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A Conversation with Michael McCarthy

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GLBTQ HC Alumni Oral History
A conversation with Michael McCarthy 1973
April 5th 2017
Conducted by Kayla Lopez 2017
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Kayla: Hi Michael

Michael: Good morning

Kayla: Good morning. So just a reminder. If at any time you are uncomfortable and don't want to answer a question, you can back out. Anything you don't want to say, that's fine. So, I guess we'll go straight in. What was your major at Holy Cross?

Michael: I was an English Literature Major.

Kayla: Ok. And how did you decide to go to Holy Cross?

Michael: Interesting. I came in transferring as a sophomore. I went to Creighton Preparatory School in Omaha, Nebraska, a Jesuit prep school. And I had an excellent education there. Both of my parents had gone to the University of Nebraska, and my father was on the Board of Trustees at the University of Nebraska. Therefore, I was going to the University of Nebraska. And yet, I knew I needed to escape Nebraska. It was the centennial year, it was a special college for 100 of the top students coming into the class, and a residence hall that was designed for them and special courses. So, I felt pressure a bit of pressure to go to the University of Nebraska, even though that was not what I wanted to do. And, there was a wonderful Jesuit Scholastic at Creighton Prep—and this will be a recurring theme—I remained in contact with during his life, and I think it was obvious to him, because he was older, and it wasn't so obvious to me, that he was gay. And he suspected that I probably was gay and really needed to escape Nebraska and find some different space. So during that first year in Nebraska I excelled, but really was unhappy. I confided that to him. And he said, "Where would you rather be going to college?" And I said, "Oh I'd like to go to the Northeast." And a week later he came back with an application and said fill it out. A week later I was accepted to Holy Cross with a full scholarship. He was my golden ticket out of Nebraska. And so I came to Holy Cross the fall of 1970 having graduated from high school in 1969, and so I'm the class of 1973. And it was really everything I'd hoped it would be. The campus still gets national awards for being one of the most beautiful college campuses in the country. So, just arriving was a little bit like... remember I'm probably 50 years older than you...no not quite... that required high school reading was a book by John Knowles called *A Separate Peace* and it was about a boy's prep school in New England. Probably Phillips Academy or Andover or something like that. And it was very much a book about male bonding at that certain age of transition into manhood, and how athletic it could be, how scholastic it could be, the kinds of the bonds that could form, and when I arrived on campus, that was exactly what I imagined my experience would be like. And indeed, I would say over the next 3

years, it really did play out that way. It was a wonderful experience. The Jesuits were incredible teachers. The other faculty members, some of them I thought were truly brilliant and really, really wonderful on a small campus at a smaller college, being the focus was on students and their lives. So that's how I made it there and it was probably one of the best decisions I think of my life.

Kayla: I know. Holy Cross definitely places an emphasis on care of the whole being. So, what campus groups were you involved with, if any?

Michael: Well, as you can imagine, I think I said. I pretty much knew, well I knew that I was different. I didn't have the word gay for it. This was a long time ago, and everything was much more restrained, I think, and more secretive in those days. And although I wasn't keeping it a secret I may have been a secret for myself. I'm not quite sure. I knew that I was attracted to men, emotionally. I didn't know necessarily physically and it was an all-male campus and there was so much opportunity just for being together, sharing ideas and being with people who shared your interests. And so, of course, the campus offered really wonderful things for someone who was a sensitive young man. For example, the theatre group. One of the Classics professors, every fall, every Friday or Saturday night would have a small theatre group. About maybe 6 students and a professor, who I'm sure was also gay and I won't reveal his name. We would go off to Amherst or to Mount Holyoke or to Smith and we would go to their local theatre productions. And that was a way to be expressive in the arts. I was very much involved in writing and writing for *The Purple*, which was the literary magazine then. I don't know if it's still is literary magazine, if it's still in production. But my Senior Year I was the editor of *The Purple*. And that involved me in a lot of work with very creative students, and I know many of them were probably gay as well. It was a film club. One of my best friends over time, who also subsequently has come out later in life, is the person who helped organize bringing all of the films onto campus and Friday and Saturday night there would be different films and it really was the center of culture. It may still be the case, I'm not sure. The campus provided a very safe, comfortable space. And Worcester was sort of a distant city to us. At least my group of friends very rarely wandered out into Worcester. And except for people who were destined not ever to eat in the dining hall would go to I think it was called Miss Woo, Miss Worcester...

