

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE
LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of
Riley K. Temple '71
Conducted by
Mary Armstrong
February 2, 2017

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Lafayette College

2018

TEMPLE

MARY ARMSTRONG: OK, this is Mary Armstrong, chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Lafayette College, recording an oral history interview for the LGBTQ Oral History Project at Lafayette College with Riley Temple. Today is Thursday, February 2, 2017, and we're pleased and honored to have Riley with us this morning. We're going to do the usual formalities. I'm going to ask you, Riley, to state your name, and that your consent is voluntary, if you would be so kind.

RILEY TEMPLE: Absolutely. Well first, let me say what a privilege it is to be here. And it's heartening to me in so many ways, and gratifying, to be able to do this. And it's fulfilling. And it brings me full circle in my lifetime. [00:01:00] My name is Riley Temple, and I live in Washington, DC. And my participation is completely voluntary, joyfully so. (laughter)

MA: In many ways, you're the instigator of these goings on, but that's another story. So yeah. So I'll remind you, for the record, that throughout the interview, you can decline, of course, to answer any question. You should feel free to elaborate on any question I ask or anything we're talking

about. It's not like we're limited to the questions. The questions are really a framework to get us talking about what you think is important about your history at Lafayette. And also, we've had this already with a couple of interviewees, if later you get home, as I always do, and you think, I didn't say, I didn't mention that one thing. Absolutely write it down or send it to us or come talk to us, or any way you'd like to get the material to us. We're happy to augment [00:02:00] this with anything. It's not like this is a moment where the window closes and we don't want your story because you didn't say it today. We do want your story, your memories, or your ideas, and please send them as you feel is appropriate. So first of all, your relationship to Lafayette, which is a long and, I believe, happy and storied one, if you could just describe how you define yourself as a member of the Lafayette communities, with your relationship to the college.

RT: OK. I came here, I realized yesterday, walked onto this campus 50 years ago, in 1967. And so this is my fiftieth anniversary of stepping foot onto this soil, which makes it wonderful. And I had a lovely time here. I have to say that it was a time of [00:03:00] intellectual and emotional growth and challenge, great challenge, both academic and personal, which we'll get to. And then, I absented myself

for many years. Eventually I was asked to come back by the dean of students a couple of times, at the time Herm Kissiah, with whom I am still very close. And I did. And it got the attention of the alumni office. And so I was asked to serve as a trustee some years after that.

MA: And what year was that, you began as a trustee?

RT: It was 1994, and it began with a visit in my office in Washington from the chair of the board. And [00:04:00] he asked me... He said, "Well, you know, we're looking for people who will participate and be vocal." And I said, "I think you may have to worry about me in the other direction. I'm not reticent, and I am progressive. And I plan to bring that with me." He said, "Good." And so that's how I did it. And I became, ultimately became secretary to the board and served on the steering committee, which is the president of the college, the chair, the vice chair, and the secretary. It was a wonderful place to be, because we were in on most major decisions on the future of the college. And then I became vice chair. [00:05:00] And then I had to leave.

MA: And what year, that...

RT: That was '07.

MA: OK. So a good, long service on the board. Absolutely.

Wow, that's a deep and long relationship with the college

indeed. So you have many moments you can speak to around its history. But of course your own. Your class year is '71?

RT: Yes.

MA: We do have that on record.

RT: Well, I did say that it was 50 years ago.

MA: You're right, so there you go.

RT: I already said it, so.

MA: Absolutely. And in terms of LGBTQ, how do you identify?

RT: Oh, as openly gay.

MA: OK, as openly gay. And how do you professionally describe yourself? So work, or sort of your...

RT: Well, that's all in transition, Mary. I have been a telecommunications lawyer. And I practiced law for 40 years. But toward the end [00:06:00] -- and I consider myself to be at the end now -- I went to seminary, an episcopal seminary outside of Washington, Virginia Theological Seminary. And I didn't go to be ordained. I just wanted to learn more. And it opened up an entirely new world to me. And so now, I preach periodically. I teach. And I have a book coming out this week.

MA: Congratulations, Riley. That's magnificent. What is the title of your book?

RT: *Aunt Ester's Children Redeemed: Journeys to Freedom in August Wilson's Ten Plays of Black America.*

MA: Wow, that's fantastic. Tell us the press. Is it coming out on the Internet? Is it coming out --

RT: Oh, no, it's coming out with Cascade Publishers.

MA: Cascade Publishers. OK. We want that for the record so we can go get it.

RT: Yes. Cascade Publishers. You can pre-order it on Amazon.

MA: OK. [00:07:00] That's a must.

RT: And yesterday, I approved the cover art, which is a collage, a Romare Bearden collage of *The Piano Lesson*, which is of the same title as one of August's plays. And I, you know, of course they asked me, "Who would you want to endorse the book?" And I gave them a list of names. And I knew I had the dean, the president, the dean of the seminary, and Kenny Leon, who is the artistic director of the True Colors Theatre Company, a theatre company he and I established together. Kenny became August Wilson's director of choice towards the end of August's life. And Kenny was nominated for a Tony award for directing August Wilson's *Fences* with Denzel Washington and Viola Davis on Broadway. Then, he directed Denzel Washington and Latasha Richardson Jackson in a revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*, for which Kenny won the Tony award. And so Kenny endorses the

book on the cover. [00:08:00] And yesterday, I said, "Oh my God. He did it." It was Ken Burns, who also endorsed it. So I am just gushing with joy.

MA: Congratulations. That's a huge achievement and a wonderful thing. We'll look forward to reading that.

RT: Thank you. It was my honor's thesis.

MA: That's great. Oh, is that right? Yeah, how nice. Wow, that's exciting. Well, we'll absolutely have to put that in the library here in Women's Studies and more generally, but that's magnificent. Congratulations. That's a huge achievement. Anything else to add? I mean that was, how do you top a story like that? We caught you right at this moment of triumph. It's a beautiful thing.

RT: Well, I guess the question was, how do I identify myself? And I didn't answer it. I would like to be, I aspire to be a writer. And I have ideas about another project that I'm working on. And I took a part-time job as a [00:09:00] museum assistant, at The Phillips Collection in Washington, which is in my neighborhood. And it's a small museum. It's a private museum. And it's a modern art collection, modern in terms of being late nineteenth century to now. And so what I do on my job is to stand in the galleries. And I did it to become saturated, because I wanted to develop a better eye. And so I think I want to write about

theological and spiritual reflection in visual art, but not in paintings that are patently religious, more abstract.

