

DreherAlfred 20191219

MARY ARMSTRONG: Let me see. Okay. So we are recording right now. And this is Mary Armstrong, and I am recording on December 19, 2019 in Woodbury, Connecticut, and I am sitting in here, a few days before Christmas, with Alfred C. Dreher, Jr., who is an alumni of Lafayette, 1965, and has been gracious enough to welcome me into his residence to talk to him about his experiences at Lafayette. And Al, before we get started, one thing I wanted to start with is just to double-check. When we were discussing the forms and talking about your permission, just to say you've confirmed your permission to record.

ALFRED DREHER: Mm-hmm.

MA: Would you mind saying that?

AD: No, I'm happy to be recorded.

MA: Thank you very much for that. We like to have it on tape. The other thing, which I have wanted to ask you, [00:01:00] is when we were looking together at the Queer Archives Project online, you saw pictures of the alums, and if I could have your permission to take your picture --

AD: Oh, of course.

MA: Good. Okay. You have a beautiful sweater on and your Lafayette hat. (laughter) So we'd definitely like a

picture of you. Thank you for that permission as well. We'll begin, and just very generally, after you've confirmed who you are, and thank you for that, by some very open-ended questions, we could talk a little bit about your -- it's hard to ask a big question about a life story, but I guess my first question, as it always is, is would you talk a little bit about the LGBTQ situation when you were on campus? I realize this is 1965, so that might be kind of short story. But as you tell it, [00:02:00] and I ask different prompts, I do want to -- as I mentioned before, we started to record, just say that -- I'll have some prompts about life at Lafayette, but really the thing we care about is you telling your story. We're excited just to hear what you have to say. And so if I ask about this and that, it's basically just to maybe jog your memory, but it's not a list of questions we want answered. They're just little prompts to try to get you think of maybe this or that, but basically, you wrote us a very, very beautiful letter a year ago in which you talked about your situation and your story, about being at Lafayette, and it was so moving and so beautiful that that's how we found out about you. Anything you want to tell is what we want to hear, so that's the main thing. Where would you like to begin, Al?

Can we talk about what it was like while you were at school or while you were young or any place you'd like to start?

AD: Sure, sure. [00:03:00] Well, I was born and brought up in Waterbury, Connecticut. My dad was a doctor. I had friends as a kid, but I hated sports. My mother was always trying to get me to go out and play with the boys, and when I came home from school, all I wanted to do was homework. I really didn't want to go out and play with the boys. I felt more comfortable with the girls, frankly.

MA: Right. You felt some pressure about trying to be a guy like that.

AD: Yeah, yeah. I remember -- and I'm sort of embarrassed to say this, but whenever we played Tarzan, I had to be Jane, and whenever [00:04:00] we played cowboys and Indians, I was Dale Evans. That should have been a clue and probably was to all the neighborhood boys, but not to me.

MA: And you went to high school in Waterbury as well, you said?

AD: Yeah, I did. Yeah. And I was a good student. I was salutatorian of my high school graduating class. Then I went to Lafayette right out of high school.

MA: What made you go to Lafayette?

AD: My dad went to Lafayette. He was an alumnus of Lafayette.

MA: Did you have other siblings that also went to Lafayette?

AD: No. I was an only child. [00:05:00] And my mother was from Virginia, and her heart was always in the South. And I remember when we first arrived at Lafayette, there was a -- what do they call it -- the Dean's tea, I think, or something like that. I met my roommate, and my mother was thrilled because he was a boy from Virginia, but I found out once my parents left and we were in the room, that he was an atheist, the first atheist I'd ever met, and was also a very proud slob.

MA: A proud slob?

AD: Slob.

MA: Oh, that's hard to live with.

AD: Yeah. Well no, I didn't have any problems with him, to be honest. I had a crush on him [00:06:00] in a big way. That marked my freshman year. And I wasn't out then, even to myself. So I occasionally dated a neighborhood girl from Waterbury, and she came to the college a couple of times to visit me. So I didn't think I stood out as gay. I didn't identify as gay even to myself. The thought scared the hell out of me. My mother was always very homophobic. Not so much my dad, but she was very homophobic.

MA: [00:07:00] So those thoughts would have been really tough to try to face.

AD: Oh very, very.

MA: Absolutely, yeah.

AD: I remember an incident that was really after I graduated. I still had friends at Lafayette, and I remember probably a weekend, driving back one Saturday evening to visit them, and as I opened the door to go in the hall that I was visiting, this kid that I had known but not well -- he was just a very casual acquaintance -- came running towards the door and [00:08:00] made very -- I don't know what terminology, but he was making fun of me and acting very effeminate and making fun of me. It was a shock, because I had thought that I was doing a good job hiding. That was the first and really one of the only examples of that sort of thing in my life. Although it was something even after I got out in the business world -- I worked for Travelers, a large insurance company, first in their Newark office and then after a year or so, I was transferred to [00:09:00] their downtown New York City office, and after a couple of years there, after my dad died, I asked for a transfer to move back to Connecticut, so I could support my mom. They transferred me to Hartford, and that was the rest of my career, was in Hartford.

MA: And that incident at Lafayette, where someone made fun of you, that must have been a big shock to you.

AD: Oh, it was. It hurt. It was a big shock. I didn't know how to react.

MA: Right, because you were scared yourself of being that way.

AD: Right, right. And nobody had ever blatantly treated me that way.

MA: Was it a topic on campus otherwise, or was it so taboo that people [00:10:00] didn't really speak about it?

AD: I don't remember anybody ever speaking about it.

MA: Total silence.

AD: Yeah. The only other -- I mean, I remember there were rumors about a couple of professors, but you know, they were just rumors. Nobody knew for sure.

MA: Yeah. So there was no sort of underground or any kind of life. It was obviously all men.

AD: No. Oh yeah, yeah. It was all men when I went there, and it was a very straight culture. The only other incident I remember that I still remember after all these years, [00:11:00] and it didn't directly involve me, but it was a shocking incident. On the basement level of the dorm that I lived in, there was a little coffee shop, and if I didn't care for what they were having at dinner one night, I would go down there and get a hamburger. So I was I would say a regular customer down there, and most of the students were. At one point, this young guy from Easton got a job there

working behind the counter. And he was terribly effeminate. He didn't last very long. He left after I think probably just a couple of months if that long.

[00:12:00] And I remember a waitress talking about it, saying how sad it was, because he really needed a job, but the guys were just awful to him, just badgered him, made fun of him, so he left.

MA: So he was bullied out of a job.

AD: He was bullied out of a job, yeah, and that always struck me as terrible, and I still think back. I'm sure that's not a unique story.

MA: Yeah. And it teaches a lesson to everybody around about how to behave. If you see that kind of bullying, it tells everybody not to behave in any kind of effeminate way.

AD: Right, right. [00:13:00] And now I would like to think I would -- if I saw anybody treating anybody else that way, I would speak up and say something, but then, I wouldn't have, because guilt by association.

MA: Right, right. Too risky --

AD: Yeah.

MA: -- to be supportive. Yeah.

AD: Which is sad. I'm ashamed of that.

MA: Well, in thinking about that kind of culture, the costs of that, even now I think people are afraid to intervene in a

very, very different culture. Back then, it could have been the end of your peace of mind at Lafayette.

AD: Oh sure.

MA: I mean, that would have been a terrible cost to bear as a young person.

AD: Oh yes.

MA: Very, very difficult. Was there a lot of dating? Was there a sort of a dating culture, or did you find it more a sort of - because right there were no women on campus, so was it mostly a [00:14:00] guy-ish kind of culture?

AD: Yes. Yeah. Lafayette had -- I don't know what to call it -- some kind of a relationship with a girl's college probably somewhere in Pennsylvania. Cedar something.

MA: Cedar Crest.

AD: Cedar Crest.

MA: Yes, in Bethlehem there, Allentown, Bethlehem. Yeah, Cedar Crest. Still -- yeah.

AD: And I remember they would send a group of girls to a dance at Lafayette, and I remember we went there once, and I remember I danced with -- there was a nice, Chinese girl that I liked. I remember when I told my mother, she was critical [00:15:00] and wondered why I couldn't have danced with a nice Caucasian girl.

MA: Oh my.

AD: And if she'd only known -- (laughs) -- who I'd really like to dance with --

MA: The irony is powerful.

AD: Yes. Yeah. But you know, all kinds of prejudice I hate.

MA: And we see a couple in that example, right?

AD: Oh yes. Yeah.

MA: Absolutely. That sounds like a very difficult time to even come out to yourself on campus, to try to realize who you are as a young person in an atmosphere that's so homophobic and so repressive.

AD: Yeah. And I suppose on some level I must have known and always had, because I knew how I felt. But it was pushed down so deep [00:16:00] that I couldn't face it. I couldn't deal with it.

MA: Right. And the world would give you every reason not to deal with it.

AD: Oh yeah. For years and years, I told myself if anybody knew or even suspected that I was gay would end my life, and I really believed it. And the irony is when I finally came out to the world as a gay man when I think I was 53, I've had the best, healthiest, most mentally healthy, certainly, period of my life since then.

MA: [00:17:00] You thought your life was over, and your life began.

AD: Began, yeah. Amen. Now, I remember, about that time, I think, I had attempted suicide, failed miserably at it, but God had other plans for me. And right after that, I was in a dual-diagnosis outpatient group at Danbury Hospital, and I remember the head psychiatric nurse, who I loved but whose name I can't remember, had me stand [00:18:00] in front of the group one day and say, I am a gay man, and I am whole. And I said it. My voice cracked, and I didn't - - I didn't believe it for a second, but I said it, because she told me to. But it wasn't too long when I actually came to believe that then. I'm thankful to say that today, I firmly believe that. I don't believe gay people are less than or ill or -- what's the word I'm looking for -- in any way deficient. We're just as normal as anybody else, and I will argue that until [00:19:00] the cows come home with anybody who says otherwise.

MA: That's a wonderful thing to be able to say you've arrived in that place where you deserve to be --

AD: Oh, I know it. Took me years and years, but I'm grateful that I'm there today.

MA: Absolutely.

AD: When I came out, after my suicide attempt, I also was diagnosed as an alcoholic, so I started going to AA. Living in Woodbury, and I don't have wheels, so I only go

to one meeting a week now. A nice man comes and picks me up every Friday night --

MA: That's wonderful.

AD: -- and takes me to the meeting. [00:20:00] When I first moved here two years ago, I had the AA meeting book, and I knew there was a meeting at the First Congregational Church on Friday night that I wanted to go to, and I had no way to get there. Somebody suggested I call the church, and I did. And the woman in the office who answered said, she'll get me a ride. And I forget if it was her or the man himself, but somebody called later that afternoon and said, he would pick me up at such and such an hour.

MA: That's wonderful.

AD: And every Friday, he picks me up and brings me back here. And you know who he is? Her husband.

MA: Oh!

AD: [00:21:00] He's in AA, and I'm sure she called him right away and said, you're picking up Al. (laughter)

MA: I've got news. You're picking up Al. That's wonderful.

AD: Yeah, yeah, but I'm sure he didn't fight her. He's a nice man.

MA: That's wonderful. That's great you're able to -- please continue.

AD: I was just going to say, I love that meeting, and there are -- aside from me, it's a mainstream meeting, but there are four or five other gay people there.

MA: And mainstream would mean open to everybody, not a particular --

AD: Open to everybody, yeah. Because I've been to gay meetings, which are just gay people.

MA: But you still have a gay community within this --

AD: Meeting, yeah.

MA: Wonderful. Wonderful. That's great. I'm moved thinking about the hard times that you've come through, and so glad [00:22:00] you did. Now the time that you speak of, when you had the mental health issues, that was post-Lafayette. That was before you came out, so like your forties?

AD: Right, right.

MA: I see. Okay, all right, yeah.

AD: Yeah. I started -- I guess my dad died when I was about 25, and that's when I moved back to live with my mom. For years, I mean, it was virtually almost like we were married. I mean, I took her out to lunch on Saturday, and she was my companion and basically the only friend I had. [00:23:00] And the thought of coming out to her, even today, I ask myself if she were still alive, would I have had the courage to come out, and I hope I would. I like to

think I would. Certainly, by 53, you'd think I would have gotten some gumption, but --

MA: It's funny how when we're in situations when the people who love us are very homophobic or transphobic, then we feel like we have to choose between the love of other people and our true selves, and that's like an unbearable choice.

AD: Oh, it is, yeah.

MA: You know, it's not a lack of gumption. It's just --

AD: And if anybody was asking me for advice, I'm sure I would tell them go for your true self, because therein lies [00:24:00] salvation and health. But when somebody is facing the end of a marriage or a relationship with their parents --

MA: It's a big cost, isn't it?

AD: Yeah. And there are still a lot of people out there, who I hear talk about problems they have with their family. I don't have much family, and in a way, I'm lucky, because I know people who go to an AA meeting after a holiday to get some sanity after being with their family for a day.

MA: Right. To recover from them.

AD: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of -- not irresponsible.

MA: [00:25:00] Dysfunctional?

AD: Thank you. Dysfunctional families out there. Sad to say, but --

MA: As I hop back in my head thinking about your stories about being in college and being a young person and how cultural homophobia really hemmed you in, when you were at Lafayette, did you have activities or things you particularly enjoyed in terms of -- was there anything you did besides schoolwork, or was the schoolwork the main focus? You enjoyed it?

AD: Schoolwork was the main focus for me.

MA: Okay. Did you enjoy your classroom experience at Lafayette?

AD: Oh yes. Yeah.

MA: Any favorite professors or classes?

AD: I can't think of -- there was one English professor I liked very much. I think his name was Rudder. [00:26:00] Probably long since retired, because he was probably in his fifties when I had him.

MA: But you enjoyed being a student otherwise.

AD: Oh yes. Yeah.

MA: It was a good experience. It was just --

AD: Yeah. I didn't have any -- aside from that one I mentioned, I didn't have any painful experiences.

MA: No painful experiences. At the same time, nobody to connect with to help you come out or no support either.

AD: Right, yeah. That's a good word. No support. There was no incentive to come out because there was nobody to connect with.

MA: Right, so an incentive not to come out, to hide, to yourself and everyone.

AD: Yeah. I remember I had -- [00:27:00] there were a couple of guys who I don't remember, but they may have lived in the same dorm I did, that I was friendly with, and one of them, I won't mention his name, but he was on the effeminate side, and I had another friend who was Larry Pi, who was Chinese, but from Brazil --

MA: wow.

AD: -- and had all kinds of money. And we were very close, and I remember once, he said to me, alluding to this other guy that I was friends with, you know, there's guilt by association, kind of implying there was something wrong with my being friends to him.

MA: Oh. [00:28:00] Not so subtle comment.

AD: No, no.

MA: Yeah. Those are hard times, and there's no place to go for support or for help, and you feel those little nudges. You see somebody else bullied.

AD: That's why I'm so impressed hearing about the group that you're involved with now at Lafayette.

MA: There's been a lot of changes. There's been a lot of changes. It could be better. It could be worse. It's not perfect, but it's --

AD: No, nothing is.

MA: Right. It's wonderful to see the --

AD: But I can see progress from when I was there.

MA: Right, right. It has been great progress, and there are students who are out, and there are out faculty like myself, and the students see us, and the students see each other. There's more support in campus life, the staff professionals who work with the students, who some are out themselves, but there are, you know, support groups. The counseling center now has [00:29:00] someone who really focuses their area of expertise. When you think how valuable that would have been for people years ago --

AD: Oh, yeah, yeah. I've come to believe that it's so important for those of us who are out to not hide who we really are, to face the world. This is a gay person. I mean, you don't have to hide from me. I'm not going to harm you. If the mystery goes, I think some of the hate hopefully will go.

MA: Makes it more rational when you see a regular person. It's harder to be irrational and hate them for no good reason.

AD: Right, right. Hopefully.

MA: Yeah. I was thinking, just before we turned the recorders [00:30:00] on, I was thinking you were saying how in AA meetings, how people tell their stories and how much this project is like that in the sense that it's so important for people to hear people's stories.

AD: Oh sure, to identify with -- and I identify with just about everybody that I hear talk. I mean, their history can be dramatically different than mine, different ages, different genders, totally different life experiences, but there's a commonality in the feelings, and when you hear somebody else share something that you identify with, you can relate to oh boy, I thought the same thing. [00:31:00] It just connects you to the world. And for years, I wasn't connected to the world.

MA: You just felt alone.

AD: Oh yeah. In fact, even when I first came out, on some level, I felt like I was the only gay person who had been closeted. And when I heard other people share their story, I found out a lot of people have issues connected to coming out, some worse than mine. It's healthy to hear other people's stories, I think.

MA: Mm-hmm. It makes us less alone.

AD: Yes. Yeah.

MA: Yeah. And it's important to know the past, too, because it gives us a sense of perspective. It's important that Lafayette's [00:32:00] better now. It's important that workplaces are better now. As you said, nothing's perfect, but there have been improvements in many ways for people. When you wrote us that beautiful letter, you mentioned that you had had a friend who was trans-identified, who had been identified as male but I think lives as a woman?

AD: No, vice versa.

MA: Okay, excuse me. I forgot.

AD: He was born as a woman.

MA: And identifies as male.

AD: Right. He's had a sex change operation.

MA: Oh, okay. He's transitioned. Because that's - trans people are also subject to many of the phobias.

AD: Right. Oh yeah. If he hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known what his birth name was. In fact, I talked to him just the other day. [00:33:00] He's a nice guy, a close friend. I like him very much. He's Puerto Rican, and he's got a close friend, a woman, who's Puerto Rican, and I think it was her pastor that once recently told him that he was basically an aberration, which is awful. I mean, he's the nicest person.

MA: People still subject to these bigotries.

AD: Yes. Yeah.

MA: Well, then we do have some progress. Do you have any advice for our younger crowd these days or anything you'd like to pass along [00:34:00] or add to your interview?

AD: Well, advice, just be yourself, be proud, and don't take any crap from anybody.

MA: That is very good advice.

AD: (laughs)

MA: May I take it also? I'm going to take your advice.

AD: Yes, oh sure.

MA: Excellent. I think that's wonderful. That's well-said and very good advice.

AD: Because there are ignorant cretins and just people who are mean-spirited out there and probably always will be, but don't let them get under your skin. Just know that you are worthy. As my counselor once said, I'm a gay man, and I am whole.

MA: That's beautiful. That is really, truly great, great advice. [00:35:00] Al Dreher, I will ask you for permission to put your letter online with your interview?

AD: Oh, amen. Of course.

MA: Okay, amen. We thank you for that and tell you --

AD: Thank you for spending so much time with me.

MA: It has been a pleasure and an honor to spend time with you,
and I want to thank you for welcoming me here and giving
this interview and adding to the Queer Archives Project and
being an example with your courage and your sobriety and
your commitment to being an out gay man who is whole.

Thank you, Al Dreher.

AD: Thank you. Thank you, Mary.

END OF AUDIO FILE