Kayla: Miss Worcester, The diner. It's still a thing

Michael: It is. The chicken with red sauce is what everybody thought was the best. I honestly never made it there so I don't know but the campus really did provide this incredibly comfortable, safe space with enough cultural stuff going on. I was also very much involved in the group that got to spend some money for buying arts and culture. And we organized art exhibits coming on campus. We organized poetry readings, with various poets coming on and reading. It was quite outrageous I remember at the time with some foul language with this woman poet. And also, chamber music so we organized trios and quartets and those kind of things coming on the campus and also opened it up to the community. Once Hogan Hall was built and parking was available for the public to come in, and that encouraged some interaction between the town and the college. So,

there was more than enough cultural life and creative life outside of the scholastic life, which of course Jesuits have always promoted. And also outside of the athletic life, and Jesuits have always promoted a sound life and a sound body. And have always, I think loved the idea of athleticism and intercollegiate sports and that kind of thing. And so that was as much fun as well. Certainly I participated in going to football games and basketball games. That athleticism of course on display was the ballet that we had access to, in a way, the physical movement. It was just a part of campus life, but it all fit in together. So whether you were gay or straight, you could really enjoy all of those things but it did provide a community space to meet other people who were interested in those kinds of things as well and it was often more of I guess, a gay kind of thing at the time. Although we didn't really have that word. That word developed later. We had other words because the other thing I think is, when you are acknowledging to yourself that you are different from other people, from boys and young men your age you become very aware of your surroundings. You know, what is safe and what does that say? What is acceptable behavior and what's not acceptable behavior? And I might not have had the word homosexual but certainly by the end of high school, certainly end of college I understood the term.. I can also say I never experienced anything truly anti-gay. I never heard words tossed around or whatever. I did see that there were some upperclassmen, I remember one especially who wore his hair very long and who carried a sort of shoulder bag who was also an English major and there were, I think, some snickers from time to time because he was a little bit more obviously effeminate and was not embarrassed about that. And sort of walked across campus in slightly frilly clothes and a shoulder bag and long hair and that kind of stuff. So there I think possibly he became a little bit of a lightning rod, but the most I noticed ever there were slight snickers from some people and they were obviously not people who I would have cared what their opinion was anyway.

Kayla: What about outside of the Holy Cross campus in the larger global context, what was going on that maybe had an experience even on your experience at Holy Cross or any of your experiences?

Michael: So, I missed the real fireworks which would have been my freshman year because of course 1969 was the Vietnam War era. People were finally protesting, shutting down campuses, invasions into Cambodia, etc. I believe that freshman year no one took exams either their first semester or their second semester because they were closed down because of demonstrations against the war. And so that was ever-present. In my sophomore year, of course, there were deferments if you were in college. And that was eventually seen as being elitist and unfair, and that most of the people therefore going to war, being drafted, were less wealthy, less well educated, less opportunities. And so they changed the draft to a lottery. And I remember one event, people would gather in the common room in each of the houses and I forget what house I was in, and the lottery was being picked on TV and one of the first numbers picked was a young man in the front row so that his birthday was going to be the third in the lottery. So he was almost certainly going to be drafted. And he picked up a folding chair and threw it through the television set. So those were difficult days, just politically. And then there was also a time when on campus there was a much more obvious effort by President Brooks, who was the president of the College, to really make Holy Cross more diverse. And so I remember

that something that seemed odd to me at the time, and I needed to work through it myself as well as that the African American students on campus, who I think everyone thought, we want to be integrated and we want to mix with you and we want you to be dispersed amongst all of the houses on campus, they fought instead for a safe place and for them to all be housed together so that they could have a common, shared experience. And that was a major showdown that first year, which I missed as well, but it did continue. And of course Clarence Thomas was a student, now Justice Thomas on the Supreme Court. He was a leader on campus and was visible and eventually went off to Yale Law School. So it was also a time of really thinking of race relations and that was something that people really did discuss on campus in a very, I think, thoughtful, respectful way. But trying to have their demands met. Those were political times, and that would be something from the outside really intruding into the campus. I did not go away for junior year abroad because I figured I only had three years on the campus and I really wanted to stay. I did go off after my junior year and took two courses at Harvard in Literature and Poetry and then I was selected as a Fenwick Scholar of the College. I don't know if you still have that.