MA: Sort of the spiritual within the less directly...

RT: Yeah, like Rothko or Barnett Newman.

MA: More meditative kind of, yeah. Fascinating, wow. Many good things ahead, no doubt. You're just starting your career as a writer.

RT: Yeah, I guess [00:10:00] so, huh.

MA: It's a wonderful thing. Well Riley, in the liberal arts context, we tell people they have many lives, and they have many abilities. And that's what we're after. So you're embodying that. I want to say, as an English professor, it thrills me from end to end, right? It's the way to be. I think that's great. Lots to admire. So we'll start out with some of the memory lane things, because a lot of the oral history project is directed at capturing the reflections of people's experience on campus. We're talking to people from all different class years, and the experiences are different. But there's some interesting sameness to it as well. So getting a sense of what the general situation on campus was for the LGBTQ community during any point in time, you know, because those histories get lost far too easily. So was the campus safe? Was the campus... Were people out? So we'll say from, in your

class years, in the late sixties to [00:11:00] 1971. What was the campus like? Was the community visible?

RT: There was no community.

MA: OK, there was no community.

RT: And I cannot talk about being openly gay on the campus without also talking about being African American. The two went hand-in-hand for me, obviously. And in 1967, it was two decades, no, a decade and three years, 13 years, after *Brown vs. Board of Education*. It was four years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and then two years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We were a country in transition. It was very clear. During my freshman year, on March 31, Lyndon [00:12:00] Johnson decided he was not going to run again because of Vietnam. And Martin Luther King was assassinated in April , four days later, on April 4. And in June, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in the summer, the riots of the Democratic Convention. And then Woodstock happened. And so I saw the campus make a great transition. We arrived here, it was all male. It was very understated and conservative, even though, not even looking under the surface; I think that I felt deprived in a way because, when I was in high school and throughout all my life up to that time, I had lots of girlfriends. Friends. And coming here, I had no women [00:13:00] as friends. It

was all male. And I thought you would think, Riley, if you're gay, this would be Eden. But it wasn't. I'd never seen so much barbaric behavior in my life, you know. And I said this, I think, in an oral history before, that women do have a civilizing effect on men. And men, left to their own devices, become totally barbaric, destructive, and cruel, and physically aggressive.

MA: The pushing and shoving culture?

RT: Yes, yes. All of that. But I, too, was in transition. I was out in high school. Well, let me back up for a second. I had spent all of my life [00:14:00] looking for a closet to hide in. (laughter) I was always gay, always a homosexual, even before I knew about sex. I exceeded gender norms, and I suffered greatly because of it. You know, bullying, you know, adults who would say,, "Don't do that. You can't do that; girls do that" And so...

MA: Gender conforming, the enforcement.

RT: Absolutely. And of course in the 1950s. Yeah, it was horrific. And one of my family's closest friends, a man who lived, whose house abutted the back of ours and was my father's first wife's (Dad's first wife died) brother.... We were very close to them. And he would get me in a corner and look at me and say, and with squinty eyes, and says, "Sissy Riley Keene." The other night at the

[00:15:00] Screen Actors Guild Awards -- which I didn't watch, but somebody told me that I needed to watch the speech, so I went back and I watched it -- was Mahershala Ali from *Moonlight*. And he said, "When you punish a child who is different from others, they turn in on themselves, and they become mute." I'll get to that later, about turning in on myself and becoming mute and living an observant life. But when I got here, I said, "Well, I won't have to be abused by straight guys, because the white guys won't know what I am. They won't know what being a black homosexual is all about." And that lasted all of six months.

MA: OK. So that felt like a form of protection.

RT: Yes. [00:16:00] When I got here, I realized, I said, "Well, here I can hide. Here I can hide. I won't have to put up with it." Except one time, one guy who lived across the hall from me -- Fred Harper, I've told him about this, that's why I called his name -- figured out several ways to insult me in one sentence. And Mary, I mean you have that look like you're so shocked. But I laughed. I had to laugh, because it was clever. And he said to me, "You know, I thought you were here on a football scholarship, until I saw you walk down the hall." (laughter)

MA: That was a very efficient insult, wasn't it? That covered everything. Oh, Riley.

RT: I had a wonderful. I mean, you know, I just said, "Well, that's very smart."

MA: They covered a lot of ground in one...

RT: Right, right. And it was so astonishing. And I didn't realize, of course, that I would remember it for the rest of my life.

MA: Right, [00:17:00] right, right. And the population, the African American population...

RT: We had 10 African Americans in my class. And we were not at all developed into a community, and didn't become that way until my sophomore year, which was enormously reinforcing, invigorating, hysterical. And then, of course, we all became revolutionaries. (laughter) Not. (laughter) But we fashioned ourselves revolutionaries.

MA: So about six months, you said.

RT: Yes. And then, [00:18:00] you know, we went to Fraternity Rush. And there had been a list out of the houses where it would be a challenge for blacks to become members. And so I didn't take a chance. I didn't go to those places. And I went to Pi Lam, which I knew of because my brother was reinvigorating up a Pi Lam chapter at UVA. Totally different story. A dean had to be fired in order to get

them recolonized there. And I knew that Pi Lam was predominantly Jewish, and that the Lafayette chapter had had the country's first African American president of a predominantly [00:19:00] white fraternity chapter in the country. And so I went, and I knew, and I was received warmly and enthusiastically. And I came back, and one of the people on my floor was very close to one of the people in the fraternity. And he pulled me aside and he said, "Riley, they thought that you were perfectly nice, but, you know, they said, 'Oh, that guy is...'" What was the phrase at the time? I don't even remember. I can't recall. Light in the loafers or something like that. "They think you're gay. They think you're homosexual." And of course, I was crestfallen. I said, "What made them think that?" "Well, it was the way you carried yourself, you know, the way you sat and stood." [00:20:00] I said, "OK. Here we are." And then one day, it was a guy who [description redacted by QAP reviewer]. And I was seated at my desk. My desk in South College had its back to the door, and we always left our doors open. He came in, and I knew it was him, because I heard his voice. And I suddenly looked around, and he had taken out his penis and flopped it down onto the desk beside me. I looked at it, and I looked at him. And he said, "These other guys don't know who you

are, but I know what's going on. You want this, don't you?" I said, "No, thank you. I flossed this morning."
(laughter) [00:21:00] And he put it back in and turned away and walked out. Never came up again.

