

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE
LGBTQ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of
Carolynn Van Dyke
Conducted by
Mary Armstrong
August 17, 2016

Special Collections & College Archives

David Bishop Skillman Library

Lafayette College

2018

VanDyke

MARY ARMSTRONG: Excellent. OK. It is August 17th, 2016, and I'm Mary Armstrong. I am professor of Women's and Gender Studies and English at Lafayette College. And this is an oral history for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Lives at Lafayette College Queer Archives Project. And we have our first oral history interview. It is 9:40 in the morning and our interviewee is ProfessorCarolynn Van Dyke. So, Lynn, we'll start with a couple of the [00:01:00] self-describing sort of formalities, and then we'll get to the more interesting. The first thing to say is thank you for being here. It is so wonderful to have you. We appreciate it so much, your time and your generosity. So, thanks. So we're going to ask every participant at the beginning of these interviews to state their name, and confirm that their participation is voluntary, and that they've given their consent. So would you do that please?

CAROLYNN VAN DYKE: Sure. My official name is Carolynn Van Dyke. I usually go as Lynn Van Dyke. And my participation is entirely voluntary; in fact I'm honored to be involved.

MA: And you've filled out and signed the informed consent forms?

CVD: I have indeed, yes.

MA: OK. And a reminder, any question that we pose, all interviewees are going to be asked from the same set of basic questions when we take these oral histories. If you don't want to [00:02:00] answer a question you can just pass, if you don't want to address it. At any time if you feel that we've missed something, you want to elaborate, you have additional thoughts, please share them. There's nothing that limits the interview to the questions. What we've tried to do is come up with questions that touch on main aspects, likely aspects of being at the college and what seems to be important for faculty, staff, and what seems to be important for faculty, staff, and for alums. So we'll begin. So we're going to start with some personal information, just to get a sense of your role at the college and what you've done here, and then we'll talk a little bit more about different aspects of being on campus. So if we could start with your -- just describing your relationship to Lafayette, how you sort of define yourself as a member of the Lafayette community.

CVD: Very good. All right. I came to Lafayette in 1980 as an assistant professor of English. I had been teaching at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. And I was in the English [00:03:00] department as an assistant professor

from 1980 through 1984. In 1984 I transferred departments and divisions, and I became an assistant professor of computer science. I was actually tenured in computer science in 1987, so I became an associate professor of computer science. It was made clear to me at that point that I was being tenured in the college rather than specifically in computer science, because my being hired in computer science was partly a function of the poor job market -- that is, in terms of hiring, that is, the scarcity -- of academics in computer science at that time. I had become interested in computing and in programming particularly, thanks partly to a female head of computing at Lafayette at that time, Janet Price. OK, so I was tenured in '87, [00:04:00] moved back into the English department in 1990 as an associate professor. I moved partly voluntarily and probably in the interest of the college. By that time it was possible to hire PhDs in computer science to teach in the field and I was ready to go back. So then I was an associate professor of English from 1990 through 1997, at which point I was promoted to full professor, and then I was also given a chair, so I became the Francis A. March professor of English. I did identify then with more than one field at the college. In addition to that, though, I also identified as I could say,

I guess, a founding member of what was initially just a program, then became a minor granting program in women's studies, and now finally, yay, is a full department of women's and gender studies. So I had [00:05:00] kind of three forms of professional identification at Lafayette.

MA: Wow. That's a broad and amazing set of relationships to the college. So the year that you came to the college was?

CVD: Nineteen-eighty.

MA: Nineteen-eighty. And then you became emerita in --

CVD: Oh, I'm sorry. In 2014. I didn't finish that story.

MA: That's OK.

CVD: Yeah, right. I officially retired in December of 2014, at the end of the year 2014, and then came back and taught one course only in 2015-16. And now I'm fully retired.

MA: OK, so you've remained as an emerita teaching for another couple of --

CVD: Right, yeah.

MA: OK. All right. So that's a long and varied relationship. How do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ community?

CVD: I identify as a lesbian. I was, I suppose, before I came to think of myself as lesbian I was very much [00:06:00] female-identified. So I was a feminist at that time and remain a feminist.

MA: And you professionally describe yourself primarily as a faculty member?

CVD: Yes. Yes.

MA: OK. And anything to add about your sort of personal logistics to the college?

CVD: It's a very, very long story. There's a lot more to be told, including associations with non-official groups, initially called the Professional Women of Lafayette, from almost the time that I came here. A good deal of administrative work. I have been head of both the computer science department and the English department over the years, and committee work, including membership in the most stressful committee at the college, the Committee on Appointments and Promotions. Let's see, what else? And then as a teacher, of course. [00:07:00] I obviously identified as an instructor.

MA: Mm-hmm. And a great one. Well, so you have a very long and varied history at the college. And so as we move to questions about being LGBTQ on campus, it might be helpful as you go to talk about years, because you'll have an unusually broad and insightful spectrum. So if you could, I'll just ask you to try to do that as you go, because the difference between 1981 and 2015 or 1980 and 2014 is going to be pretty amazing.

CVD: Huge, yeah.

MA: So however we can situate this oral history, the better. So these are questions about describing the general situation on campus for people who are in the queer community. Any generic timeframe will help. So could you describe the situation on campus? You might talk about safety, or visibility, or, you know, any of the sort of classic elements that you want to talk about, but just [00:08:00] the way that -- and for you it might be how it's changed.