Kayla: Yes, we still have those.

Michael: So five of us were selected after a process. I focused on Imagist poetry and essentially did a very thorough thesis on that and I spent a third of my time my senior year at Harvard in their Rare Book Libraries where they had letters and other kinds of manuscripts between the Imagist poets of the time. I used that as my research so I was away a bit of the time. I think getting onto a University campus, which was much more diverse, much more bustling, of course, just because of its size, its wealth, and access to things. I did actually see, though I never went to it, I don't know if it was out of fear, or whatever, that they did have even at that time a Gay Lesbian Student Group on campus. I saw signs for a meeting place once a week. So, I was aware that that existed though I didn't wander off to go to any of the meetings.

Kayla: When did you officially come out? I recognize that you always knew, but was there ever an official coming out? Or not really?

Michael: Well, very interesting. You're right. People come out everyday, and in ways that you don't expect. For example, yesterday at lunch, I had as my guest the president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Because after Holy Cross, I got a scholarship to go to Oxford and I studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Corpus Christi College there, part of the University. There was a big Oxford in America event in Los Angeles last night. He had come up then. And since I've been a donor to Corpus for many years, he had lunch with me. And he's the new president, and the first question he asked, "So, are you married? Do you have kids?" And I'm a sixty-six-year old man. And I said, "No, I'm gay. I've had partners. And I've had a wonderful life. But, No." So, you come out everyday in some ways because people will ask questions making assumptions about you. I am just a normal looking sixty-six-year old guy. I really didn't come out, I would say "come out" by coming out I would say I accepted it internally. But there were at least roadblocks that I created to my own physically coming out sexually. Those were

initially religion, although I pretty much by the time I was a junior at Holy Cross, I was at least agnostic if not an atheist. I knew that I wanted to become a lawyer. I ended up, after Oxford, going to Columbia Law School and practicing law in New York. Honestly same sex acts were illegal in virtually every state. And every State's Bar Association had the right to ask you during your interview about morals and upholding the laws of the state. And I had heard that New York was actually not afraid at all to ask, "Are you gay or lesbian? And did you know that that was against the law of the state of New York to act on it?" So, that kept me back a bit. In my early years of practicing law I was at a very large, prominent Wall Street law firm. We had very wealthy clients. And one client began losing all of her creative friends. And she wanted to do something about it. And the Head of the Trusts and Estates Department at the law firm came to me, again possibly thinking that I was a sensitive young man and would know about these things, and said, "Michael, is there a way to get public legal services to these individuals, because they need both health care directive and crafts simple estate planning and a will or something like that." And I said sure, because I had been a member of the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts in New York. Many of those lawyers I knew were gay and lesbian and I was able to cajole them into working with a new organization that had been supported by my firm called, "Gay Men's Health Crisis." And that was because the AIDS crisis broke out in the early 80s when I was a young associate. And so, AIDS kept me from coming out because no one really knew how it was transmitted. And so, I used that as yet another excuse for not coming out.

So I did not eventually come out until my law firm opened a Los Angeles office in 1987 when I was 37 years old. And I took that as the opportunity to break out from New York and my social life in New York and sort of being the third wheel in all of these straight couple relationships. And to create a new life for myself when I came out in Los Angeles. And that's when I actually came out. I started I talked about friends who all knew, of course, and who were delighted. But I didn't really then pursue a relationship until then. I was very fortunate the first younger man that I really fell in love with it was also his first experience. It lasted for a number of years and it was worth the wait.