MA: There's a moment of regression, and that's really something.

RT: So I was perfectly happy to be in my own cocoon in that way, even into my sophomore year. And I don't have any question in my mind that people knew that I was gay. No question whatsoever. But I didn't talk about it, and they didn't talk about it.

MA: The open secret.

RT: The open secret. They would say things about other people on the campus, [00:22:00] but it wouldn't come up with me. Now, I know that they were talking behind my back. There's no question about that. They have even told me so, that they knew it.

MA: So it was an open secret, and everybody knew, and nobody spoke, and there was a...

RT: It's a very small community. It was a small world. Even if we didn't know one another on the campus, we knew of one another.

MA: Right. So there weren't really pockets of what we would think of now. There's sort of the pockets of gay life, or

when you say there was no community, it was more like you knew of each other but, did it ever develop into a kind of...?

RT: Never, never. Many... Well, not many years later. My junior year, [00:23:00] I think that was the year that *Boys in the Band* came out as a movie. It played on campus and sent me into despair. That play/movie is not at all affirming. And of course, my junior year was a time when Vietnam was going haywire. And every single one of us, absent some intervening event, would have gone to war. Every single person on this campus. Then the lottery happened. And I had a low draft number. So I had to go take my physical. And I checked the box that says, "Do you have homosexual tendencies?" And I [00:24:00] checked yes. They looked at that, and they said, "Well, you'll have to come back tomorrow to talk to the shrink." I said, "All right." And he said, "And when you come back, sit in the orange chairs." I said, "The orange chairs?" And he pointed to a group of chairs over in the corner. I wrote an essay once about the orange chairs.

MA: It's almost too symbolic and incredible.

RT: Yes, yes.

MA: Sit in the orange chairs. Wow.

RT: And it was a major moment in my life, to declare on record that I was a homosexual. And in that context. I did go back the next day, and [00:25:00] the other people who joined me in the orange chairs, wow. Orange hair, you know, really flamboyant. And I said, "Oh yes."

MA: Party at the orange chairs. Isn't that something? Wow.

RT: So my interview was very interesting. The guy said to me... Well, one question I'll never forget. "Do you ever masturbate?" I said, "Yes, yes I do." He said, "Well, do you think of men or women?" "Men." And I realized later that these questions were so silly and fundamental, because the assumption was that if you had the courage or the temerity or the foolishness to declare yourself a homosexual, this is not going to be a tough examination.

MA: Because you already...

RT: [00:26:00] I had already done, right.

MA: You already passed it, basically, because...

RT: I was willing to do it.

MA: Because look at the year it is, and here you're going to say it. So you know what the consequences are.

RT: So what happened, as a result of that, when I came back to campus and they said, "Well, how did it go?" And I said, "I'm not going." "Well, why?" I said, "I checked the box and said I was a homosexual." Nothing more. No one

ever... Just let it go. Just let it go. At the end of my junior year, I worked here on the campus. And that was the year that we had shut down because of the Cambodia incursion in May of '70, and, you know, the campus was all in a hubbub. We were doing a summertime freshman orientation. I worked on the staff of the orientation, so I was here. And most of the week, it was like I was in solitary possession [00:27:00] of this campus. And it was gorgeous. I mean, it was beautiful. Oh, and I would open the window of Easton Hall and play Sarah Vaughan's, you know, "one by one all my doubts are disappearing." And I believed it. Later I said, "How silly and naive, Riley." But I did believe. I did. I did. At dusk, you know, the fireflies would come out. And on that sloping lawn in front of Pardee, now ruined by that building in front of it, but on that sloping lawn down there. And it was like the fireflies were rising from the ground, serenaded by Sarah Vaughan. -- I went home for two weeks, and came back for the fall classes -- and the energy of the whole place had changed. And I said, "Who are these hooligans occupying my space?" Right, right, right. But that summer was also a time when I wrestled [00:28:00] with the notion of changing. I had always held out the hope that I could change, and that I, you know, after I could pay for my own

therapy to change... Because I wouldn't dare go to my parents and say, "I think I'm homosexual. I need to go into therapy." But, you know, I wrestled all that summer. I was reading *Narcissus and Goldmund*. And the duality of nature. But I saw them as being in love. And of course, they were in love. And I finally said, "I am not going to change; there is nothing I can do to be straight" My reading had convinced me of that - the reading in Skillman Library. There was a section in the library here, and it was only about yay big, about homosexuality. And what was interesting about that section was that the carpeting was always worn down in front of that bookshelf. And the books that talked about it... I mean, just fell open to the same pages. Isn't that something?

MA: Absolutely. [00:29:00] Absolutely. Paule Marshall, the Caribbean writer --

RT: Who has written about... Has Lafayette in one of her books.

MA: Does she now?

RT: Yes, she does.

MA: You'll have to tell me about that. I didn't know that.

RT: I told Diane about it yesterday.

MA: Oh my gosh. That's funny. When I teach Women Writers, I teach a story she writes about growing up and finding

herself in a library. And it is so perfect. And she essentially says, Every queer kid, every gay kid, every girl who wonders if she's a lesbian. As she talks about her immigrant parents, and looking for yourself in the library, and how libraries save lives. And how they set that self where somebody goes and is lost and they're found when they find that shelf. And you've described that --

RT: And you realize that you're not alone.

MA: Yeah, absolutely not. There's somebody like you out there somewhere. The isolation is broken by these books.

RT: Right. Right. You are not alone.

MA: Yeah. That's powerful. So the worn carpet is almost too perfect. The open secret. [00:30:00]

RT: But it was not an easy summer. I mean, there were times that I went to bed at night wondering if I would wake up sane. And so I realize, as I look back on it now, that I had clinical depression that summer even though I also knew that there was some emergent clarity, as well. And I was physically unkempt. I went home. My mother went wild. "Why do you look like this?" And my father was very calm. "You're OK. You're all right Relax. Take care of yourself. Let me know what I can do." He was very good. That is he was always very good. My father. "There's nothing wrong with you." And people would say things.

