they're against, so they vote that side no matter what, without seeing the ramifications of everything it could take away from people, especially gay people.

KF: The political side of it really, it's gotten so bad on both sides, it really has. They just blame each other instead of just dealing with what they're supposed to be doing.

ML: Racism is really still bad in the area, and a lot of people vote a certain way because they think these lazy Black people are taking all their tax money. You know, and that’s something we’ve heard since the ‘50s and’ 60s. And they make people vote a certain way, which turns out to be voting against your own best interest if you're gay or your own civil rights and things like that. So that's one thing that we're dealing with.

KF: It's more prominent down South than it is anywhere else, I think. Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia.

ML: Yep.

ZS: Okay, well that’s all I had, so I’m gonna stop recording.