And yet you still do come out every day. I am now a senior managing director at US Trust Company, which is the high net worth division of Bank of America. And Bank of America is incredibly good on diversity and inclusion. I am one of the most senior out members at the managing director level. And we started an executive committee for LGBTQ individuals and we're focused now on things like -- How do we get that message on diversity and inclusion out? How do we make sure it trickles all the way down through hiring and promotion? and make people aware of this? How does handle it in advertising? because it does help. And so, you know, you come out everyday, because in doing that I basically have a sign outside on my door that the recurring ads or promotions that Bank of America does for the LGBT community and it's a little Plexiglas folder on my assistant's shelf and it says: If you have any questions about this, please knock on my door and ask. So you come out everyday and I get people coming in everyday questioning, or wondering if it's safe to come out or how should they do it. And every time they come in, it's a little bit of a coming out process. It's something that you never

don't come out eventually, and you just have to acknowledge that difference and people's curiosity and move on.

Kayla: You said that after Holy Cross you went to Oxford and Columbia. You said also that when you were studying at Harvard you saw more openness and more opportunities for the LGBT communities. Were they different at Oxford or Columbia?

Michael: Well, one would have thought at Oxford, which is notorious for homosexuality, that I might have had an experience or two there. I was really so immersed in my studies. I never even went to, I knew it was a gay bar, I never went to the gay bar. I was of course old enough to drink then. But I never did. And I don't even know that I had really--I take that back-- I know I had at least one friend who was flamboyant, but we again never talked about sexuality. And so no it was much more open on the campus, but I took advantage of other things. That really wasn't really forefront of my mind to be out and participatory or anything like that. And at Columbia Law school, again, Columbia being a major urban university. I know, well, the first exposure I had to a transsexual was a woman in our class, slightly older, who had transitioned from being a man to a woman. Absolutely fascinating personality, brilliant mind. Obviously had transitioned. It wasn't the most successful in terms of beauty and, she did say that she was facing issues and facing issues getting a job, and that kind of thing. So that was present. And that was the first time the LGBT part of it--the T-- actually hit the forefront of my knowledge. I'll be completely transparent and say the first gay pride that march I went to in Los Angeles after coming out, the thing that shocked me the most, and you will fall out of your chair with this, is how many women there were! And of course, I had studied Latin and Greek both in high school and at Holy Cross and it was just like a smack in the face just how many women and the diversity of the women that were there. I was like "Oh my God Michael how could you not have ever really focused on this?" But I didn't have any lesbian friends so it never really hit me in the face. It just shows you you can learn something even in old age.

Kayla: I know Holy Cross was all men when you went there. Was your high school all men as well?

Michael: Yes. High school was all men as well. And Holy Cross did go co-ed my senior year. I think that was the first introduction to, I think, a softer edge to our social life. You probably won't if you've never talked to anyone at my level of age. Every Friday and Saturday night, the busloads of women from other colleges would come up the campus gate. And there would be hordes of eager, young men faces waiting to see them off or over to the dance or whatever. And that was just such a weird ritual. And I would even go down just to watch it, just to see how these otherwise confident young men could become just dishrags and awkward in trying to introduce themselves to these young ladies that were coming off the buses from other colleges. It was a very strange ritual and it made those kind of interactions on the weekend a little odd. But it was just a part of college life. Now, it's I'm sure completely different. It's much more natural interaction, and all the rest.

Kayla: What else?

Michael: I apologize. I'm probably rambling all over the place

Kayla: Oh, no. It's good. You hit some questions without my quite asking them yet. I'm looking just to check. So, I know you talked about how the Jesuit identity of Holy Cross, and the environment of the unique Holy Cross identity helped you with your sexuality.. Do you think the Jesuit identity and environment of Holy Cross affected your view of your sexuality?