"There's nothing wrong with you. My son, you're perfect. And I'm very proud of you all the time." Yeah, isn't that wonderful? So when I came back, I definitively, [00:31:00] decided that I needed to accept it. Grow to accept it. And I came out to a friend who said to me, "How do you know? Have you ever had any experiences?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well Riley, that's not such a bad thing." I came out to another friend, and we are still friends. These two people are still friends. And this guy was a very handsome, soccer player. And we bonded from the very moment we met each other in South College. And I sat him down in Marquis Hall, [00:32:00] and I said, "I'm a homosexual, I know it." And he said, "How long have you known?" I said, "Probably all my life." And he said, "Riley, I thought we were friends. Why didn't you think you could tell me about this before?"

MA: Beautiful. That's beautiful.

RT: It's a great gift.

MA: Yeah, a great gift indeed. No wonder you're still friends. What beautiful reactions.

RT: Yes, yes. Why didn't you think you could tell me about this before? (laughter)

MA: That's wonderful. That little trust and you were rewarded with these wonderful... Wow, those are powerful

recollections. Did the campus -- I'm thinking about the times, and you've so beautifully described the way that people know about gay people, and they can even see gay people, but the point is to not talk, to sort of hide and see. [00:33:00] At the same time, there's like this period where people know but people can't say, and you're sort of forging the way of linking what is known to what is said. And these few trusted people are responding. Was there any campus conversation about homosexuality or gay people? Or what was the context on campus, or was it just generally this open secret?

RT: Oh, I don't even know if it was open, because people really didn't talk about it. But occasionally you'd see, you know, in literary publications, for example, you would see references to homosexuality and homosexual longing. And I remember the college yearbook from my first year was full of quotes from Ferlinghetti. And I don't know why I believe this, but [00:34:00] he spoke, oh, about despair. And one element of despair is waking up without a woman in my bed. And I never believed that he meant that, that what he was really talking about was not a man in my bed. And then we had a couple of really fine black writers on campus. We seem to nurture them, I think. And one guy, who was very -- Larry Lennon, he comes around now -- but

Larry Lennon, who was very aggressive in our own version of (inaudible)[the black revolution] wrote in a poem that, [00:35:00] you know, the faggot is a brother. (laughter) I looked. Yes. Yes, thank you, Larry. Thank you.

MA: So these moments, sort of these...

RT: Yeah. So what I realized is that in a community like this, there are intelligent people. And so it was probably OK. It was only later that I saw things open up a bit. I'll tell you another story. There was this guy who served as secretary to the board of trustees in those years, now deceased. It was Ron Stenlake.¹ Ron and I became very good friends. We were also friends [00:36:00] with a man named [Name redacted]. Very heterosexual. [Name redacted] ultimately married and was married for many years. His wife died. He's now remarried and a grandfather. And I had a duty when Ron Stenlake died. He made me promise that I would do this. You see, when I was a student We were all -- the three of us ([Name redacted], Ron and I) were very close. And when we would get together, we would drink whiskey and get very drunk together. And he had an apartment over in Marquis. And I knew...I just knew... But he and [Name redacted] would travel together. They would go camping and so on and so on. And many years later, when

¹ Assistant to the president of Lafayette College, 1968-1972; in this role served as secretary to the Board.

I was living in Manhattan and he and I found each other, somehow or another, in Manhattan, he told me that he was gay. And I said, "Were you in love with [Name redacted]?" And he said, "Absolutely." He said, "Absolutely." I am certain that the love was never consummated. And he said, "Will you please tell him, if you are the longer liver and if you two survive me, [00:37:00] I want you to tell him how much I loved him."

MA: Wow. And that was your duty to convey that.

RT: It was. It was. And so he said that there were several faculty members who observed his interest in [Name redacted] and knew exactly what was going on. (laughter)

MA: Which brings us to the faculty and the classroom. I mean, what... Given the sort of the times, and you say the faculty knew what was going on. I mean, one thing that's a big part of your life while you're here are the classes, right? So does the topic come up in some way across classes? Is there an acknowledgement from faculty? Were there supportive faculty? Was this also the same sort of, people knew what was going on but they didn't say much?

RT: Well you know, I had an interesting conversation with Jim Vitelli, [00:38:00] who was, for many years, the head of the American Studies program, American Civilization. And

he also taught English. Very demanding. And a wonderful teacher. And when we read *Leaves of Grass*...

MA: OK. That's an open door. (laughter)

RT: I don't recall him ever saying a word about the same-sex longing and love in *Leaves of Grass*, which is a lot to skip over. And what he said to me was, "You were not ready to hear it." He said, "Because you cannot teach Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* without dealing with that." Right, right, right. I said, "Well, you didn't say, you didn't talk about it in *Billy Budd*, [00:39:00] you know. (laughter) You didn't talk about it in Sherwood Anderson. You didn't talk about it in Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" you know."

MA: There's a lot of it out there to skip over. That's amazing. When we think about, you know, what part did academics play, if any, there was a sort skirting the issue even when it was right.

RT: Yes. But for me, it was wonderful, because I saw it.

MA: That's the beauty of art, right? Even if no one acknowledges it, it tells you. It shows you yourself.

RT: It was liberating and freeing. But that roommate of mine told me, "Well, you have to go see *Boys in the Band*, because *Boys in the Band* was funny," he said. I went to see *Boys in the Band*. I went by myself because I knew what it was about. I walked back and I said -- I went right to

bed and I said, "That was not funny." [00:40:00] I said, "That's not funny." He subsequently came out and became a Ron Stenlake's lover.

MA: That's funny. Why did he think that was a hilarious movie? No one thinks that. Oh my gosh. So there's like text and subtext going on, on campus.

RT: Yes. So. And even in the alumni publications, I never saw any indication or presence of or acknowledgement of homosexuality, except one time, the first time. And it was when I came back to the campus -- I think it was 1989 or '90 -- to make a speech about the AIDS quilt that had come, a portion of which had come and was unfolded in Alumni Gym. And I had led [00:41:00] a, I chaired the board of Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, which, much to our amazement and surprise and despair, ultimately, became the largest and probably the most well-respected community-based AIDS clinic in the country. I mean, we didn't have the heft or the influence of AIDS Project LA or the Gay Mens' Health Crisis in New York. But we had begun in 1970 as a gay men's health clinic. Early roots in the basement of a Georgetown church. And of course, during the mayhem of the '70s, people would just go to the clinic, you know, get their shot of penicillin, and go right back out. And so because we were seeing sexually transmitted diseases when

AIDS [00:42:00] happened, people began to come. So here at Lafayette, I had never seen "gay or lesbian" mentioned in any publication. I came here to speak after I had received, on behalf of the clinic, a Point of Light Award from George Bush.