CVD: Yeah, OK. Yeah, let me just start with a brief comment about how it's changed. It has changed enormously. My perspective, of course, is personal, and it is the perspective of someone who is privileged in many ways. So that, you know, by the time I retired I had absolutely no concerns about my safety, security, and my identity or any of that. But I think the college in general changed much for the better with regard to identification of all kinds of difference in diversity -- many kinds, not all kinds -- many kinds of difference in diversity, and in particular for the LGBTQ community. When I came I guess the primary circumstance of that community was invisibility. I thought long and hard before I came here -- well, let me back up just a bit. [00:09:00] I came here as a person already in

a stable partnership, which is now a marriage, to Ann Carter, whom you'll talk to later on. I took this job, because I thought my professional situation, not because of my identity, but my professional situation at Case Western Reserve, was uncertain, so that I might very well not get tenure for various reasons -- not having to do, I think, with my being a lesbian. So I was here for a year by myself. Ann was still teaching -- had a contract at a school in Cleveland. And I thought long and hard about whether to come out to anyone in the department. I had the feeling during my interview that there might be a kindred spirit, at least somebody who was open to people who were not heterosexual, and I almost came out to her, decided not to, and later thought that that [00:10:00] was probably a good idea. Not that this person, who became a very dear colleague, not that this person would have been judgmental, just that she would have felt it something of a burden. That she definitely identified as heterosexual, which I hadn't guessed at first. So I didn't come out at all. I didn't, you know, do anything that would indicate that I was anything other than a relatively young, single woman. That was awkward for me, because there were people who kept trying to ask me out on a date, fix me up with someone as a -- and this is kind of a funny story. As a kind of cover I

accepted a couple of dates with a man in the math department, whom I also thought of as a kindred spirit. My gaydar was pretty bad I guess in those days. Anyway, and he was really nice, and it didn't turn into anything terribly awkward, but it was interesting. [00:11:00] He wound up leaving Lafayette in, I think, '82, for a job in industry. So that was fine, and then he got married, and that surprised me. Anyway, so it was a little bit awkward, but it was awkward being a female faculty member at that time. There were only about a dozen of us, because Lafayette was what was called a "change school," had been all male until about 1970, gradually started admitting women students, but in 1980 the student body was very heavily male. And "of course" not many female faculty had been hired when it was an all-male school. You know? I mean, it didn't seem to cross anybody's mind that it was possible to have female professors in a school with male students. Anyway, so we were a minority at that time. And I remember another thing that was comical, but awkward, there was and may still be a group called the Adrienne Club, named for the [00:12:00] wife of the marquis to Lafayette, which was female -- wives of faculty. And I got an invitation to join. They didn't know what to do with female professors. So, anyway, yeah. So I felt isolated

on that basis, but that identification as a female faculty member in a minority was actually what gave me a lot of strength as a lesbian and made me feel secure here, because it was a group of feminists, and so I had no hesitation fairly early on about coming out to some of them, and that was great. So I had a support network in that respect. Over the years, there was a gradual opening, I think, toward a visible presence of, if not necessarily gay students, but students who were open to issues of sexual identity. [00:13:00] That started in kind of a backward way, and I won't have the year here, but Liz McMahon and Gary -- and her husband -- could tell us exactly when it was that there was a survey that was -- you probably know this, Mary -- there was an informal, but very widely known survey called the Princeton Review of undergraduate schools that branded Lafayette as being the most homophobic school in the country.

MA: Wow. The most?

CVD: The most.

MA: Wow. I'd heard of the Princeton Survey, but I had not known it was that bad.

CVD: Yeah. And I think it was in the early '80s, maybe the mid-'80s. Partly as a result of that, Gary and Liz and -- excuse me, Gary Miller, the chaplain, who was very open to

all kinds of people -- wonderful guy, heterosexual, but a [00:14:00] strong supporter -- decided to found an organization called Friends of Lesbians and Gays here, or a branch of it. So it was supposed to be, you know, not students who themselves were gay or transsexual or lesbian, but people who wanted to support them. And that was kind of the opening wedge of openness. Another significant landmark in the move toward being more open and more supportive was -- and I know you know about this, Mary -- in the spring of 1992, the exhibition of sections of the names quilt, the AIDS Memorial Project, at Lafayette in what was then Kirby Gymnasium. And that was a very moving experience for many people. It was I think at the initiative partly of students. I don't remember [00:15:00] any names, I probably wouldn't mention them if I did, but there were students who I guess reached out to some faculty members who might be supportive and brought the thing here. And it came to involve many members of the community. I think the provost -- well, one of the things you could do as a volunteer was to read a section of the names in alphabetical order of people who died of AIDS. And I think the provost did it, I did it, quite a few people did it. So in many ways, I think, in this country that the tragedy

of AIDS made people reach out in their hearts a little bit more.

MA: When you talk about being safe, and visibility, and things like that, and how it's changed, is safety -- I mean, for a faculty member, safety is largely a kind of employment safety? Like a sort of -- [00:16:00] like get tenure, not get tenure kind of safety? Or what did it -- how has that sort of changed? I'm just sort of thinking it's an interesting concept to imagine a place as safe.

CVD: Yeah. I think it's a kind of virtual, if you will. It's kind of a sense of being secure in your identity and -- but there's a kind of employment security that goes with it too, I suspect. It wasn't an issue for me, partly because I think I don't -- maybe this is one of the problems with my gaydar -- but I don't project as being obviously non-feminine. So I didn't have to worry about that. I mean, I had only one incident that I can recall where a student wrote a slur on a note by my door. And that was it. When I first came -- again this is an issue partly of just gender identity -- [00:17:00] there were stories about a number of young faculty who hadn't lasted here. What tended to happen often was that people didn't come up for tenure. Sometimes they did, and were denied, but fairly often, especially for women, they would get signals that

things didn't look good and they would look elsewhere. And I don't know, I wouldn't swear that some of those cases didn't involve sexual identity for both -- at least one guy and possibly a couple of women.

MA: So what's the timeframe around that?

CVD: So that would be early --

MA: So it would be in the '80s?

CVD: Late '70s, early '80s. You know, before I came, maybe my first years here.

