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A Conversation with George Grattan

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GLBTQ Alumni Oral History Project

GLBTQ Alumni Oral History Project Conversation with George Grattan (Class of 1991) March 23, 2017 Conducted by Raha Maalin'17

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Transcript:

DELETE: (0-0:09)

Raha: Thank you so much for agreeing (for an interview)!

George: My pleasure, always happy to help out for the Cross!

Raha: So I just literally pressed the record button, so I just have to ask you again if you are okay with me recording you?

George: Yes, that is fine.

Raha: Perfect! How is your day going?

George: It is going okay. This is a nice way to end it.

Raha: We read the book [In, Out, and About on the Hill] and I was fascinated with how much students' experience changed based on when they were on campus, and also the different services available, and (level of) viewability on campus.

George: Yes, absolutely.

Raha: I am going to get the interview started. So I want to tell you more about the structure of the interview; there are three sections. I have a list of given questions. The first part is (about) coming to Holy Cross and what it was like. The second is coming out and being LGBTQ at Holy Cross. And last part is about looking back and reflecting on your experiences on campus.

George: Okay.

Raha: So, I will start with the first question, coming to Holy Cross. How did you decide to come to Holy Cross?

George: That was pretty easy. I come from a Holy Cross family, both of my older siblings, my sisters, went to Holy Cross before me. My sister, Leslie, graduated in the class of '85, and Lisa

graduated in the class of '86. And we actually had an older relative, I think my father's older cousin, who was a professor at Holy Cross for many decades in the History Department. So, the family knew of the school, so when I was looking for colleges, it was pretty easy for me to identify that Holy Cross was a place that I already felt comfortable and knew it had an excellent academic reputation, and knew it had a culture I was familiar with and liked. I visited my sisters there a lot when they were there, so it was a pretty easy decision. I ended up going early decision to Holy Cross, when I was in high school.

Raha: Oh, that's amazing. What was your transition like, from high school to Holy Cross?

George: It was pretty typical. I had the usual nervousness and homesickness feelings in those first couple of weeks first year. But, I found a pretty good group of friends pretty quickly right on my hall in Clark 2, and those are still some of my best friends today, more than twenty five years later. So once that social group began to form, I really did start to feel very much at home. Holy Cross was, you'll probably get to this in later questions but Holy Cross, when I was there, was pretty conservative, and pretty much of a jock sports culture place as well. So I didn't really fit in with either of those characteristics of the culture, so I did often feel like a bit of an outsider, but a lot of my friends were other outsiders, and we were sort of the kids on the margins of the popular group, so that made things a little bit easier once we found each other.

Raha: What year were you an alumni, again?

George: I was at Holy Cross from the Fall of 1987 until May of 1991, when I graduated.

Raha: And what was happening during that time?

George: Wow. With the end of the Reagan era, and you know sort of the end of Reagan/Bush-era. Reagan was leaving office, and Bush was coming in, so it was the Bush/Dukakis campaign. There was an Olympics in, I think Seoul, South Korea, if I remember that correctly. Of course, it was the height of the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was starting to fall apart. I remember the Berlin Wall came down when I was studying abroad in England. I was actually visiting friends in Ireland that weekend, watching it on T.V. from a pub in Ireland. It was Tiananmen Square (1989) happened during one of those summers. It was the War on Drugs, and obviously it was the height of the AIDS crisis, as well. So there was a lot happening, it was a real time of transition, I think, culturally.

Raha: Did the global context have an impact in your experience at Holy Cross?

George: Yeah, I think so. Like I said, Holy Cross was pretty conservative in those days, at the tail end of the Reagan era, but there were small pockets of resistance as well that were growing, with some more students who were really taking to heart Catholic social justice teaching, and getting involved with various different causes. There was always a great ethic of service to the community at Holy Cross, and I think that was in some ways a reaction against somethings that

were happening in the larger culture. As a child of the eighties, I grew up in the culture wars and it was very much a time of right versus left, and take no prisoners, and I guess we are seeing that again today. But you were very aware of where you stood, and what side you were on.

Raha: Transitioning to our second part of our interview, and recognizing that coming out is not a one time event. When and how was your first time coming out?

George: So the first time I actually said the words to anyone, "I am bisexual," was when I told the woman, who is now my wife, who was then my girlfriend, and was about to become my fiancée, when I was about twenty-five or twenty-six. We knew that we were heading towards becoming engaged, and I had known this about myself since I was nine, but had really only articulated it to myself in the last few years there, when I was in grad school and was starting to claim the identity for myself, and realized I really wanted to let her to know. I needed to be open and honest with her about my sexual orientation and sexual identity. So yeah, she was the first person I told when I was about twenty-five or twenty-six years old.