MA: Wow, congratulations.

RT: Thank you. And so they asked me to come in and speak, be the keynote speaker for this unfolding of the AIDS quilt at Alumni Gym. And I talked about the remarkable courage of the AIDS community, of the gay community, in building its own response to a crisis when the world said no. And I also called upon them to think about this AIDS quilt as a way, as almost [00:43:00] the people who are fortunate enough to have others who love them enough to stitch and sew in such loving ways. But I asked if as they unfolded those panels they would think about the people for whom there was no panel, for whom people did not sit down and stitch fabric onto fabric because of shame and stigma and homophobia. And so that speech was reprinted *verbatim* in the Lafayette Alumni News. And so that, to me, was... And that's the first time that I have ever seen gay or lesbian mentioned in the college publication. And it was associated with my name. But you know, I could be wrong. I mean, you know, your research and the research of your

students could tell me, "You are absolutely wrong. It was in blah blah blah," you know.

MA: I suspect you're probably right, though. I mean, it makes a lot of sense. One thing we definitely want to do is accompany this [00:44:00] interview with the text of that speech. I mean, first or not, that's a seminal moment. I'm willing to bet the farm that homophobia wasn't talked about. That's probably the first time that that's ever come up, and probably gay and lesbian, as well. How was that moment received? I mean, was it a big crowd? Were you speaking --

RT: It was a very big crowd, and it was a very solemn crowd and very somber crowd. And I talked about how thrilled I was and proud of my community for doing that.

MA: Yeah, for being there and showing up for that. Yeah. And do you have a sense of how that was received, that the AIDS quilt was there more generally?

RT: Absolutely. It was... I think it was a major turning point for the college, and an acknowledgement. And then, students... And I became the first openly gay member of the board of trustees, first openly gay officer [00:45:00] of the college, in addition to being African American. The first African American officer of the college. And when I resigned from the board and took emeritus status, I said to

the board, "You should be proud that you elected an openly gay person to this position."

MA: Yeah. That was a kind and generous comment to say. They should be proud, but really, wow. I was thinking about the quilt and that moment, which does seem to stand out as a really seminal moment in the gay history of Lafayette, that that was a... Are there others that jump to mind that you know, as an alum? [00:46:00] As a person who's had a long and deep commitment and relationship with the institution? Were there other big moments?

RT: I think yes, and I'll get to that in a second. You know, when it became clear to others that they had this openly gay man on the board of trustees, then students who were openly gay or not would come to me and would visit me in Washington and say, "Well, how can we do this?" And I said, "Come out. And make sure that you connect it to the academic purposes of the college." I said, "This is not a social club." And then they had something called Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. [00:47:00]

MA: Right, that was one of the first chapters, I've heard. Like PFLAG.

RT: PFLAG, yeah yeah. Friends of Lesbians and Gays, which was a way for gay people to acknowledge their own sexuality without having to come out. And then Lafayette began to

appear on lists of being one of the most homophobic college campuses in the country. And I was livid with the college.

MA: For being that, or for how they --

RT: For being that. No, for being that. I mean, to even be considered.

MA: Yeah, that's a disgrace.

RT: It was a disgrace. And the fact that they could only have an organization that says Friends of Lesbians and Gays was an indication that it was not a safe place for lesbians and gays to be at. I said, "Do something about it. You have to do something about it." [00:48:00] And so... But you can't force people out of the closet.

MA: And did the leadership sort of, the leadership of the college, I mean, it could be... You know, whether it's the president, provost, board of trustees, just anybody generically, the leadership of the college felt bad about that. But were they proactive ever?

RT: Well, they said, "Well, that's really unfortunate."

(inaudible)

MA: It's an embarrassment, but...

RT: It's an embarrassment. But nobody lifted a finger to do a damn thing. Then one time, Michael Benitez, who was head of Intercultural Affairs, yeah yeah, asked me to come and to lecture on the Bible and homosexuality, which I did. It

was an evening lecture. [00:49:00] All of the gay faculty, the gay and lesbian faculty was there, plus some. And just a handful of students. Just a handful of students. But some member of the board... You know, it must have been in the mid- to late-'90s, because I was a trustee at the time. And Peter Simon said to me that he had gone back and listened to my speech and was intrigued and wanted to know more. Jeff Kirby was very supportive. And then, just a few years ago, I jumped up out of my seat and shouted when I saw all of those colorful t-shirts on the campus.

MA: Right, right. So we started [00:50:00] having... And I see this from Gender Studies, as well, a partner in student life, that is, the gender and sexuality program coordinators. You know, we have people who are working with the students, too. That's been a big change.

RT: Well, and with your curriculum, yes.

MA: That's a hope of our program. We make the experience of LGBTQ people part of the education of everybody, whether they're gay or not. This is a part of our history.

RT: Right. It's a part of who we are.

MA: It's part of human history. We have to learn about it.

RT: It's always existed. This is not a new development, no matter what Mike Pence wants to say. But you know, but also I am hopeful that other members of the faculty are

attuned enough to include LGBTQ issues in the general curriculum. [00:51:00]

MA: Absolutely. That's a big concern for the college right now. And one of the things that we're really working hard on is to see if we can find out what's in the curriculum that has to do with LGBTQ studies. We have basically two courses, Professor Ian Smith's Literary Taboos. So he teaches basically LGBT literature in this 200-level English course. And my sexuality studies course, which is the 300-level course that produces the work in the archives and the history. So we have these two courses going. We need more courses like that. But to your point, we need courses that integrate the experience of LGBT people into courses that don't have to be just about LGBT people, but they're integrated into the story. This is amazing. So I'm thinking back to the moment where you had that beautiful summer that was also so difficult. [00:52:00] And you had the realization that will be familiar to many LGBT people, right, when we recognize the moment of, oh, this is not going to go away. Now what do I do? And that's not a... It can be a joyful thing personally, but it's not a joyful thing socially because you realize that it would be to your advantage if it went away in the social and cultural sense.