MA: Yeah. Before people moved towards more visibility, were there pockets of LGBTQ life? Did you see them devel-- I mean, how did people find family? Or did it just --

CVD: I didn't see them at all. I mean, my partner and I had a life, you know, outside the college, but -- and then, you know, I guess for me [00:18:00] a group of feminist faculty members was that kind of community in a way. The founding of the women's studies program, which I won't go into here, but involved meetings in the early '80s, early to mid '80s, among a bunch of female faculty, who were trying to educate ourselves in the field. And there I was very open and other people were educating themselves in LGBTQ issues. We heard rumors. In fact, this was confirmed by -- oh gosh, I guess I shouldn't mention his name -- there's a retired, now deceased, male faculty member that we got to know

somewhat, who told us about the sort of Mattachine Society, kind of meetings of men in the pre-coed days. That there was a group of male, gay, male faculty members, [00:19:00] who would meet off campus very quietly. I think this guy told us that there was a period -- maybe Ann will know about this -- there was a period during the '50s -- it would have been very early in his time -- when they felt they could be more open, you know, in their behavior at least, and then that closed down again. So, you know, there is a history that unfortunately the archives probably will never be able to get.

MA: Right, right.

CVD: Anyway, which is sad. Safety issues. My own situation became better -- not that I felt terribly isolated, but I got personal support in 1987 when Bryan Washington was hired in the English department -- a gay, black man. And he was not overt about being gay, but I think I quickly realized that he was, and he and I had kind of a little [00:20:00] private bond that supported me. But I worried about him. Because he was one of very few African American faculties, certainly the only one in the English department, students expected him primarily to identify racially, right? And I don't think he tried to be closeted, but he did hide certain patterns of behavior that

people could probably pick up as being non-heterosexual. I have to pause here for anyone who's listening to this later. You probably know that Bryan Washington died recently and at the age of only 57, and it's a source of enormous grief. Anyway, but I think he had stress, employment stress and certainly personal stress in his relationships with students in that they wanted him to be not only [00:21:00] a black leader, but an activist leader. Bryan was, I mean, obviously very strong in his leadership in those areas, but academically that wasn't his field. He was interested in American literature primarily and literature of a certain era of the 20th century. So he felt stressed in that way. Then I think when a few students started to get signals from him, and they would come into his office -- guys -- and they would come into his office, and come out to him, and want support from him, I think he felt pulled in lots of different directions and probably felt insecure professionally.

MA: Do you think -- I'm sorry.

CVD: No, go ahead.

MA: Do you think it was a classic minority tax kind of case?

CVD: Yeah.

MA: Where the person who --

CVD: Very, yes.

MA: -- represents certain identities is --

CVD: Right.

MA: Yeah. [00:22:00] And that's a source of stress for faculty as they --

CVD: Yeah. And, you know, the tax took rather tangible forms, because he was always being put on committees, you know. The faculty handbook indicated that in several cases, you know, they should try -- committee members that should involve diversity about racial lines, and so on, and so forth, so there's Bryan. So, yeah, he was extremely busy. I won't go on too long about this, but personally he was extremely generous with all of his students, so he would hold hours-long conversations with a student who just was uncertain about something or other in his or her life. So he was under incredible pressure. So that's a roundabout way of saying that there was a certain kind of professional insecurity and risk.

MA: Mm-hmm. Were there sources of support? So the way that gay faculty find each other, in your experience, and faculty start to support each other, were there -- what was the trajectory [00:23:00] of more formal support on campus? Did you have a sense that there -- right, so -- health, wellbeing --

CVD: I mean, for I guess quite a while I didn't know of any other queer faculty on campus besides Bryan and me. There was -- well, I mean, there were people about which one wondered, but there was nothing open about it.

MA: Yeah. Yeah. What do you attribute this -- as you describe this arc as things get better -- what changed the college? I mean, there'll lots of answers to that, I assume, but what do you think changed it as you saw it move forward?

CVD: I think change came from a couple of directions. One direction was faculty members like Gary Gordon, Elizabeth McMahon, who were very supportive -- and Gary Miller, the chaplain at that time -- [00:24:00] who were very supportive. Oh, and Bob Weiner, in history department, I have to mention is another very strong supporter. He and Gary Miller would hold brown bag discussions, for example, about homosexuality and the church, and, you know, try to broach that extremely vexed issue in a supportive way for students. So that was one direction in which support came. Another was a few very brave students. There's one that Susan Basow talks about a lot named Peter Theodore, who was the first, I think, openly gay student at Lafayette. But back up a little bit back to my early years, because I identified as feminist and was by, I'd say, '83 or '84 part of the women's studies faculty group that people knew

about, [00:25:00] female students would come to me and come out, usually one or two a year, and seek support. But they weren't ready to be open. When Peter was open -- and I want to say that was maybe around 1990, but I may be way off about that; my memory is terrible -- but anyway, you know, he was a member of this sort of FLAG group, you know, Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and he, I think, pushed pretty hard to say it's not just friends of, you know, we need to have the courage to say that there are people here. So he and then whatever students helped to bring the AIDS quilt, I think from those two directions there was more pressure to be open. Go ahead. OK, I was going to say that personally I decided I finally had to come out overtly to students when I was teaching women's studies. And I wish I could remember when this was. [00:26:00] It was probably the late '80s. At any rate, there had been other signs of openness -- it may have been later than that -- there had been other signs of openness, and we would always do exercises in class where we would ask students to sort of put on the identity of -- an identity other than their own, and so I can't even remember the details, but I came up with some way of making it sound kind of funny that all of the students were going to say, you know, "I am a lesbian," and I would say, "Well, I really am. And it's

important that people should know that." So, but that didn't lead to any kind of, you know, solidarity around the campus of other people coming out.