Raha: What was it like telling her?

George: It was really intense. We knew we were serious, and we were thinking about getting married. Obviously, you are always afraid of rejection. In my particular case, bisexuality has such stereotypes and myths associated with it that I was really afraid of rejection in a very particular way, and how it might impact our relationship. It was a wonderful experience, probably the best conversation of my life certainly one of the most important conversations of my life. She responded incredibly well and supportively. We are about to celebrate twenty years of marriage in October!

Raha: Congratulations! That is amazing. We have a couple question below, if you were "out" at Holy Cross or not, so you were not "out" at Holy Cross, correct?

George: No not at Holy Cross. I mean sort of vaguely to myself.

Raha: Okay.

George: I think there were some people, who probably knew or suspected, but I was not publicly "out" at Holy Cross. In my day, very few people were publicly "out" at Holy Cross.

Raha: What do you think kept you from really revealing that sense of identity, to your greater community?

George: Fear, really. Fear of retaliation, fear of being ostracized, physical fear. There would have been a sense of physical threat. One of the kids who was out, as a gay man was definitely beaten up for that when we were here at Holy Cross. It was just palpable that this was not a time and place that was safe to be different, and not a safe place to be then what was called

“homosexual,” or “faggot,” or “queer,” in a negative sense. Nobody was yet reclaiming “queer” as a positive term at that point. That was starting to happen, but just barely. It would have been fear and I think, also, the overwhelming Catholic atmosphere and identity, certainly the Church, with the Pope and the leadership fall the way down the line through the 1980s was you were not hearing any positive messages about homosexuality, bisexuality, or human sexuality in general, for that matter. It was a pretty chilling atmosphere and that kept from coming out to the community or to family during that time period.

Raha: I recall you saying that it was really during the AIDS crisis that you were on campus, I wanted to know more about what it was like for the LGBTQ community during that specific time period?

George: The first public scare and height of AIDS was obviously a bit earlier ‘82, ‘83, ‘84 when I was in high school/junior high. And That was really difficult to be sort of coming of age as a queer person, and particularly as a bisexual person, when many bisexuals were being blamed for the spread of AIDS to straight communities, bisexual men in particular, or “men on the down low” were being sort of castigated as these disease vectors. So, I was growing up with a message that not only was I going to hell according to my church, but that I also was a public health threat according to my government. By the time I got to college, we had learned more about the disease and transmission methods, and safe sex was coming very much into vogue along with campaigns against drunk driving. Those were sort of the two movements of my teen years, and by the time I got to college, I think people were practicing safer sex, but it was still casting very much this association of queer sexuality being linked to illness or disease, and death. A lot of people who were queer at the time had partners, friends, lovers, associates, family members, that they were straight themselves who were dying by that point. An so there was this narrative of death really around queer sexualities.

Raha: Wow. That is so interesting.

George: That has started to change.

Raha: Yeah!

George: It’s a different experience now.

Raha: I took an AIDS class last semester, and we talked about how AIDS has been re-imaged since so like “even if you get it, you are still going to survive.” So, seeing the change and how it has been put through. I wanted to know more about, you mentioned that you really weren’t out on campus, but I wanted to know more about the support system that existed for the LGBTQ community on campus when you were a student?

George: There was almost nothing. I mean, there were kind individuals, but there was no formal, official support group. There was no Allies group, there was no ABiGaLe, there was

no... I know a little bit of the history of Holy Cross, I do not know what all the groups are called there now. None of that existed in any formal way. What we did have were individual professors and staff members who cared greatly, and who would make it a point to kind of do outreach, but it had to be sort of stealth outreach, under the table, because you could not talk too directly about these things. But we found those resources and I know looking back now that there were mentors in my life, who knew probably that I was queer, and who were reaching out to me with sources of support and strength, but who never forced the conversation on me. They would not have anywhere to direct me to but one person in particular who comes to mind, is the late chaplain Kim McElaney, at Holy Cross who was a great mentor of mine, and I think an early pioneer in being accepting of LGBTQ students at Holy Cross, and being a resource for them, over the course of her tenure there. I know that we had the kind of relationship where had I been ready to come out at school, she's probably the first person I would have told, outside of maybe some close friends, because I knew she would have been kind and loving and accepting and supportive. She would have been wonderful. There were other people like that too, other professors, Professor Helen Whall, and Professor Pat Bizzell, and some others that you just knew you could come to them with anything. That very special Holy Cross connection between professors and students that you only get with a small school, with a very caring ideology. That did exist, but otherwise, and thank God because otherwise there was nothing, there was no formal support systems at all.

Raha: The next thing I wanted to know really more about, the clubs, sports, and campus organizations, you were apart of.

George: Sure. I was apart of Pax Christi, which is the Catholic peace group. There's a chapter at Holy Cross, and I think there still is. I actually led, by the time, I started when I was a freshmen, by the time I was a senior, I was one of the co-leaders of Pax Christi, along with my classmate, Anne Cahill and Kathleen Walsh. I was also a member of the Alternate College Theatre (ACT), which I think still exists.

Raha: Yes, it does.

George: And Fenwick Theatre, and my senior year the College Choir. So, I was in the arts, and social justice side of things. I was not in any intramural sports clubs, or anything like that. But, those clubs, those organizations were great sources of support even if they did not know, they were being supportive. Again, looking back now, there was obviously other LGBTQ students in those clubs, and we bonded and that was probably one of the reasons that we bonded even if we weren't out to each other. We were still very supportive of each other.

Raha: How did your involvement in these groups impact and shape your experience, especially having other students there that were of LGBTQ community, but not explicitly there?

George: Yeah, I mean it gave me a sense of community, even if I couldn't fully embrace it or name it. It gave me a sense of being at home. I also met other people, who now we would call

allies, who were wonderful towards LGBTQ people. It did begin introduce to me, particularly my involvement with theater and music, which I had been involved with in high school, but in college I began to learn more about the history of theater and music, and that includes a lot of queer history. So, I began to learn about examples of people who had gone before me, not at Holy Cross obviously but in New York, LA, wherever it may have been. And that was great and I think that's actually the context that I first encountered examples of people identified as being bi and so that was finding an identity, finding a label that would work, and I do not think I would have found it if I had just been just on the intramural soccer team. It really took being involved in ACT, Pax Christi, and other groups like that.

Raha: In looking back at your Holy Cross experience, if you could change or do something differently what would it be and why?

George: That is a tough one. I think about that a lot. I think about my youth a lot. I came out to my wife and girlfriend, at age twenty five or twenty six. I really then stayed, and I told some close friends at that time, but I stayed public in the closet, and stayed in the closet with my family, until just about three or four years ago in my mid forties. And so, I really do have a sense of, Gee, what would life had been like if I had been out as a teenager or a twenty something, like so many of the people I know and work with today? What would I change? Well, there is a part of me that wants to say, I really wish I had been out, I wish I had been out at Holy Cross but I realize that, had I been out at eighteen, nineteen, twenty, I probably wouldn't have been at Holy Cross.

Raha: Yeah.

George: I probably would have gone to another school, where I would have felt that there was a more or an obvious, open, supportive community that was valued.

Raha: Did you have any romantic relationships at Holy Cross? Both within either genders?

George: I did, with women only at Holy Cross. I dated a couple of women at Holy Cross. Blind date balls! I do not think they do those anymore.

Raha: No! I wish they did!

George: That would be a really good thing! I dated a couple women at Holy Cross, including one woman seriously from my junior year through senior year.

Raha: Wow, looking back is there anything you had wished you had known coming in as a bisexual student?

George: Yeah, I guess I wished I had known, that, Geez there's a lot I wish I had known. I wish I had known that there were in fact other gay and bi men. That there were bi women, as well as

straight women who might have been interested in dating me and being supportive of my identity. It really was a really isolated feeling I did not know bi men existed in the wild, in the world. And the only bi people that I knew of were David Bowie, and according to rumor, Mick Jagger, and that was it. I guess I wish I had known what I know now, which is that there definitely were gay men, bi men, bi women at Holy Cross that I could have had a greater sense of community with but having said that, the relationships I had with women at school were very fulfilling, wonderful, fond memories, look back on them as sort of key components of my growing up and becoming a young person.

Raha: Lastly, do you think that the Jesuit identity and environment of Holy Cross affected your view of sexuality?

George: Sure. But it's sort of a--there's a contradiction there--because on the one hand, the Catholic aspect of that, as I referred to before, was almost an entirely negative effect on my view of sexuality because of the messaging coming from the hierarchy, about the doctrine. And the doctrine is still that non-straight people are considered "fundamentally disordered in their being. That's still official church teaching. That is still something I struggle with as someone who considers themselves a Catholic.

On the other hand, the Jesuits were focused in ~~one~~ other places in their theology. They put their emphasis on different things. And they emphasised love and acceptance, and inquisitiveness, intellectual rigour, the primacy of the conscious of the individual, and those things were really helpful to me as a bi student, as a young bi person. I began to feel that it was theologically legitimate for me to have a personal relationship with God, in which my sexuality was not a problem for God, but was a gift. And that is definitely from the Jesuit background and influence. It was sort of a "both /and" in that identity.

Raha: Did you come to that realization at Holy Cross? Or was that always present in your life?

George: No, I think I really started to come to that realization at Holy Cross because my earlier experiences of Catholicism were very traditional. I come from a small town, a conservative town, on the east end of Long Island, and there was no acceptance of different sexualities whatsoever in that context.

Raha: Then, we will go onto our last part of retrospecting. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to LGBTQ students who are struggling to come out at Holy Cross?

George: Well, I think my experience being born in 1969, and arriving in college in 1987 is likely to be so different from what students going through and arriving there right now and being there. I almost hesitate to think I would have anything very useful to say to them. I think that they do live in a very changed world, and I would hope that if they were struggling to come out, they could look around, and look at the existence of projects like this one, this oral history project, which it was unimaginable in my time. Or they could look to the existence of the Transgender

History Project [Digital Transgender Archive], and professors like Professor Rawson being at Holy Cross, that they could look to the existence of all the support groups and just the general elevated presence of LGBTQ life at Holy Cross and take some comforts and courage from that.

At the same time, I am a really big believer in saying there is no one perfect time to come out. Everyone gets to do it on their own timeline. It's not a race. It's not a failure of courage, it's not a failure of character. You've gotta feel safe, you've gotta feel ready, so if that does not happen at Holy Cross that's fine, and it's not any kind of a failure not to come out.

Raha: Based on your experience, what advice would you offer to LGBTQ seniors, who are about to make the transition from college to the professional life and what were your experiences?

George: In some ways, their world is about to get a lot bigger. Holy Cross, for all that its changed, is still a relatively conservative Catholic school, so that's going to change. They're going to go into a wider world with much more upfront diversity and that will be phenomenal. And they will meet new people and experience new things, and gain a new sense of community from that. In other ways, their world is going to get a little bit smaller, because you are going to lose this sense of community that you have only with your college friends. That ability to just drop by someone's dorm, or off-campus apartment, and just spend six hours just talking about nothing. That really goes away and you never get that back, and that kind of interaction, I found built life long bonds and friendship. And so that will change and I think that if LGBTQ students, in particular, have found community at Holy Cross, of that type, it maybe difficult for them to replace that. But I urge them to get involved in their local communities. There's almost always an LGBTQ group in any, now even small town of any size and the internet, of course. I did not have the internet--you guys have the internet. You can find each other, and you can find each other on meetup, and through other venues. It's everything from support groups to queer rock climbing groups, queer hiking groups, queer art museum groups, or whatever it may be. That is a wonderful thing. So that's out there for people.

Raha: Our last question today is, can you share a story about a moment, when being LGBT impacted an experience that you had at Holy Cross? I know you were not out, but being just bisexual.

George: So, I think the one that sticks with me the most is sophomore year, a good friend of mine we had been great friends, and lived on the same hall freshmen year. He came out as gay sophomore year, and he came out to several of his closest friends, sort of well after telling a lot of people, that at the time, I thought of as acquaintances to him. And I was really wounded by that, I was really hurt by it. I didn't understand why he couldn't share this information with me, this important information, this secret he had been keeping. I realize now it's because I wasn't trustworthy. I think that he knew that I was struggling with my own stuff and we probably sensed that about each other. It may had been what drew us to each other as friends. He was ready to be out, and I was not. And I think he probably wondered how good of an ally, I was gonna be.

And so, I think he found the support group that he needed elsewhere among some older students, and other students who were more involved in some of those communities, I mentioned before.

But, I will always look back on that and think, "If I had been out, or if I had been able to respond to his coming out to with my own coming out," I really wonder where/what our friendship could have been. How it could have been strengthened, and deepened, because we never really reconnected after that and just kind of drifted apart. And I attribute that, in large part to, how I was responding to the cultural pressure. I'm, ashamed to admit, that when he first came out, I was concerned that people would discover me, by associating the two of us. It's like, "Oh, no I have a gay friend!" Does that make me gay or bi? And so, that could have been different.

Raha: Thank you so much for interviewing with me today.

George: You are so welcome. I had a blast! I hope you get good stuff out of it, and that the paper goes well, and I look forward to reading all the interviews online.

Raha: I am glad I was able to talk with you!

George: Me too!

Raha: Thank you!

George: Bye.

Raha: Bye.