So what were your latter years like at the college, after this summer?

RT: That was, it was my senior year.

MA: That was your senior year. Oh, OK. I didn't realize that. So that was how you sort of... You ended your student career here realizing that that was sort of the closure to --

RT: It was, I'm an openly gay man. I am a gay man. And I didn't make an announcement, but my closest friends began to know, because I began to let them know in my own ham-handed way. [00:53:00] Checking the box.

MA: Was there... And it seems like not, but was there anything like a... We always wonder -- and this varies too over different decades -- but there wasn't a social life for gay people, because people were closeted at this point, right?

RT: No social life.

MA: Because that's hard in college.

RT: Right. I mean, don't me wrong. I mean, there were... Did I have sexual experiences here? Yes. But with people who do not now even identify as gay.

MA: Yeah, yeah. I could absolutely see that.

RT: Oh yeah. No question about it. That's been the case my entire life, actually. I had a shrink once who said, "You must have pheromones of some kind." (inaudible) my

freshman year, some wonderful soccer [00:54:00] player came to my room and, you know, we had been overindulging. And he just took my hand and he said, "Come with me." And we walked across the campus, hand in hand, holding hands across the campus on a Saturday night.

MA: Wow. That's amazing.

RT: Isn't it?

MA: Yes.

RT: And one time, I had a job being the night watchman at the women's dorm. My senior year was the first time women were here. And so on Saturday night, I got paid however much money it was. But I got to see what was going on, which is really what I wanted to do at this. I really love to know everything, you know. And so I was invited on a break one time to go up and play a game of spin the bottle with a group of people. [00:55:00] And there were two guys there, two very big, robust athletes. And we were playing spin the bottle. And when they spun it and the spins went to one of them, they kissed one another.

MA: Wow. Really? Oh, humanity. (laughter)

RT: And nobody said a word. No one said a word. What's been interesting though, Mary, is that now, many years later, as, you know, you either read about people or they die... I mean, I'm at the age now that my friends and people of my

age are dying of natural causes. I see people who were in my class at Lafayette. He is survived by his husband. His long-term companion. And it makes me regretful [00:56:00] that we were not able to be while we were here and so young. And exploring our intellects.

MA: You passed each other during your time here. And because you didn't see, you didn't know. And all those connections lost, and all the things that our students struggle to find, but they still have more opportunities to find today, they find each other.

RT: Yes they do.

MA: They find each other. They know each other.

RT: Right, and they can speak up in the class.

MA: Absolutely. They have a different world that tells them many things. But one of them is, "You're a community. You can be this kind of thing." And yeah, that is a, I guess a happily disappeared, or maybe not entirely disappeared, but at least there's other options for students who come here now. It doesn't have to be the case anymore.

RT: [00:57:00] And they can express themselves in their writing.

MA: Yes, yeah. And in their art and all their forms of expression. And nobody's pretending that's not really about gay stuff.

RT: That's exactly right. I mean, they're open. They'll say, "Well, this is what it is."

MA: How about Greek life? I mean, you were in a fraternity. Was that a...?

RT: Yeah, but it really wasn't a fraternity.

MA: Was it more like a group of people?

RT: Yeah. And, you know, and I'll tell you why.

MA: Because I wonder if it played any sort of experience other than welcoming you as an African American man, which was race and racism. Obviously, it's shaping your experience dynamically with your experience of being an openly gay man. But that fraternity seems an interesting --

RT: It was a highly progressive place. And it was also focused like a laser beam on academics. There were two semesters where the average GPA -- this is [00:58:00] before grade inflation -- the average GPA was 3.8.

MA: That's off the hook for that time. That is really high, because a couple of decades ago, an A was a rare thing.

RT: Right. And we have had some fabulous people who came through that house where I lived.

MA: Indeed. That's very impressive.

RT: I mean, there was one guy who I read about in the *New York Times* a couple of years ago who had developed a new therapy for schizophrenic children. There was another, my friend

Brent Glass, who became head of the Smithsonian American History Museum. Another friend of mine who just died, Harvard Topilow, I was reading at the bottom of the page of the *New York Times*, "Thank you, Dr. Harvey Topilow, for saving my vision." He was a retina detachment surgeon, one of the most famous in the world he became, and his office was right across the street from the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan. [00:59:00] You know, I could go on. Heavy, heavy hitters. Heavy hitters.

MA: Intellectual, curious people who were progressive and wanted to, a cut above. And what we hope now to see in our, as well. Yeah. OK. So that was a --

RT: It was wonderful. We would invite people to the campus to speak, but first, invite them to dinner at our house. James Farmer, Dick Gregory, you know, people like that.

MA: Amazing. Yeah. It's nice to see that fraternity can mean something else than what we mean, and that was your experience of it.

RT: And that was a place that was a haven for people who couldn't go elsewhere. And so once everything else opened up, you know, Pi Lam ceased to be. And somebody said, "Well, you know, it died." And I said, "Yes, but it died a noble death." It was time.

MA: It raised the level for other... Yeah, yeah.

RT: And the other thing was that you didn't need it anymore.
You didn't need a [01:00:00] place, a haven for Jews and a
haven for blacks.

MA: Gotcha. Right, right. Athletics?

RT: Never did.

MA: Or that wasn't a role particularly in your experience here
--

RT: No, no, no. However, (laughter) there was no athletic
event that I didn't go to. And I especially liked Greco-
Roman wrestling. (laughter)

MA: I knew where that was... I saw it coming. (laughter)

RT: And basketball. You know but the poetry of all sports.

MA: That's so wonderful. That's so wonderful. Yeah, it's a
beautiful thing.

RT: It's a beautiful thing. And one time Herm Kissiah had
the... It was a Lehigh-Lafayette game. We were down on
the... [01:01:00] He told me to come down to the sideline.
I had no idea how wonderful that would be. And you know,
Kelly, his wife, said, "There's an awful lot of
testosterone down here." I said, "Yeah." (laughter)

MA: I appreciate this look at athletics now. I think it's the
right angle. (inaudible)

RT: Celebrate.

MA: That's fantastic. Well, I like that different look at athletics, because we think it's just being an athlete. But, you know, I like that.

RT: No, it's more, so much more than that.

MA: Other clubs or organizations you were part of? You must have been really deeply involved.