MA: One of the things that we're interested in learning about is -- and you've already mentioned it with the case of Bryan Washington, but -- a sense of how other aspects of identity played into the way that LGBTQ [00:27:00] life -- right, so thinking about race, or class, or any of those other things -- I mean, you've talked about it, but any further thoughts about that, their connections?

CVD: You know, just to reiterate that for me identification as a feminist was really important and, I mean, I guess I would have to say that during my years at Lafayette the feminist part of my lesbian feminist identity has been stronger, more open, perhaps much more supportive, and I think that was true for students too. So in women's studies classes there would be students -- mostly women, but sometimes guys -- who would come out as a result of that experience. For students, obviously another part of identity for female students, for lesbians, another part of identity that would be important would be their participation in athletics. And [00:28:00] that was -- I can't really talk about personal experience, but I know that it was certainly very ambivalent for them.

MA: Yeah, could --

CVD: They could find support and they would also feel stress.

MA: Talk some more about that, that sense of athletics as a big factor.

CVD: Yeah, I wish I really could. I mean, it's very vague in my mind. I just have this memory of times when the basketball team would sort of be trying to work through the issue of, you know, that they were perceived as being non-feminine and maybe lesbian, and I'm sure that still happens.

MA: Mm-hmm.

CVD: Let's see, what else? Yeah...I don't want to go into specifics, but there was another faculty member on campus for whom I think [00:29:00] the relationship between African American identity and the relationship between being gay was a problem. So, again.

MA: We've been thinking about the -- wondering about the way that people talked about it on campus, the words that got used, what people said, sort of how the climate has changed for grappling with the issue, what you hear and don't hear.

CVD: Sure. I mean, just the change that's happened in many areas around the country from simply talking about gays, to talking about gays and lesbians, talking about gays, lesbians, oh, transgender people. How about that? And then reclaiming the word queer. I mean, that's something

that's happened during my time. I can't give you any specifics about it, but it certainly has been an issue here. [00:30:00] And having a very strong women's and gender studies program has helped us, I think, push into the current sort of slightly more accurate, maybe, ways of talking about things like that.

MA: Mm-hmm. Have you had the feeling that the faculty themselves have changed around this issue a lot?

CVD: Oh yeah.

MA: How has that looked? How has that change looked?

CVD: Golly. I think again going into the women's and gender studies issue that people who have been part of that -- faculty who have been part of that academic field have also led the change toward a more open and affirming kinds of language. Faculty handbook changed.

MA: [00:31:00] Oh really?

CVD: Yeah.

MA: How did it change?

CVD: Oh, OK. I wish Ann were here, because her memory is better about these details than mine, but -- even though she wasn't on the faculty. We had a president named Robert Rotberg, who was here early '90s? I'm terrible, I'm sorry, I should know this, but in any case. Rotberg was a fairly short-term president; he was here for only three years.

And he was a very strong-willed guy, in some ways what he was trying to do was good, and he decided that the section in the faculty handbook that indicated that Lafayette didn't discriminate on the basis of x, y, z, and so forth should include sexual orientation. So he just changed it and then put it in the catalogue. And some members of the board of trustees went nuts. Like, you know, and the faculty too were a little bit -- I mean, the faculty, I think, as a whole were very supportive of it, and that kind of indicates that things were being way more open.

[00:32:00] But, you know, it was -- Rotberg tried to do a lot of things that may not have been to the benefit of the college, but that was one really good thing he did. And from then on I think people started including sexual orientation more whenever they would talk about diversity and discrimination, so...

MA: It was more his dictatorial style than the content, you think?

CVD: Yeah. His dictatorial style was what put people off, but I think when they looked at the content they thought, well sure, why not?

MA: (laughter) OK.

CVD: And then actually I think when Arthur Rothkopf became president -- he was the next president -- then he had to

kind of defend this and he said, "Yeah, you know, we should say this." So finally the board of trustees said OK and, yeah.

MA: So one of the areas, thinking about that inclusion aspect, that naturally is very, very big for alums -- or will be -- is the social scene on campus. So [00:33:00] because you came here with a partner that was differently experienced, did one emerge in the LGBTQ community? I mean, just different if you're partnered or not? Obviously questions about dating or all those things are not on the table, so or has that never really -- I mean, faculty culture's different.

CVD: Yeah, I don't know. I have a feeling that, you know, younger faculty -- each younger generation of faculty was, I don't want to say progressively more open, but -- I don't mean necessarily gay faculty, I mean all faculty were not necessarily more open toward issues of sexual orientation, but they were open. So when faculty socialized -- you know, we now have a fair number of gay- and lesbian-identified faculty. When they would socialize I don't think there was any sense that, you know, the straight people would do one thing and the gay people would do something else, so I think there was mixing.

MA: [00:34:00] OK. There's never been a separate scene,
because people have just emerged that way.

CVD: But I probably wouldn't know if there was a separate scene.
I mean, yeah. (laughter)

MA: Thus is married life.

CVD: Yeah, yeah.

MA: That just made me think of a follow up. Hang on...so the
sudden emergence of LGBTQ faculty, what's the year about --
like, when did you suddenly say oh there's gay couples --

CVD: There's a lot of us around here.

MA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. When would you say -- just tracing the
timeline?

CVD: Not that long ago. Maybe a dozen years?

MA: Mm-hmm. OK. So in the early 2000s there started to be --

CVD: Yeah.

MA: So you were sort of the only out -- assuming that, you
know, you started to come out in your WGS classes, you were
sort the out faculty member, except maybe Bryan Washington,
[00:35:00] who didn't hide anything either? So there was
the two of you.

CVD: Oh yeah. No, he was certainly out within the department,
yeah.

MA: The two of you.

CVD: Yeah. You know, again, my memory is so awful. I'll probably go home and think, oh, I should've remembered when so and so came, but I do have this feeling that until maybe a dozen years ago, maybe 15 years ago, when those of us who -- my friends and I -- and by my friends I mean the people in the English department, who have always been very supportive -- you know, we would sort of say, oh gosh, there's another person in such and such a department, and I think he's gay, or and she might be family, or something. So it was kind of this rare bird phenomenon for quite a long time.

MA: And then that got sort of "normalized" in the last decade or so?

CVD: Yeah, yeah.

MA: OK. So here's the fun stuff, academics.

CVD: OK.

MA: So thinking about, from your perspective, [00:36:00] how the curriculum over three plus decades has changed, reflecting or not reflecting knowledge about LGBTQ people, and communities, and cultures, so how has that evolution happened through academics or, you know, sort of where are we now from where did we start?

CVD: Yeah, OK, well, let's take my own field, which is English studies -- my old department or field. I think there have

been over at least a couple of decades, longer than that -- and you know this too -- there's been a good deal of interest in theoretical issues, which turn out to have of course real world correlatives, that would be cultural studies, issues of gender studies, and that sort of -- studying what's not the normative, [00:37:00] that that has been important and powerful in English studies, and probably in most areas in the humanities. In terms of the curriculum, again, the area that I've been most familiar with has to do with gender and not necessarily sexual orientation or gender identity. But, you know, the people we've been hiring in the English department, some of whom aren't here any longer, have left for other jobs or otherwise, came in over the last couple of decades knowing about the study of gender identity, the study of sexuality.

MA: So you think it's been disciplinary?

CVD: Yeah.

MA: OK.

CVD: Yeah.

MA: So uneven?

CVD: Yeah, very uneven, probably.

MA: Yeah. You mentioned this a little, but I would like to ask about it, because it seems important. A lot of the LGBTQ community -- the measure of the culture and changes in the

climate tends to be about the personal experience and the academics sometimes get sort of left out, because it's the personal is more immediate. And certainly for queer people, you know, sort of that's where the urgency is. But since you've taught some courses with LGBTQ content, because of your early involvement and really founding involvement with women's studies -- you've chaired the program, you've done all that -- sort of thinking really about it's disciplinary on one hand, because content about sexuality and identity seeps at different rates into different disciplines, but what was it like to be at Lafayette and say, you know, lesbian and gay over time? Like, how did the shock -- was it always like, oh well, it's women's studies? Or how did that -- you know what I mean? Like, there's a bunch of students, but you were you, and they're changing, and you're -- you know, how did that sort of evolve to teach that stuff? I mean, [00:39:00] there'd be a number of stories probably associated with that, but just sort of over time, what was it like to say those sort of things at a place that started out with not many women faculty members at the beginning of your career and now sort of with, you know, courses on LGBTQ studies?

CVD: That's a really good question.

MA: Well, thanks.

CVD: OK. One thing I can say is that, I mean, I taught women's studies pretty much continuously, although not as often as I would have liked, from -- in 1982 through about 1996, even sometimes when I was in computer science (inaudible). So, you know, I would say that starting in the late '80s, maybe the early '90s, I no longer had the sense that students might be uncomfortable. OK, in a women's studies course you never had the feeling that that many students would be that uncomfortable about it, because they're already doing something, [00:40:00] which is kind of against heteronormativity. But I think I wouldn't have felt nervous about talking about lesbian, gay issues, even referring to myself as gay after maybe '90, 1990.

MA: Mm-hmm, because the discipline protects that project.

CVD: Right, protects that project. Yeah. You know, in other things that I taught it didn't come up that much. You know, when you're teaching literature obviously there are certain texts that raise issues, but it's a little hard -- and this is good -- for me to remember back to a time when if I were teaching let's say a novel or a poem or something in which there were issues of queer identity that I felt nervous about it, you know? So it changed certainly I would say midway through my career, not earlier.

MA: Mm-hmm. And the students take it in stride at this point?

CVD: They do. I mean, our students -- [00:41:00] you know this -- our students take a lot in stride. They're cool.

Right? And, you know, being cool is kind of the dominant value, so, you know, they would not show -- and who knows what they would go back and talk about?

MA: Mm-hmm. So they won't flinch if the bomb goes off, but later they'll have something else to say.

CVD: Right, yeah. Yeah. I mean, I was always much, much more concerned about queer students than I was about faculty. Yeah, because Lafayette student culture is very unforgiving.

MA: Yeah. So that brings us to students. So they are a cause of more concern than faculty life and as we trace the faculty experience for any good faculty member, like yourself -- and good is not adequate -- but any dedicated faculty member knows that the faculty experience is connected to the student [00:42:00] experience, the human beings in your classroom, and you're committed to their wellbeing and their intellectual growth. And so, you know, what was your sense of -- it sounds pretty tough the way you describe it in, like, the '80s and the '90s.

CVD: Yes.

MA: What do you think they went through or what was your sense of, from your perspective, you know, what that was and how it's changed? It sounds big.

CVD: Yeah. I'm not that close to students actually now, but I suspect that on one level, that to some degree just because these are adolescents and they're going through periods of intense personal self-examination and insecurity that things haven't changed that much. But I think the last time that I had a lesbian student come out to me in a context in which she was clearly [00:43:00] going through great anxiety about it was probably around 1990. After that, well, I didn't, you know, I only taught women's studies until about '96, but after that I think they probably had other forms of support on campus. Sympathetic deans, for example, counselors that they could go to. Oh, I forgot. I was going to say something else about the students and I've forgotten it. Anyway, so what were you going to ask?

MA: I was thinking about the formal sources of support for them. Did that -- to say more about that. When did that sort of kick in for them, you had the feeling that the counseling center and all that stuff was in place?

CVD: Yeah. I don't --

MA: Also in the '90s?

CVD: -- really know. It may have been earlier.

MA: Just sort of slowly --

CVD: It may have been earlier than that, yeah. I'm sure there was not a lot of support [00:44:00] in the '80s when I was here.

MA: OK, yeah. Yeah. Why do you think it was so tough? The conservatism? Or, I mean, your sense is they are very vulnerable in the -- when you said the culture was unforgiving.

CVD: Yeah. Oh, sure. I can think of a good example and I'm sure he wouldn't mind my using his name, a student named Ted Rosenberger, who was in my computer science class. And one of the few people in computer science that I gradually connected with on this issue sort of accidentally, that he happened to discover that I lived with another woman, and we talked about his own sexual orientation -- he's gay. Wonderful alum, and very active and supportive of the Lafayette pride group. Anyway, I think he was class of '86 maybe? [00:45:00] Yeah. He was president of a fraternity. Yeah. And he was of course completely, absolutely closeted.

MA: Oh, wow.

CVD: Yeah. So...

MA: Wow.

CVD: And I don't know how Ted, bless his heart, managed to sort of come through all of it unbattered. Yeah, he's a very special guy and he -- I think it was close to his graduation that I learned that he was gay, and then Ann and I started socializing with him and his partner. But, yeah, he would be a good person to talk to for the project.

MA: Yes, indeed. Yeah.

CVD: Yeah. He could talk about student culture a lot.

MA: Yeah, absolutely. So you see it as sort of a heavily closeted culture where you couldn't be out and be successful as a student here to now those things seem to have [00:46:00] dovetailed? From what one can tell admittedly.

CVD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MA: Yeah. Faculty relationships to workplace are always interesting to think about, because, you know, sometimes we think it's home. (laughter)

CVD: Right.

MA: You know, we don't realize we work here, because we never stop, or I don't know what, but it's always sort of funny, you know, how faculty -- I'll speak for myself -- startled when someone says you're an employee. And you know you are, but you're just so heavily identified with your work.

CVD: Sure.

MA: It seems like a calling or whatever. But -- and this will be probably more powerful for the immediate for the staff that we talk to, but the climate for queer people employed -- we can go look up the policies, benefits, safety, equal treatment, discrimination, etc., but how do you think that has changed? I mean, it seems like on an up arc, but...

CVD: You are talking about [00:47:00] all employees now, not just faculty?

MA: Yeah, absolutely anybody employed here. Like, your sense of that, especially since your partner has worked at Lafayette for so long. I mean, we'll talk to Ann Carter as well, but...

CVD: Yeah. I think one landmark -- and, again, I'm awful at dates and remembering things but -- was the inclusion of domestic partnership as a category for things like life insurance beneficiaries and that sort of thing. And that may not have happened until Rotberg dropped his little bombshell in the mission statement. But, you know, that was, I think, significant for people like me, you know, who were in partnered relationships. Yeah, again, my memory has always been really fuzzy for my own life, remembering my own life, and I think it's getting worse, but I should have mentioned earlier that there was [00:48:00] another woman who was hired here in -- I can probably say this --

the history department in about '90 maybe, who has a female partner. So Ann and I would socialize with them. So when you were talking about relations among or if there was any kind of social scene among faculty, that friendship was very important.

MA: That's the case, yeah.

CVD: Yeah. But anyway, she was another person who was glad to have the domestic partnership, you know, officially recognized. And then you could actually -- we did this sign a form in the HR office, personnel office, you know, declaring that you were domestic partner of so and so. So that was, you know, a milestone. I don't know whether any administrative staff have done that. I mean, [00:49:00] now we certainly have openly gay administrators, but certainly -- and Ann will talk about this, I think, but when she came the administration was totally, totally straight as far as anyone knew.

MA: Yeah. (laughter) The straight administration. OK. It's nice to hear about all the positive changes. So public moments, sort of marking, you know, if we were going to chase down the story of LGBTQ history at Lafayette, you mentioned the AIDS quilt as one of them.

CVD: It's a big one.

MA: It's a very, very big one.

CVD: Yeah.

MA: So that and others. That was big because it was the first time in your memory that something having to do with the gay community was front and center?

CVD: Yeah. If you don't count theater productions.

MA: OK.

CVD: Yeah. [00:50:00] The director of theater for many years here, a colleague of mine in English too, Michael O'Neil, was very good about bringing all kinds of productions in and some of them included sexual orientation and out issues. But that's not, you know, that's just theater. That's not necessarily a public event, public moment. Yeah, I wish again I could remember more clearly, but to me one of the clear public moments came in some kind of open meeting of faculty when I think Liz, maybe it was Gary, stood up and said we need to have an organization that support gay and lesbian students. And this was the Friends Of kind of thing. So if you talk to Liz you can ask her if she remembers when that was.

MA: OK. And they stood up in?

CVD: In some kind of public gathering. I want to say it was in Hogg Hall [00:51:00] in one of the open meetings about something or other.

MA: OK, OK.

CVD: Something that was maybe related to the college's social scene, reputation, because the Princeton Review thing was also connected to Lafayette's reputation for being a great party school.

MA: Oh.

CVD: A school where there was a great deal of consumption of alcohol, it was relatively open, and blah, blah, blah.

MA: Oh, OK. So the Princeton Review was speaking to the party climate as well.

CVD: As well, right. Yeah. And somehow or other that these things seemed to go together, you see.

MA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I bet they do. (laughter)

CVD: Yeah. Well, yeah, you're a great party school if there's a lot of booze and also if there's a lot of covert sexual harassment, so...

MA: Yeah, right. Right. The hookup culture at its darkest and most alcohol-fueled is a heterosexual culture and defined by gender that way.

CVD: Yeah. Yeah.

MA: Yeah, yeah. Hmm. OK, that's interesting.

CVD: I can't really [00:52:00] think of other public moments, but I'm sure there have been some.

MA: Well, it's just trying to collect them as we go along. I mean, one of the fun things is to sort of imagine, you

know, the times that there was sort of a breakthrough with the LGBTQ community, and a thing happened, and everybody had to think about it. Or, you know, someone was brave, and stood up, and said that. So it's so impressive how Liz McMahon and Gary Gordon come up over and over in your stories as straight allies who have been so dedicated to improving the community.

CVD: Yes. And obviously Susan Basow also. I don't know whether you'll be talking to her or not, but she would -- there was some public declaration, I think, that Peter Theodore made. I think he came out -- the student -- he was her advisee, I believe. And he came out in some open gathering and said he was gay, and that was a real breakthrough.

MA: Yeah. The moments of visibility seem to be the [00:53:00] key moments of sort of tracking how a climate and the culture change, as well as the technical things, like the policies. So I get the overall sense that your feelings about the Lafayette climate and your stories are it's just sort of getting better, and a lot of the time you've talked about how things have changed or not. Has anything not changed?

CVD: Wow. Well, I think certainly for individual students certainly the stress around defining themselves sexually has not changed a whole lot. A lot of the covert sexism

has not changed. And certainly the change for transgender students, and faculty and staff [00:54:00] if there are any, which has been happening, is really recent, and it probably means that not a whole lot has changed there.

MA: Mm-hmm. Trans issues are --

CVD: Trans issues are just not recognized by a lot of people, yeah.

MA: Yeah. Well, the absence of gender neutral bathrooms, that sort of --

CVD: Yeah. Yeah.

MA: Absolutely. Different for men and women?

CVD: Yeah. I think definitely different for men and women. I think the fact that the first openly gay student was a male speaks both to the difficulty of -- the greater difficulty, I think, for men -- at least male students at a school like Lafayette -- the greater difficulty of his doing that, but that also speaks to the fact that it was an important public announcement. I mean, there may have [00:55:00] been women, right, who came out in relatively open settings and I just didn't know about them. It didn't make as many ripples.

MA: Why do you think that is for men?

CVD: The gender issue.

MA: Yeah.

CVD: Yeah, that you're defining yourself down in a way if you're saying you're not all male, whereas, you know, for a lesbian you're in a way defining yourself up.

MA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hmm. What do you think the college needs to do to make sure that the community thrives if you had to give us some advice?

CVD: Wow.

MA: If you had a magic wand and you could wave it.

CVD: Don't let Mary Armstrong go, one thing because --

MA: (laughter) Thank you.

CVD: Yeah, because she has been the primary, best change agent I have seen here. Hands down. [00:56:00] I don't know what the college needs to do.

MA: Is there work undone? If you were going to send a young person you loved here and this is the place for you --

CVD: Wow. Wow. Oh, that's great. There's work that's been done and doesn't quite persist. I'm thinking of the position that Gene Kelly held, and I can't remember the title of it.

MA: Coordinator of gender and sexuality programs.

CVD: Yeah, OK, coordinator of gender and sexuality programs. I think that when he was here there was a good deal of open support. If a student, a young person I loved, who was questioning his or her sexual identity were to come here,

he or she would have known instantly, right, who to go to. A trans student, same thing. And I don't know how you do this, [00:57:00] but it would be nice if there were sort of a way to formalize that part of the person's role. I don't want to speak negatively of anybody. I've been away from the college, but I just don't have a sense that that component of that program is visible anymore.

MA: OK.

CVD: So just, I guess, maybe more administrative support for that dimension of that role.

MA: From the student life angle?

CVD: Right. Yeah, I think student life is very important, obviously. And for faculty I'm not sure. I mean, we have, you know, young, very openly queer identified faculty now here, some of them tenured, thank goodness, who're not going to go into a closet, if they ever were -- I mean, back into a closet if they ever were -- so I think for faculty I can't [00:58:00] really imagine much that needs to be done, at least with lesbian and gay issues. I don't know about trans issues.

MA: Yeah, and that probably tells us something that we just --

CVD: Yeah. That, you know, I'm blind to --

MA: Do you know any trans faculty?

CVD: No, I do not. No, I do not.

MA: OK.

CVD: Yeah. And again I don't know what would need to be done to institutionalize some kind of support.

MA: For the gay and lesbian community, is it more heterosexism than homophobia then?

CVD: Yeah, I think. I think that's true. And I don't know about administrative staff. You know, if a student graduating from another school or thinking of taking a position in the administration here, I think I would probably say that there's support, but I don't know how [00:59:00] dependent that support is on particular individuals.

MA: Gotcha. Absolutely. So here's an interesting question: you have to rank the climate on a scale of one to ten when you got here and rank it now.

CVD: (laughter) Oh my goodness.

MA: Or upon your departure, if that is easier, but that's only two years ago, so...

CVD: Yeah, yeah. OK. Well, are we talking about climate for all parts of the community?

MA: Yes.

CVD: OK. Which is hard to do.

MA: I'm asking you a really hard question. We're just sort of interested in what people see as the jump, I guess.

CVD: Yeah, yeah, how big is the jump? That's a really good question. I mean, I guess I would say that it wasn't a one when I came, because there wasn't active, open homophobia, right? But it was pretty close to that for students, so I would say at most a two. [01:00:00] End of 2014 where would I put it? Again, higher certainly for faculty and upper levels administration staff.

MA: You can assign a number for faculty and a number for students if you like.

CVD: No, I'll try to do the whole thing.

MA: OK.

CVD: Maybe about a seven.

MA: OK. All right. That's a good jump. Has Lafayette kept up with the world out there in sort of American culture as you perceive it?

CVD: Surprisingly I think it has. Yeah. You know, as of late. So, of course, American culture is a huge amalgam, so --

MA: Oh boy, right?

CVD: Yeah. But if I'm rating it sort of on a scale of relatively privileged institutions around the country, you know, we're pretty much up there.

MA: When you think back in your experience as a faculty member [01:01:00] are there any particular sort of examples or

stories of being here as a member of the community that you want to share?

CVD: Yeah. I mean, the ones when I first came that I've already shared of being closeted and not wanting to be closeted, but also not wanting to come out overtly. Gosh, I wish I had a better memory for such things, but I guess I'll just let it go.

MA: OK. Anything else to add? I mean, we've gone over a lot of territory.

CVD: Yeah, thank you. But, I mean, this project itself is amazing, so thank you.

MA: Speaking of amazing, Professor Lynn Van Dyke is Francis A. March Professor Emerita of English. She is an outstanding teacher, an amazing scholar, [01:02:00] an incredible doer of service for the college, and someone to whom we're very grateful for taking the time to do the inaugural interview for this project. Thank you, Lynn. We're big fans.

CVD: Thank you very much. [01:02:14]

END OF AUDIO FILE

VanDykeAppendixI

MA: [00:00] I don't know if we're still recording or not.

CVD: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MA: Are we?

CVD: I don't know.

MA: Well, just if you want to talk about that. Let's try that.

CVD: OK, yeah. I'll just --

MA: So we're back with an appendix, same date, time, Professor Lynn Van Dyke talking about being in a committed relationship.

CVD: Yeah. So, you know, part of this is just personal, it doesn't have much to do with the Lafayette community, but the fact that I have been in a relationship with the same woman for 38 years now, when I came here by myself I was very lonely and I couldn't talk to anybody else about why I was lonely -- or I didn't choose to. I guess I didn't feel comfortable talking about why I was so lonely. And I would go back to visit Ann. She came a year later and she can tell you her employment story, but the happy part of that was that gradually people -- usually the administration would sort of start to guess that we had this relationship. It was kind of comically awkward, because [01:00] she would know things about faculty that people might think, well, how does she know that? (laughter) And conversely I would know things about administration, so, you know --

MA: The flow of information was --

CVD: Yeah, yeah, we felt a little bit awkward about that, but we enjoyed it. But gradually, you know, when people in the administration would start to guess about it and then when I would start to tell faculty friends about it, as I often did, we got a lot of support, including some support from very high places. Ann will probably tell you about that. You know, just personal support, so -- and people recognizing this as couple -- so that's one thing that did change a lot. And I think another sign of positive change is that I'm guessing that let's say a guy happened to be hired in the department of whatever, who came here without a partner, and when the little blurbs are [02:00] mentioned on the floor of the faculty at the beginning of the year, if this person had, let's say a husband or even just a partner who was elsewhere, that probably the head of the department would feel comfortable about mentioning it. And so that's an enormous change.

MA: Wow. Right. So you were the couple that emerged as a couple over time.

CVD: Yes. Yeah.

MA: And now you could arrive, gay or lesbian, partnered, and just people would just know you're partnered, as long as you wanted to be known.

CVD: Yeah, so, OK.

MA: That's a great story. Thank you, Lynn.

CVD: Sure. [02:34]

END OF AUDIO FILE

VanDykeAppendixII

MA: [00:00] OK, we're back with Lynn Van Dyke for the second appendix, same date, same time, with a new question regarding how being at Lafayette has affected one's ability or one's style of maintaining relationships.

CVD: OK. Yeah. Something like, you know, how has being at Lafayette and being a member of the LGBTQ community, I could never get that out, has that affected relationship with a partner, if you have one? Other personal relationships with people inside and/or outside --

MA: OK. And could you answer that since these are rolling?

CVD: Oh, me. Oh, OK. I didn't realize --

MA: No, no, absolutely you. It's a great question.

CVD: Yeah. Initially it made it more stressful, partly because there was no, absolutely zip visibility in the administration [01:00] for anybody who wasn't heterosexual. And it made me much more private, I think. I don't think I ever completely came out of that. You know, I was probably much less sociable than I would have been if there had been

more openness from the beginning. But, as I think I said a minute ago, gradually being in a committed relationship at Lafayette was delightful, because we had lots of support around the community.

MA: Was there a chilling effect overall of one's ability to just socially interact?

CVD: I think, yeah. I think there was, yeah.

MA: Yeah.

CVD: You know, Ann would certainly go with me openly to English department parties, and that was perfectly fine, and later on to computer science parties. They were cool about it too. But we always felt a little bit [02:00] tense about showing much of our personal relationship at events where students might be present, because, you know, students would know me, they wouldn't know who this person was, they would sort of start speculating. So, yeah.

MA: Did that change over time? That sort of --

CVD: Not much. That didn't change very much. You know, there were students, who I became close to, to whom I was out and that was great, but a large gathering where there were a lot of students, you know, we were a little bit reserved.

MA: Yeah, yeah.

CVD: It wasn't that we hid -- you know, she'd go in one door and I'd go in the other, nothing like that.

MA: Right, right. The sense of sort of being speculated about, figured out, talked about, more than being out or not --

CVD: Right.

MA: -- as a sort of, like, being an occasion for talk.

CVD: Right. Which faculty always are, (laughter) right?

MA: But some more than others, right, as you're rightly pointing out.

CVD: Yeah, yeah, exactly. [03:00] So it would be a little distracting sometimes.

MA: Right, right. So do you think that generally that's characterized the climate for faculty in couples is that they socialize with other couples or they socialize very privately, but there's this still maintaining of relationships as visible or not that a straight couple wouldn't --

CVD: Yeah.

MA: Pretty much overall.

CVD: I suspect so, yeah.

MA: Yeah. That would make sense. Because, well, I guess that indicates there's still a cost to being found out against your will.

CVD: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And even if it's unfortunately an internalized cost.

MA: Right. Well observed.

CVD: Yeah.

MA: Thank you, Lynn.

CVD: OK. [03:37]

END OF AUDIO FILE