

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE
LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of
Tom Gibbons '87
Conducted by
Mary Armstrong
June 3, 2017

Special Collections & College Archives

David Bishop Skillman Library

Lafayette College

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[This transcript has been significantly modified by the interviewee.]

Gibbons

MARY ARMSTRONG: Okay, so it is June 3, 2017. This is Mary Armstrong, professor and chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College, and I'm here with Tom Gibbons, class of 1987, who has graciously taken some time out of reunion weekend to do an LGBTQ oral history interview. Thank you very much, Tom.

TOM GIBBONS: You're welcome.

MA: So, at the beginning of every interview, we ask the participant to -- if you'd state your name and confirm that your participation is voluntary, and you've given your informed consent.

TG: Sure. My name is Tom Gibbons, and my participation is entirely voluntary, and I just signed the consent form, so --

MA: Okay, marvelous.

TG: -- yes, I'm ready to go.

MA: So, two things. One is -- or a couple things -- you are -- please decline any answer -- to answer any question that you don't want to address. The idea is that the questions are just prompts [1:00] to help you think up things that

you'd like to share. If you want to elaborate on any question, it seems like something really rich, and you want to talk about that -- and also, later, if you're like me, and you get home, and you're like, "Oh, I wish I'd mentioned that thing," feel free to send an email or write it down or -- you know, it's not like this is a fully bound interview where you can't add something later if you think of anything. It's not formal in that sense. So, if you want to write comments or send more information -- if you have any sort of materials or things you find from your days at Lafayette that you want to donate to the archives, they're always happy with that. So, personal pronouns you prefer? He, him, his? Sometimes --

TG: For me?

MA: For you.

TG: Yeah, he, him.

MA: Okay. We like to ask. And how do you define yourself as a member of the LGBT community? That's a sort of "which letter?" question, I guess.

TG: Well, that's a very interesting question, because I do have an opinion on that. And at least for me, [2:00] I've always really kind of resisted the definition of L, G, B, T, or Q, and maybe that's unique to me. I don't know, but I believe that, you know, my sexuality really shouldn't

define who I am. I was very comfortable here at Lafayette, but at the time I did not consider myself gay, at least when I was here in 1987. I was dating women; [3:00] and although I had interest in men, I thought it was just friendship interest, you know, at the time, but it was obviously stronger than that. I have been in a relationship with my partner now for 22 years.

MA: Wow. Congratulations. That's wonderful.

TG: Thank you very much. We've led what I consider to be a traditional lifestyle. I don't consider it an alternative lifestyle. [4:00]

MA: Great. So, you were saying that you felt comfortable at Lafayette.

TG: Yeah.

MA: Just describe your time at Lafayette as a person. It sounds like you were [5:00] coming out to yourself a little while you were on campus, or figuring things out, or -- what was it like to be that person when you were here?

TG: [6:00]I had great friendships in Lafayette, and I had what I consider some intimate -- emotionally intimate relationships with several men, but it was mostly, you know, pretty platonic.

MA: Yeah.

TG: Yeah, all of my relationships here were platonic.
Remember, the mid-'80s was when AIDS was starting, and there was a lot of uncertainty; there was a lot of negative publicity. [7:00] And even when I thought that this might be something that would appeal to me -- being gay -- I almost immediately rejected it, because I felt the risk to my health and the impact to my family would be too high until I understood more about it, or until I really had a relationship that was so trusting that I could do that.

MA: AIDS made it a different context, essentially.

TG: Completely.

MA: Yeah.

TG: Yeah. I mean, there was a lot of fear. And even at 25, when I started to have relationships, I was so stressed out about the risk of getting sick.

MA: The anxiety of that time is -- it's hard to convey to people who weren't alive at that [8:00] time.

TG: Yeah.

MA: Like, it was an unknown.

TG: And --

MA: People didn't understand. It was panic.

TG: Yes. Right.

MA: -- that it's hard to convey what a grim, gruesome --

TG: Yeah. It was scary.

MA: -- terrible time that was.

TG: Right. To have these feelings of love that you want to express, and thinking that you're putting your life at risk --

MA: Yeah. [9:00] That's powerful. So, that -- I think that's beautifully said. I mean, it's really important, too, because it's a context of gay identity that is thankfully changed. Those times have changed, right?

TG: Yeah. Right.

MA: And people feel differently, and it's a different world. But that's really important. So, did you know of gay people? Was there any kind of gay community? Was it -- even if you weren't associating with it yourself, did -- was Lafayette -- seemed like it was just silent around these issues? Or how was the context of the college, I suppose?

TG: You know, in retrospect -- yes, some of my friends were gay, but we never talked about it. We came close to talking about it--

MA: You knew they were gay when they were here, or you mean -- or you [10:00] found out later?

TG: Later, I found out later.

MA: Okay.

TG: But I suspected while I was here. But again, it was never directly discussed, except once that I can remember.

So, I had a very good friend, and we were together in choir. He would tease me during the class or something. It was kind of flirtatious. And we would go out to lunch or dinner. [11:00] -- we were also the same major, studying engineering, and it seemed like he was getting a little bit too close. I remember saying to him that "I'm not interested in that; I'm not ready for that, and if we have those feelings, we should really not encourage them." You know, something to that effect. Looking back, I regret saying that, because I think it would have been nice to have that experience in college. But, you know, maybe it was for the best because of my anxieties, and I just didn't think I was emotionally ready for any type of relationship. You know, [12:00] another aspect of I guess my development is I grew up with a sister who's mentally ill, and it was undiagnosed while I was there. It was a stressful situation. [13:00]

MA: I can't help but think what you said at the beginning of this interview, where you said it doesn't -- LGBTQ doesn't define a whole person.

TG: Right.

MA: And what you're saying is we -- life is full of these challenges, and some of them have [14:00] nothing in the world to do with being LGBTQ.

TG: Exactly.

MA: Right? It's, like, we have other things to deal with that are super challenging, and sometimes unfairly, at really young ages, and that's really -- that's a challenging story.

TG: But I think it's part of my story.

MA: Right. When you've got that burden, you're not going to take on something you don't have to take on, perhaps --

TG: Yeah.

MA: -- as an issue. And so, while you were here, you were -- it sounds like you were dealing with other things in many ways.

TG: Yeah. Yeah.

MA: In many, many ways, yeah. And --

TG: Yeah, and there was a school psychologist here that I went to several times, and I wish I could remember his name. But he was so helpful. I just remember he --

MA: Great.

TG: -- boiled [15:00] it down and said, "Listen, you're dealing with a lot. It's okay. You know, just -- there's no need

to solve the problems right now. Just, you know, do what you can do."

MA: That's wonderful. That's great to hear. As a faculty member, I'm reminded when you say that -- I try to keep in mind that my students are often dealing with such immense things.

TG: Mm-hmm.

MA: They come here, and they really have heavy burdens, you know, things they really need to sort through. It's not only school. They --

TG: Right.

MA: -- often have very complex lives, and they're trying to do the right thing, and they're trying to figure it all out.

TG: Yeah.

MA: I'm thrilled to hear that, you know, you got the help you needed to help you manage [16:00] at a young age -- to manage that challenge.

TG: And I think without the family situation, without my sister being ill, maybe I would have been more focused on my own sexual identity, and coming out to my parents, and all of the traditional things that you see. But in perspective --

MA: Right.

TG: -- it seemed secondary.

MA: Right, yeah. Everything's relative, right?

TG: Yeah.

MA: I mean, when you can see that, you're describing that relativity. That makes a lot of sense. You had -- you were a member of the choir. Were you in other groups? Did you -- was your experience here -- it sounded like you had really powerful friendships and --

TG: Yeah. Well, it's interesting. We had a very special group, because it was the first year -- our freshman year was the year the Williams Art Center opened.

MA: Oh, wow. I didn't realize that.

TG: Yeah. Most of the friendships I made [17:00] were made freshmen year in Farber Hall, which is a smaller dorm. And it seemed like all of the freshmen there were majors in computer science or engineering or psychology, whatever, but we all seemed to have a musical talent -- in grade school, even, I was in band, choir, and theater.

MA: Oh, wow, so musical. Oh, so creative, yeah.

TG: When I interviewed here at Lafayette, I remember during the interview they said, "You know, we're very interested in all this theater experience. [18:00] And we've got the new Williams Center, and we'd really love people to utilize that." And I said, "Absolutely, of course, I'll do that. That won't be my major -- I'm here to study something else -- but I love doing that for fun." So, we were friends,

and we were in the theater. We were in shows together.
The Williams Center was brand-new. It was just amazing.

MA: The thing.

TG: I remember sophomore year [name redacted], and Lisa Lacroce '86, who was the majorette -- they came to my room and said, "We want to do a student-run theater." And there wasn't one at the time. They wanted to do *Godspell*.

MA: Oh, wow. Okay.

TG: And I had been in *Godspell* --

MA: Oh, in high school?

TG: -- actually in 8th grade. [19:00] So, Lisa was involved with Colton Chapel here and she spoke with Gary [Miller], the chaplain, and he agreed to sponsor us.

MA: Nice.

TG: So, it was the first year of the -- I think they call it the chaplain's theater now --

MA: Mm-hmm.

TG: -- or the little theater. And it's still going on, and it's very rewarding to know that we were part of that first student production. So, yeah, my groups here on campus were, as I recall, theater, choir, Alpha Phi Omega, which was a service fraternity. We would clean up the trail and -- oh, I tutored prisoners down at Northampton --

MA: Wow, you were very involved.

TG: -- (inaudible) college. Yeah.

MA: Was that through the Landis -- like, community outreach --

TG: Alpha Phi Omega.[20:00] It wasn't a social fraternity. It was just for service. And we would get together; we had our meetings once or twice a month, and in the spring and fall, we cleaned the trail. What was it called? The Appalachian Trail -- a segment of it. And during the winter we tutored prisoners.

MA: Wow. Marvelous.

TG: Yeah.

MA: That's a lot to be proud of.

TG: Thank you.

MA: Yeah, wonderful.

TG: Athletically, I did the riding club, and rode horses several times a week.

MA: Wow, you were busy all the time. It sounds like you had lots of friends and lots of --

TG: And I also learned to fly while I was here.

MA: Really?

TG: I got my pilot's license --

MA: My goodness.

TG: -- at Braden's Flight school at the local airport.

MA: Wow. Amazing. Well, that's a lot from your Lafayette experience. How about academics? I mean, one of the

things that we've asked about, and I think in -- you know, from '83 to '87 the answer would likely be no, but I'm curious. You were an engineering [21:00] major.

TG: Yes.

MA: What branch of engineering?

TG: Initially, I started out as a physics major. Then I transferred, I believe, for a moment to civil engineering, and then I switched to Bachelor of Arts in engineering.

MA: Okay.

TG: The AB engineering.

MA: Yeah.

TG: And the reason I did that -- I took an elective in the biology department with Nancy McCreary [Waters], and it was Organism and Environment, and I loved it. So, I thought I wanted to be an environmental engineer, but at Lafayette they didn't have that [22:00] degree, that major. So, I met with Nancy, and she agreed to be my adviser -- Nancy McCreary [Waters] -- and we put together this program where I had a sequence of six or seven classes in biology: organism and environment, advanced ecology, limnology, a number of others. And I also was her research assistant and a teaching assistant in limnology. And in the summers, we did research together on acid rain and acid lakes.

MA: You sort of built an early -- it's like a prototype for what we have now as our sort of fourth -- like, these interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary --

TG: Yeah.

MA: -- environmental-slash -- like, you sort of built --

TG: Yeah.

MA: You're like a preview for what we're trying -- striving for now as a college, these integrated learning programs. Fascinating.

TG: And Professor McCreary [23:00] was instrumental in that. Because I was kind of struggling, but I knew I really liked ecology and I excelled at it, you know. I got good grades, because I was interested.

MA: You loved it, yeah.

TG: Yeah. So, she helped put that together. And, of course, there was the AB option, but I didn't want to just go AB engineering. I wanted a concentration in something. So, all my other classes, all of my other electives -- because AB frees up some of that -- was biology and English. So, I had a lot -- like, six English classes as well.

MA: Wow. That's a really wide range. You had a true liberal arts education, in the arts and English --

TG: Yeah. Plus, the theater and the -- being a pilot. Yeah.

MA: So, it sounds like it was a --

TG: And riding the horse.

MA: And riding the horse. Flying the plane, riding the horse,
[24:00] picking up trash, service.

TG: I said to someone here at the reunion that I really -- was privileged when I was here in college, doing all of those things. You know, I really took advantage of what was here. I was doing so much, though, that I believe -- I graduated with a 3.0, which isn't stellar.

MA: Although, back then, that's a really -- that's a strong GPA. I mean, the grade inflation has changed what that means to some degree, but still.

TG: Yeah. Lafayette was academically challenging. It was very rigorous compared to my little [25:00] private high school.
[26:00][27:00]

MA: Was there Quest or PFLAG or FLAGB or any -- no? Not a single thing?

TG: Not a single thing that I recall.

MA: Yeah. And any events or speakers or -- nothing?

TG: No.

MA: Okay.

TG: That I recall. However, [28:00]I would take classes during the winter break in February, and, you know, they would move us to South College, so we'd be all in the same dorm. I really loved those winter break classes, because most of

the people weren't here. But there was a group of us that got together to play cards. It was once or twice a week. But it was half a dozen guys which now, you know, 30 years later, I know were also gay. But it never came up. We sat together; we played cards; and we had a great time playing cards and, you know, laughing and just doing what kids do.

[29:00] --

MA: It's funny how you found --

MA: -- each other.

TG: Yeah, without any kind of communication, and yet we gravitated towards one another.

MA: Wow, that's fascinating. Gosh. Anything else? Don't want to make you late for your photo. I'm sensitive to that. It's five of three.

TG: Yeah. You know, I have your email, so I'll -- I will think on it. And it's funny, just being here again -- some of the memories come back.

MA: It sounds like you were happy here --

TG: I was happy here. [30:00][31:00][32:00]

MA: Absolutely.

TG: And, you know, just going back to where we started, "LGBTQ" -- I think at some point in the future we need to get rid of that designation. We need to really live in a society where we're all part of the same group. You know, I

understand the need for it, but still, I'm uncomfortable with designations.

MA: Right, because you -- it's got a funny backwards effect of marginalizing --

TG: Yes.

MA: -- even as it [33:00] seeks to articulate a desire for rights and fair treatment. It also marginalizes you as that thing.

TG: Right. I think we can still advocate for human rights, but it's human rights. That's what I love about the Human Rights Campaign. Right?

MA: Sure.

TG: They're a great group, because they're fighting for human rights. It's not gay rights or lesbian rights or queer rights. I mean... Maybe I'm missing something, but that's just how I feel.

MA: Well, thank you for your time today.

TG: Oh, you're welcome.

MA: It's deeply appreciated on a busy day.

TG: Great. Okay.

MA: And I enjoyed talking to you.

TG: Yeah, me too.

END OF AUDIO FILE