RT: Yeah, student government. I used to wear my anarchy button to Student Government meetings. I know, crazy. And, you know, Maroon Key, Knights of the Round [01:02:00] Table, what else? I mean, you know, all that stuff. My biggest regret was not being more involved in the theatre.

MA: Because I wondered. Because you're a big supporter of the arts.

RT: I love the theatre, yeah. Because then, there was no such thing... And I had been an actor in high school. And I got awards in high school for my acting. But when I came here, I felt that I couldn't because there was no such thing as color-blind casting at that time. No, no.

MA: The way that prejudice and -- it works in so many ways.

RT: Doesn't it?

MA: The way it gets into the groundwater, and not just into the big and obvious things. That it would be prohibitive for a person of color to be involved in the theatre, because then when you say it, it's obvious. Of course that was the

case, but I think [01:03:00] unless you've lived it, I was going to say, a majority person like myself, it's easy to forget the depth of what these kinds of things, the effects that, the quotidian, nonstop. You know, it's good.

RT: It's ever-present. You know, the first time I sat in class with a white student was when I came here. I grew up in total segregation in Richmond. And it was a great high school because you had all the black talent in one place. I ran into at a recent funeral of a friend of my parents, who died at the age of 103, Mary Wilder Lucas Winston, Doug Wilder's first cousin. And at the funeral, someone touched me on my shoulder. And I turned around, and it was my eleventh-grade [01:04:00] physics teacher. And I looked at him and I said, "Mr. Barham."

MA: We always remember the high school teachers.

RT: I said, "You know, I have..." I said, "I'm about ready, and I'm still in seminary. I'm about ready to take my third advanced degree. And I've had some wonderful teachers. I cannot get you out of the top five."

MA: Oh, wow. What a compliment.

RT: But it was true.

MA: Amazing school.

RT: Oh, it was. You're talking about people who soared after, you know, many. Many. But... And he looked at me, and he

said, "We really had something special, didn't we?" I said, "Yes, we did." And so when we did Shakespeare, for example, or we did any play, we would do any kind of play say, *The Children's Hour*, something like that. You know, we didn't worry about color. You know, we just did all the roles. [01:05:00] And, you know, to come someplace else and say, "No, I'm not going to play a maid or a janitor."

MA: Right, right, right. That was an obstacle. Yeah, understandable. Yeah. That was the institution not catching up to the fact that students need these opportunities. But you were involved in a lot of clubs and a lot of things.

RT: Yeah, yeah. Too many, probably.

MA: Well, no. That's, I mean, that's... Your sense of how things have changed is a really big question. But you have such a unique and uniquely close to the center long-established relationship to a college that, I have to say for the record, you've benefited with your presence in so many ways.

RT: Oh, you're so kind to say that.

MA: No, really. And you're modest about it, because you make it sound like an everyday act. But to return and try to make the institution better is a great gift. I mean, the person coming back and returning. And when you say

something like, you know, less involvement in the theatre [01:06:00] because you didn't have color-blind casting. To return to that institution and strive to continue to uplift it is a real gift to the college. So just to acknowledge that. But I'm thinking you've had so much generosity, however one would sort of define it, that you've given to Lafayette. And you have a long arc, in a sense. What do you see as the biggest changes for LGBT people? I mean, it coincides with changes historically. But good changes, obstacles that remain, and there's probably many things to say there.

RT: I dream of a time when gays and lesbians, transgender, bisexuals, whoever can come here and be fully integrated. [01:07:00] I mean, just fully integrated into every single corner and crevice of this institution. And I dream of a world that way, too. And that it isn't... We won't... Everybody wants this. I have ambivalent feelings about the re-integration of gay and lesbian studies in literature. "We don't need a separate course anymore. We can... Everybody's doing it." But, you know, I hope that never happens.

MA: Mainstreaming makes these things go away. Yeah, I'm with you.

RT: I hope it never happens. But I do think that...

[01:08:00] And it makes me kind of rueful about this rush to marry and to establish mainstream life and families and so forth. Because our culture is rich.

MA: A strong feeling in the gay community, and people who are not twenty, and I'm not either, see a tremendous loss in the variation of gay, lesbian, and trans life.

Assimilation has many faces, and one of them is loss.

RT: It does. But I've learned something about African American assimilation, and that is that human nature does not change. One of the great [01:09:00] advantages of spending time in ancient texts and reading literature, poetry, whatever, you know, and theatre, ancient theatre, is that you know that what humans have always felt, we still feel. And what we feel today, humans have always felt. And ways in which we behave. The same forces will make us do it again. Now, that should give us comfort. But it should also make us shudder because of what we will do, the capacity for evil that we will inflict upon one another as we take each other to the brink of annihilation. That's also consistent. And so we will see that. And so what I see in assimilation in African Americans is that they get to a point... [01:10:00] get to a point in which they say, "I've got to go back to my people. This isn't going to

work." And it can be a sad realization, but it can also be a celebration.

MA: It seems to me that not fitting in, if you strip away the pain of that or the second-class status of that, or all the hard things that we've experienced, not fitting in has advantages because it's different. It's the diversity. It's the awesome variety we say we want and value. It doesn't have to hurt to be different. If you make it not hurt --

RT: If you don't put value judgments on it, yeah, get rid of the value judgments. Yes.

MA: You know, [01:11:00] and you see the normalization of gay behavior, and I'm very interested by that. And I think some of our students struggle with that, because I wonder, within the gay community, you have the naturally and highly, say, gender performing normative gay kid who, what is it? Straight acting, right. Or just straight looking, or seems to be, or whatever. And they pass, right. They pass. And they're not trying to pass. They just pass. They just, nobody thinks they're gay because of whatever. And then you have the gay kid who is just... I miss these members of the gay community. I used to see more of them, the really butch lesbian and the really flaming gay guy. It's like, where did they go? Because they were a kind of

person. And I loved seeing them, you know. And does assimilation mean we flatten that out? Because those were the people that made me shout, right. When I was a... That was like... You could see them, and you could just... [01:12:00] They wowed me.

RT: High camp.

MA: High camp. And what happened to high camp? You know, there's not much of it left, or it's been commercialized, or it's, you know. But in any case...