Michael: Well, not some much the Jesuit view. I mean Jesuits have- if I could summarize the teaching style- Jesuits teach you to question everything. And that is the method of learning. And also to be accepting of different views, challenge them, be honest and accepting that other people are going to have different viewpoints. They have always been slightly ahead of the Catholic Church in their teachings and much more accepting, I think, of issues like the existence of LGBT people and the fact that it's a normal facet of human life. Now, if anything, it did support me in my own coming to grips with the person that I was and accepting that and understanding that if I was ever going to be a productive member of society, I had to be able to express my entire self and be honest about who I was--both in the workplace and social life and, for me, religion was not a part of it. So, I had already given up the Catholic Church because I felt that if the Catholic Church has a God that has created me in his likeness and yet doesn't accept me, well, I don't accept that. So, goodbye. An so, that was pretty easy! I tinkered with the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church because they were more accepting, certainly when I was in England, it was the Anglican Church. Later, in New York I would sometimes go to the Episcopal church, not so much because of the belief system but because culturally you get indoctrinated with a sense of community. The ritual of music, the beauty of the language of the King James Bible and that kind of thing. So those are touchstones for a sense of community and belonging. Unfortunately, Atheists haven't really figured out how to come together in a common space and simply accept life as it is. And that is something that I think will probably come down the line at some point. And anyway, so it wasn't really a detriment and indeed somehow it was helpful in the sense of the teaching to question everything. So that was fine. And quite honestly there were gay Jesuits and although they never talked about being gay and I don't think they ever acted on it (of course that would have been improper with any of the students.) But one of the reasons I got a scholarship to Oxford was a Jesuit on campus had done his graduate work at Oxford and he was certain he was gay and he worked all of the contacts he had to get me accepted and get me a scholarship to Oxford. You know I'm most grateful for that as well.

Kayla: Looking back, based on your experience, what advice would you offer to LGBTQ students who are struggling to come out at Holy Cross? I know it's very different from when you were here, but....

Michael: Yes, it is still every individual faces that question. When is it the right time to come out? And I would say first, there is no right time. It has to be individual by individual and based on their own circumstances. I would say you can't come out until you feel like you're in a safe place. As I've seen generations grow up, younger and younger individuals are declaring their sexual orientation and being able to speak that to the world and declare who they are. And often there are bad results when they are too young, and parent, because of religion or cultural understandings or non-acceptance. I support too many organizations where younger people have been tossed out of their homes and become homeless and need shelter, educational support and that kind of thing. So, the first rule is you have to be in a safe place and somewhat independent before you do that. You can test test the waters. And it's alright to keep it to yourself and be somewhat secretive because you need to make the decision that it's safe and right for you. I, however, also do encourage people to come out as soon as they do feel that they are safe about that.. I know for me, the burden for not living a double life or double standard or keeping something secret or trying to change pronouns when you're talking about the person that you're dating, it's exhausting. And once you've accepted and you've come out, the burden is relieved. There will still be challenges, but it is so much better psychologically for you to accept it and then integrate your life with LGBT things with non-LGBT things so that you feel fully integrated. I think part of it is developing that safe space. So that you develop friends that will be supportive. You introduce the idea of LGBT knowledge, facts, culture, whatever to those that are within your family or whom you might depend financially. So you start to educate them about that. Almost always, they know anyway and there's just an unspoken word in terms of curtain drawn and they don't cross that line with you until you're willing to do it. And then also looking to the future, find organizations. Say that you want to work in the financial services industry. There are a lot of different companies out there. Look at their policies. If you're aiming to get a job and you want to be out, but you want to be an accountant or an investment banker, or whatever, look at what the companies state as their goals and responsibilities to society are and choose a company that has a public statement of diversity and inclusion that will match what you want. That you will find a supportive environment in that business. And don't go to some place which has a bad reputation for that because that's a recipe for throwing up challenges that you just don't need as you develop your career. That's a bit long winded.

Kayla: No, that's great. You've already answered the next question which was what advice would you offer to LGBT seniors about to make the transition from college to professional life? So just find a company and a path that will accept.

Michael: Yes, and don't retreat. It's important that you continue to move forward with your own personal acceptance. It's important for society to see bright, young people comfortable with their roles and it's good to continue to challenge other people. This is the only way that change has occurred.

Kayla: Is there anything else you want to share about your experience at Holy Cross, further, or anywhere?

Michael: Well, only to say my experience overall-- I am very, very happy with it. There have been challenging moments for me as an alum in financial support for the College. I still consistently support the College. I don't know \$4,500 a year or so. But there have been periods where I have seriously thought about withholding contributions. One was years ago now, and I have no idea what the status is, and this is more Catholic teaching than anything else. Health services for women on campus and the issue of being able to discuss contraception and being able to discuss abortion and being able to discuss women's health issues with them, being locked because it being a Catholic campus. That threw me into an absolute rage and it did make me focus, for a while, in directing my contributions specifically to a fund at the library to acquire specifically LGBT books, literature, magazines and to make sure that it was accessible at the library. I haven't done that in a number of years. I know the librarian at the time was very happy, but I assume that as things happen they probably took funds away from other things because of that. But, at least I was feeling I was having an impact on making accessible knowledge about LGBT sociality books, psychology books, general culture, whatever. I've gone back and forth about that, whether or not., the level of gifts, and the consistency. In the end I've thought that I got a wonderful, wonderful education and that I do want to give back so that others can have that through scholarship or just support of the general fund or whatever. That is important to me and that people will find their own way if the Jesuits are still doing a good job of teaching and encouraging people to question everything. They will hopefully get a similar education that I've got and come out open-minded persons. The second part of it is, and I think this is still, reading that I get from emails and bulletins, and that kind of stuff, the emphasis on of course in my day it was "Be a man for other men." And now I think the phrase should be "Be a person for other persons." That sense of your connectedness with the community. I always say that I definitely took that away as well from, you know, my volunteer days with Gay Men's Help Crisis and helping so many people go through that transition to death when there were no drugs that were successful. When I finally came out and was living in Santa Monica, California there was a newly elected lesbian mayor of Santa Monica and she asked me to create a charitable nonprofit that could provide education for HIV/AIDS in the high schools in Santa Monica. And so I started Santa Monica AIDS project and I was the president of the board of that for 12 years and eventually was into the Venice Family Clinic, which is a really wonderful community larger organization in Venice which is the neighborhood south of Santa Monica. So, being involved in larger projects outside of yourself, dedicated to your community, is something that I think the Jesuits rightly should take pride in as well.

Kayla: I think right now the mission statement is "Men and Women for and with Others."

Michael: "For and With Others." Okay...yeah

Kayla: So, they tried to switch that up a little to make it more inclusive. More than just serving the community, but with the community. Rather than distance, as a classist perception. In terms of Residence Life, as of last year, you can get gender inclusive housing based on gender identification instead of biological.

Michael: Oh, okay.

Kayla: At Holy Cross, we're making some strides.

Michael: Excellent. And the fact that there is a student club and they have actually gone public by having an alumni club as well. Those are both advances, you know, when you bring people out of their shadows and include them, it's a very good thing.

Kayla: There's also "Out Front" which is the faculty club. Pride which is for the students. Out Front which is for the faculty that partners very closely with Pride. And this year, we've had our third annual drag show.

[Laughs]

Michael: That's so funny because that's something I've never really been comfortable with. There's been this intellectual tension between whether it's outrageous fun or there's perhaps just my own discomfort with the comedy. That's something that men of my generation and older have loved; it's just not my thing. [Laughs]

Kayla: But the fact that Holy Cross has created a space where we can do that now. I think that's important.

Michael: Oh, yes. Absolutely. It's amazing.

Kayla: Well, anything else you want to add or say or state? Anything you want updates on, maybe?

Michael: No, I guess the other thing I would say is how I am delighted that it is also entering the academic sphere and that these type of issues are being studied. When I heard that this class was doing this, creating an oral history of alumni. I thought it was definitely something I wanted to support. I am so pleased that someone reached out to me and said, "Would you want to have a conversation?" This has really been terrific, Kayla. It's been very nice. Thank you.

Kayla: It's wonderful. Also we currently have the digital transgender archive. It is currently happening at Holy Cross. We're working on bringing it more into the academic sphere, definitely.

Michael: Great

Kayla: Ok Thank you very much. When I eventually transcribe this, I will send you a copy. Always feel free to reach out to me. I'd be happy to update you on anything else happening at Holy Cross's, Pride community and different things. Thank you for taking the time.

Michael: It's been a lovely hour.

Kayla: Yes, thank you very much. Bye.