RT: I loved to tell a joke and it's a very true story. It happened to me. But I said, "What strikes absolute terror in the heart of a young gay boy? When his mother looks down at her feet and says, 'What in the world happened to these shoes?'" (laughter)

MA: That's great. And some people might not get that joke. Yeah, yeah. That's great.

RT: So last night at dinner, I ended... So Diane said, "Well tomorrow, Riley's giving his oral history to Mary Armstrong." Blah blah blah blah blah. And so somebody said, "Oh that must have been lonely [01:13:00] for you here." And I said, "It wasn't as lonely as people thought it would be." (laughter)

MA: See, that's the thing. That's what I'm talking about. That's exactly what I'm talking about. That's the thing.

RT: I want to go back to this point about being different. You know, Mahershala Ali --I mentioned in the beginning, said, "You force children to turn in on themselves." And when I was a child, I had to become careful about not putting a foot wrong. Because I knew what would happen if I somehow showed my being, who I was. And so I watched, and I calculated every single thing. It has been a gift, [01:14:00] because I had to learn to live an observant life. I know that I see things that other people don't see. Whether I see them accurately or well, it's my perception. It doesn't matter. But I know that I can see it. And people say, "I don't see that." But it is a gift. And it's a gift when I write. It's a gift when I listen, to be attuned. Being forced to do it.

MA: Assimilation is a big question. Sometimes, we take safety and we gloss it right into assimilation. And safety and assimilation aren't the same things.

RT: But I'll tell you, one of the parting things said to me on this campus that has stayed with me. It sounds very simple, but it stayed with me that whole time, [01:15:00] because I knew exactly what he meant. I was nominated initially for the Pepper Prize. And I took my name off the list.

MA: Why did you do that?

RT: Because I felt that this man, George Wharton Pepper, and this whole notion of a Lafayette ideal was not something to which I aspired, nor was it, I believed, conceived to include someone like me, in any way whatsoever. And it was done quietly. I didn't talk about it. You know, I just went to the dean, whoever it was at the time. And I said, "Take me off that list. I don't want to be on the ballot." Portlock (Dean David Portlock) came to me. I [01:16:00] was up in the... I spent a lot of time in the administration office, up there in the president's office, actually. And he turned to me and he said, "You took your name off that list." I said, "Yeah, I did." And before going back in his office, he said, "Riley, you will do yourself a very big favor in life if you stopped being so concerned with what other people might think of you." And he turned around and walked into his office. It's a gift. It was a gift.

MA: Yeah, that's powerful.

RT: Because ultimately, I felt the people that I respect won't respect me for standing for this election.

MA: [01:17:00] In the end, we've come a long way. Have we ever, right. What do we need to do at Lafayette to make it everything it should be for the students and the faculty who are like us?

RT: Come out. Be out. You know, things are now beginning to change in this country for us, I think. Of course, it was the sexual revolution of the '70s. But I think things didn't really begin to get better until AIDS. You know, it's very difficult to talk about a silver lining of such a very bad time. But what happened is that people who were living the open secret were not [01:18:00] secretive anymore. And they stepped forward and said, "Oh, forget all that. You know, forget about what we think of our careers. Our people are dying. Right, we've got to step forward." And what happened was that straight people began to see us all around them. And they began to say, "Well, of course." And then people would say to me, straight people would say to me, "Thank God you're involved." What a wonderful compliment. This is important work. This is very important work. And it changed things.

MA: An optimistic reading, I like that very much. That makes a lot of sense to me.

RT: You know, and when... In the Episcopal liturgy, there's a time... It used to be the priest turned around, but not anymore. But I like the notion of turning around to the people, [01:19:00] because it was dramatic, and said, "Listen to these words. Come unto Me, all who travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "All" never

had an asterisk. And Episcopal churches opened wide the doors. And so we became involved in mainstream ways that brought communities together for the purpose of saving us, and ultimately saving society generally. But we were the ones who built the institutions. We were the ones who responded. And we were the ones who built families of care. Right.

MA: And even changed the idea of families who choose. A lot of that came from that crisis, and not just about gay parenting. A lot of it was about we're going to make our own family. To feed each other and help each other and drive each other to the hospital.

RT: [01:20:00] You know, when I made that speech about people who are loved enough that someone will sit down and stitch fabric to fabric, I knew what I was talking about because I had done that. And a group of us did it for one of our friends. We were up all night long. We saw the sun come up trying to figure out how to operate a sewing machine.

MA: Yeah, I can just imagine. I can just imagine that quilt had some moments of people trying to do that, for sure. So come out. Absolutely. I think about all the LGBT faculty now on campus. There's a ton, as opposed to two of us looking at each other.

RT: You know, I was in a board meeting when we had, when Arthur Rothkopf] introduced a motion to have, oh God. Was it same-sex benefits. Yes, yes, yes. Domestic partner benefits, recognition of domestic partners. And [01:21:00] they said, "Well, should we have this for everyone?" You know, because there was some kind of a distinction between people who are straight and people who are living in same-sex domestic partnerships . And, you know, and Arthur said, "Well, the people who are heterosexual have an option. They have another option." And not a lot of discussion about it. But I remember two board members voting no. And I said, "What did you do that for?" You know, later. And they said, "Well, you know, I'm Catholic," and so forth and so on. And I said, "Yes, but Christ teaches you to love one another."

MA: We progress, don't we?

RT: Yes, we do. If that vote came up today, [01:22:00] I don't think there would be one dissenting vote.

MA: I don't believe there would be a dissenting vote. No. And you would be understood as a bit of a Neanderthal if you did. People would ask, "What are you doing here?" It would be the opposite of what it used to be, wouldn't it? Not, "What is the gay person doing here?" But "What are you doing here, that you don't know enough to --"

RT: That's precisely right. And you know, I just want the institution to be comfortable.

MA: Yeah. That's a great word, Riley. That's a great word.

RT: You know, we have such discomfort in this community with difference.

MA: To stop wincing and wiggling and being so...

RT: And celebrate.

MA: Well, I celebrate you.

RT: Thank you, Mary. I celebrate you, too. (laughter)

MA: You've been wonderful and generous in so many ways. And we've kept you for quite a while.

RT: I've had a wonderful time.

MA: Well, we are deeply grateful. And don't think we'll let you alone. Don't think this is the end of it. We'll keep bugging you. Thank you, Riley Temple, for this wonderful interview.

RT: You're quite welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE