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A Conversation with Mark Thivierge

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LGBTQ Oral History Transcript:

Mark: Hello?

Caroline: Hi. Is this Mark?

Mark: This Mark.

Caroline: Hi mark, it's Caroline.

M: Of course it is. Exactly 10 o'clock.

C: (Laughter) I'm a little punctual!

M: Very punctual.

C: How are you doing? Are you feeling better?

M: I'm feeling better, yes. I'm still dragging on with some residual from this cold or stuff or whatever that I had. But yes, I'm feeling much better, thank you.

C: Good! I'm glad to hear it.

M: Are you back on campus?

C: Yes, I'm back on campus. We had vacation until Monday. So, I got to go home. I stayed for a couple days because I have so much work-- it's that time of year. But I went home, and had a nice Easter celebration with my family, and then a pipe burst in our house so our basement flooded, so that's when I decide to come back to school!

M: Oh, my god. Oh well. (laughter)

C: Hey, it happens!

M: It happens. Where is home?

C: So, I'm from West Hartford, Connecticut, so it's an hour out of Worcester.

M: Oh really? Where we are now in the Berkshires is a town called Southfield. We are within a mile from the Connecticut border. We can literally walk down our dirt road and be in Connecticut.

C: Oh nice!

M: Yes, so we are sort of familiar with Northwestern Connecticut.

C: Ok yeah. Well, I'm so happy that I get to talk to you and before I say anything or we talk about anything, I have to obtain your verbal consent that we can, one have this conversation and two that I can record it so I can transcribe it, is that okay?

Mark: Yeah, all of that is fine! I did look at the forms that you sent but I just didn't have a chance to print them out.

C: Oh no, do not worry about that!

M: Which I will still do, don't worry about it.

C: Yeah, take your time! So, I know I sent you some of the questions but I want this to just be a conversation, So anything I ask, if you don't want to answer, you don't have to. And there's no time limit so take as long as you want. But basically where I want to start off is going back to why you decided to come to Holy Cross and kind of the beginning of that journey, if you will.

M: Well, this was in 1966 that I enrolled there. I graduated from high school and I did go to a Catholic school, a Catholic High School in Dover, New Hampshire. And my academics were good and I didn't really know what I wanted to do as far as careers were concerned, but I mean how many high school seniors do. But I knew that I needed and wanted to have a college degree and was a good student, so that goes without saying. And my family was fortunate enough to be able to send me to wherever I wanted. We didn't have at the time high school guidance counselors that were terribly proactive the way

they are now. So if you went to your high school guidance counselor, they just basically gave you literature on different places and told you to apply to the best school you thought you could get into, blah blah blah. So, I'm trying to remember. I didn't apply to a lot of schools, but I did apply to several Catholic schools. I didn't apply to any public universities. I wanted to stay with a private school. I wanted to stay with a fairly small school. And I, you know, and I got in, and I wasn't looking for financial aid, so that wasn't a factor anywhere. I applied to MIT. My thinking was that I was very good in math. I didn't know an awful lot about myself at the time, apparently. And I was very good at math, and my faculty and teachers all told me that I should do math and Holy Cross was a good place to go for math and science, blah blah blah. And MIT, well lo and behold, I took the interview, and everything and I told them I wanted to be a teacher, which is fairly ridiculous because I had no interest in teaching whatsoever, but I just wanted an answer. So, MIT was not keen on that. They didn't want to train teachers and Holy Cross was perfectly fine with that. So, anyway, I went to Holy Cross and it had a good reputation.

C: Did you visit it before you decided to come?

M: No, I didn't, actually.

C: Interesting.

M: I guess that's just not something that was terribly commonly done at the time. It was a long way off, But I was the first one in my family to go to college and it didn't seem to matter and certainly made no sense to be fussy about the campus and all of that because this was a very big deal to send somebody to college. So, that was me and that was the school and the rest was history.

C: So, where was home for you?

M: Dover, New Hampshire.

C: Oh, okay. So, you started Holy Cross 1966, and obviously a lot was going on in our nation's history during that time. So do you remember any global events that either stood out to you during your time at Holy Cross and may have impacted [it]?

M: (Laughter) I have to laugh because of my generation, nothing has impacted the world more than the Vietnam War did and certainly if you were in college or university in the late 1960's, there was nothing on the agenda other than the Vietnam War and [incomprehensible] against it..

C: Absolutely.

M: And that was it, you know. As far as gay rights were concerned. It wasn't even embryonic in 1966. By the time I graduated in 1970, I wouldn't say there was a gay rights movement yet, there had been, to my recollection, no pride marches yet, but something was forming, you know? I don't remember what year Stonewall happened... But do you?

C: I know it was in that time period. I can't think of the specific date.

M: And that was sort of the turning point where suddenly there was recognition that gay lives matter, to use current terminology. But every other cause was overwhelmed by the Vietnam War. And of course that was the civil rights era as well, with Martin Luther King. So, there were just so many political movements and the country was in turmoil, a period of turmoil. And we were in the middle of it, and we, all of us, were participating in it and I have to say, Holy Cross was a very, very proactive place for all of those causes

and I was quite astonished at how liberal, in the traditional political sense, how liberal Holy Cross was.

C: Yeah, that's very surprising, So everyone was just very involved in all of the movements?

M: Everyone was very involved and I can't even imagine and think of any people who I would say, by today's standards, would have been considered conservative. I was a math major with a minor in economics. My friends were science majors, some pre-med, and everything. You know, that was relative to the general university population, it was an educated and intelligent group, and I don't know if that makes any sense or not. Maybe at the time, if you were intelligent and informed, there were very few rational choices to make except the anti-war. So, it seemed like everybody was with us on that. There was no opposition on campus. The campus was uniformly anti-war and pro-integration. We had just started a program at Holy Cross for integrating black students.

C: That's fantastic.

M: I don't remember them being called black students -- actually there was a black student union. Oh, I guess they were.

C: Yeah, we still have that today! Yeah, the BSU.

M: You do? Oh really? Well, that was started if I had to guess I would say in probably 1968 or so.

C: Oh, okay.

M: And Clarence Thomas was one of the first ones. Although he graduated in '71 but I don't know whether he was part of the Black Students Union and I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't.

C: Exactly, yeah, I'm actually writing a paper on him and Anita Hill and I don't think he was, which is interesting. [Note: Thomas was an original member of the black Student Union]

M: That is amazing, absolutely amazing. Well, we shouldn't talk about Clarence Thomas. (Laughter)

C: Yes! Another day.

M: Yes, we're talking about what a wonderful liberal place Holy Cross was...

C: (Laughter) Absolutely. So, then, touching on a little bit more on you while you were at Holy Cross: do you mind talking a little bit about when and how the first time you came out was?

M: I mean I certainly don't mind talking about those things but "coming out" I think is misconstrued by a lot of people as a moment in time when you quote come out, but it's really, and certainly in my day, was a very long process. First you started by coming out to yourself.

C: Absolutely.

M: And that takes time. It takes a level of personal knowledge, and that started for me when I first got to Holy Cross. You know, I certainly had been sexually active, not terribly, but I had been sexually active as an adolescent but didn't really understand what that all was about and just had assumed that was just adolescent sexuality. I was still dating girls, and I hadn't really given it a lot of thought. I didn't feel it was anything that needed a lot of thought until I got to Holy Cross. And of course, it was an all-male environment at the time, and I started to realize that I certainly had no interest in women. And I took a job in the summertime when I was at Holy Cross, up in Maine, in a resort

called Ogunquit, Maine, which at that time was a gay resort. It's much larger now. There's still a small gay presence there I guess, but in any case, when I was there in the late 60's, it was quite gay and attracted a population of fairly openly gay men, which was very, very rare at that time. So, I went to there, and here I was, a nineteen or twenty year old kid from Holy Cross, waiting on tables for a bunch of gay men and I was pretty popular! (Laughter) And I thought Gee this is fun! Yeah, I could get into this. So, you know, the whole community, gay community started to make sense to me at that time. So, it evolved over the time when I was at Holy Cross. I didn't do a lot about it except, ironically, when I think it was in my junior year I decided that I wanted to talk to someone about it because it wasn't just about having sex, it was about having the whole community, and myself as a person. So, I had a sociology professor there who I thought was just wonderful, really, really brilliant, and so intuitive and so sensitive. I'm sure he could have been an analyst or any kind of therapist anytime he wanted to in his life because he was so great, or so I thought. So, I decided to go see him and talk to him, about this -- I guess this was my junior year -- and he was such a very nice guy and I made an appointment to see him, and I went in. And as soon as I said something about the reason that I wanted to talk to him was about I wanted to discuss my feelings of homosexuality and my thinking that I probably was a homosexual, he blanched. He almost froze and went into a state of panic, like oh my Scott!

C: Oh no!

M: Yeah like I had crossed a boundary, seriously crossed the boundary. And his counseling to me was, "Well, I'm going to give you the name of this doctor in Worcester who has had a lot of success working with people like this." (Laughter)

C: Oh no.

M: And this was 1968, or whatever. And I said to myself, "Oh my God," I just stepped back, this was in the 60's, I had just stepped back 50 years. So, I took the piece of paper and I said thank you and that was sort of the end of any kind of research into my sexuality in a formal manner at that time. And then, you know, things developed very quickly. I became of drinking age and gay bars were around the corner and the rest is kind of history.

C: So, just to delve into that a little bit further, you talk about how during your time at Holy Cross it was kind of a liberal bastion with the Vietnam War but would you say it was welcoming to LGBTQ students? Both of my parents went to Holy Cross and my mom graduated in '81 and she said that it was more of a "don't ask don't tell" type of thing and it just wasn't really talked about. But also in class we've learned about how the chaplain's office was the first one, almost ironically, to start a support group. So, was there nothing like that during your time at Holy Cross?

M: No, there was nothing like that at Holy Cross but frankly, there was nothing like that anywhere.

C: True, yeah.

M: There was just no gay presence anywhere. There were no openly gay students. There were plenty of students that I knew were gay and everyone assumed were gay, but I can't think of a one who would come out and say that they were or act on it publicly, even though there were things going on. But it was all on the very, very down low. But I don't think that was unusual for that place and I don't think that was institutionalized. Definitely. It was more cultural. I don't think that was anything that the school imposed

or part of the school's culture. In fact, interestingly, I had an ethics professor during that time period who was Scandinavian and he taught ethics and he was an openly gay atheist. And this was at Holy Cross College, this Catholic institution. And this was such an eye opener for me because this is a person who would be shunned in most of the American community, nevermind Catholic community. Here you are at a Catholic institution. I think his name as Stryke[unintelligible]. He was open about it in his classroom and he talked about it and challenged the students to make their own decisions about issues like these and it was amazing, actually amazing.

C: That's great.

M: Yeah, it was great.

C: So, what were you involved in during your time at Holy Cross? And within those activities, were you able to find a sense of support system, like your friends, your roommates, anything like that?

M: Well, interestingly, my closest friends and my roommates were all gay. And none of us ever talked about it. All of us, even amongst ourselves, pretended we were straight. (Laughter). That's just what you did. And I wouldn't even call pretending. These things were just so much on the down low that you kept it entirely to yourself and whenever you participated in your homosexual lifestyle, you did it on the down low, on your own, you know, usually in a bar. Or, I had forgotten about this, you went to certain places, certain cruising areas where you could have anonymous sex. And almost every campus had them and at Holy Cross it was in the library. And almost every university campus had a cruising section in the library.

C: Interesting.

M: And Holy Cross was not alone in that and, then, certainly I'm not saying it was a big issue or, let's say a big phenomenon, but it was there. And if you thought you might want to engage with someone you just went to a certain section of the reading carrels and that's where you studied. And you know per chance you might actually engage with someone else. And these were not sexual contacts, these were sort of like social contacts actually. Yeah, it was curious. I think I lost track of your question though...

C: Oh, no no! You're fine. You're totally fine. That's really interesting. I had no idea about that. So besides that, you talked a little bit about your roommates. Were you involved in any campus organizations, or anything like that, besides being a math major?

M: Um, I was a member of the glee club.

C: Oh! I didn't know we had a glee club.

M: Yeah, they probably call it a chorus now or something like that.

C: Yeah, probably.

M: Yeah, at that time it was called a glee club which was kind of a misnomer because it was a rather formal affair and we performed in tails, not just ties, but we actually all wore tails. And we sang almost exclusively classical music, but I would certainly call it a chorus and not a glee club, but it was called a "glee club." And I was a member of that and -- surprise surprise -- a fair number of the glee club members at this point, I understand, were gay. And I'm sure even then I knew they were. But it was all, again, very much on the down low. And we didn't think about it or talk about it. But we were like minded people, so yes, I met several people there and we socialized together, although again, it was not sexual. It was more of a social community with an understanding that there was something among us that we all had in common.

C: Okay. Do you think looking back on your experience at Holy Cross, you would do anything differently?

M: I don't think so. Given the times, if I were to go there now, or anywhere now. We're talking generations ago. There's absolutely nothing, nothing about life as a gay person now, as far as being an eighteen year-old that was similar to then. Given the times, I'm very, very pleased with the way that it turned out and that's where I went. And the disappointing factor was that I would have expected the clergy and the church to be providing some sort of counsel, even in those times. But this was the church in general, not just Holy Cross. There was no awareness and, in fact, I think it was quite the opposite there was a real intimidation factor on the subject matter for very obvious reasons. The clergy had absolutely no interest in getting near that subject. They wouldn't touch it and they were terrified by it. So, there was nothing there. But there was nothing I could have done about that and that time I don't think there was a campus in the country and maybe somewhere else in other countries in the world, maybe Western Europe or something, maybe in Scandinavia, but certainly not in the U.S. I don't think there was any other campus that would have been more liberal, perhaps places like Oberlin. But it's hard when there was no movement; there was no consciousness in society or among ourselves. So, you can't really expect the institution to lead the way when the community itself hasn't even aware of the subject matter.

C: Absolutely. So one of the next questions I have on my sheet is about if you ever had any romantic relationships and I know you talked a little bit about how everything was very on the down low but would you say that during your college experience, did you ever meet another gay man that you were interested in? Or no one talked about it but was there ever a romantic inclination towards anyone at Holy Cross, ever?

M: Yeah, that's pretty much it. There were people that I thought were gay and had it been 10 years later, something might have happened. But nothing ever happened at Holy Cross. My graduating year, I had a friend who actually did come out and we talked about it and I remember we went to a couple of bars together, but there was never any more than that. And by the time I had graduated, I was fairly active on my own but it was all when I was out during the summer at home. So that period, it was a fairly active gay lifestyle, like in Ogunquit, Maine. So, I came of age, I think, fortunately a lot earlier than a lot of people my age because I was able to spend time there in a rather openly gay community that didn't exist in many places. [Unintelligible]. Even with my very good friends, who were my roommates, all who ultimately ended up coming out as gay, didn't even talk about it! We would go on vacations together and nothing. It was all pretending that we were all straight.

C: Yes. So, we've talked a little bit about the Church and the clergy at Holy Cross but was there anything within the Jesuit identity of the school that affected your view of your sexuality? Or no?

M: To that specifically, I would say no. The Jesuits are obviously known as the more intellectual and liberal element of the Catholic Church and that was very good but I don't think it contributed anything positive to the experience, except for the fact that it didn't contribute anything negative, which could have happened at a lot of religious schools. There could have been a lot of intolerance; a lot of narrow-mindedness, and that just didn't exist there.

C: Well, basically as a campus now I would say we definitely have much more of an open climate, much more than when you were here. One of our Student Government Co-Presidents openly identifies as queer, and I think there are a lot of resources but there are definitely LGBTQ students who are struggling to come out. So, based on your own experience, what advice would you give to them?

M: I would tell them to be patient and take it at their own pace. In my experience, everyone deals with those issues in their own way and when the time is right they will know. And as I said, it's a long process, and first you deal with yourself and coming out with yourself, and then perhaps with friends. And to me, the final coming out is coming out to family. And once you've done that, you're out-basically. And the timing of that, I think, is very, very personal because there are no generalities. It depends on the background that you come from, religious beliefs, the personalities on the family that you come from, your relationship with your family. And I think you have to be careful. I think the gay community has a tendency to push everyone to be honest and open and out and all of that which, of course, is the ultimate goal, but I think you have to be really careful not to have people do that prematurely because it can cause a lot of pain and suffering.

C: That's great advice.

M: And frankly, I guess I was just more comfortable about it than most people. So, I didn't have problems with those things but I have just had so many friends that I know, who have dealt with that through the years. And I have very close friends right now, gay men, at fifty, which is crazy, but after going through a marriage and two kids they finally come to realize what's going on. But I wouldn't be critical of them, because you know that's the way their life road took them. And they're not dishonest people and they're certainly not cowardly, and they're certainly not unenlightened. That's just who they were. We all do it on our own pace, when it's appropriate.

C: Absolutely, I completely agree. Do you mind speaking a little bit about your transition after Holy Cross? Like entering professional life, and what you did? How you were feeling?

M: Well, I went to graduate school and got an MBA in Financial Accounting and I decided that I really hated math. So, I was destined to be a businessperson. So I did that and then I started working at a large bank in Boston that no longer exists, but there are only like two banks that do exist. And I was definitely openly gay with myself and my friends at the time, but I was not out publicly, and I was certainly not out at work, especially in the banking environment. So I did that and then I transitioned to a smaller bank and I was in banking for about 8 years. And I had an actively gay lifestyle, but I was single. So, there were no particular conflicts except that it was a pain in the butt having to never talk about my weekend, and my lifestyle and what I did. I wouldn't say "hide it," but just not be forthcoming. Certainly, not lie about what was going on but fortunately, no one said "Gee, are you gay?" They didn't say things like that. And then after about 8 years in banking, I did meet someone. And I decided first of all, I didn't really enjoy the banking community. I really, really liked the work I was doing, but I just didn't enjoy the community at all; it was conservative and closed. I wouldn't say it was a horrible place but for a gay person at the time you simply couldn't be yourself. And at the time I was probably thirty years old, and I just decided that this was it, I'm not pretending, I'm gonna be out there, and if I can't take my boyfriend to the Christmas party- and again,

this is 1980, you just didn't do that sort of thing. So, I left that and I took a job back in Boston with a smaller company. And actually, it was owned by gay people, and again, I never looked back.

I went from that to running my own consulting practice, so I was completely independent there and absolutely everybody that I knew, whenever I talked to clients, I was right up front about not saying I'm gay but I would immediately start conversations that were personal in nature, and I would let them know that I had a partner and blah blah blah, and it was never an issue. But of course I was consulting with architectural firms and they're not the most radically conservative department in the world. So, it was a pretty enlightened community and it was never ever an issue. So, it was a fairly easy transition for me and that was when we were in Boston. And we moved to New York and I took a job there for a larger engineering firm, in the CFO position, that I never would have expected myself to be in at all, certainly not as an out gay person. And I took the job after interviewing with the CEO there and I was right out with him right there about expecting to being able take my husband (he wasn't my husband at the time), that he would be part of the community. And he said no no that's not a problem, not a problem at all, it wasn't even an issue. So I got that job and from day one, I was the CFO so I had a lot of people reporting to me and everybody knew that I was gay. I brought him to every event. They all knew him, personally by name and he was just a part of the family. And it wasn't all that long ago, but in any case, the world has been turned on its head as far as gay issues are concerned....so I've been very fortunate, I was very out and open about it from a very early period.

C: So when and where did you meet your husband?

M: (Laughter) It's a very wholesome -- embarrassingly wholesome story. I could say it was that I picked him up in the back of a sleazy bar in New York, but it wasn't. We both belonged to a gay outdoors club in Boston, which may or may not exist any longer, called [unintelligible]. And he was living in Southern New Hampshire. I was living in Northern New Hampshire, and we both were members of this club that would sponsor weekend hikes for members. And of course I was living in Northern New Hampshire and so I sponsored a fair number of them and people would come to my house and we would hike from there. My house was within eyeshot of Mount Washington, so it was a great area. So I was an avid hiker and skier. So he came up on one of those weekend hikes and we met each other then and then a couple of weeks later, we made a date to go bicycling along the coast along York harbor, along the shore in Southern Maine, in Kittery, and we had our first date then and the rest is history.

C: Aw! That's great. And how long have you guys been married?

M: Well we've been married for seven years but we have been together for thirty.

C: And are your families accepting?

M: Oh, my goodness, yes!

C: Oh, that's so great.

M: It was an issue with my family when I first came out to them and we talked about it. They had known all the time. There was never any question about it but talking about it was oh my god, traumatic. Very, very traumatic. But you know, I came from a family, at least on my father's side, where you put everything out there. You blow off steam. You have a fit, you yell and scream for an hour and then it's over. Okay!? Air is clear and that's kind of how it was. It was all fine and I only had one brother who was overseas and

he has four kids, my four nephews, who are basically like our kids and are now young adults. The youngest is thirty. But we were like parents to them too, and one of them is gay. We are in regular communication with them and we are like parents to them, really. And with my husband's family too, we are all very close, very friendly, no issues really.

C: Good. So, this past year has been really tough for a lot of people, especially on campus with the election and the rhetoric that was used, and how people are feeling. How would you say you are feeling as an openly gay man, or the gay community as a whole, like- where would you see the gay community now? They've made so many strides. Do you think progress has been paused in a way or do you think the election has kind of been the catalyst for even more change? Some people have said after DOMA was eradicated that like what more can we do? But I think there is a lot more we can. But where would you say the community stands? I know that's kind of a tough question.

M: Well, I guess as a gay person, I'm not terribly concerned. I am hugely concerned as a rational human being should be but as a gay person I'm not. I know that Trump has surrounded himself with enormously homophobic people and I know that the party will try and succeed in rolling back some of our advances. But I do think that on the national level we are a mature community and have educated the country, really. I think there are a few pockets of backlash against the gay community and yeah, we'll take a few hits and take a few setbacks but I would think that they would be very minor. We won't make the progress that we've made the past 20 years, but I think this is all very temporary. I think that whatever happens to us in a negative sense from this administration is going to be temporary, I don't have any concerns at all because whatever he does will get reversed and rolled back as soon as he's done just as quickly as he did -- just as quickly as he has erased some of the gains that we've had. I think they'll be put back in place, perhaps even with a vengeance. There may be such a backlash against he is doing that it will be easier to get things to happen when he's gone. But I'm definitely not fearful of any long term negative changes. Again, from my lips to God's ears but... I'm not nearly optimistic about the country, in fact I am pessimistic about the country as a whole and the rest of the world, but I think for us specifically, fortunately, I think we're in the better position. Not so the black community by any stretch. And as much as I loathe Donald Trump, I don't think he's homophobic.

C: Yeah, I don't think so either. I think you're right, I think he surrounds himself with people who are.

M: Yes, he does because those are the people who play to his political base. But I believe that he personally is not homophobic. And I think that is going to protect us from some of the most damaging stuff, nor are his family, nor his kids. So, as much as this administration is horrible on so many issues that matter to us, fortunately I feel like we have dodged a bullet. We are one of the few groups for whatever reason, I don't feel that they feel personally invested in taking us down.

C: That's good to hear. I agree. So I'm nearing the end of my questions for you but to revert back to Holy Cross, what does it mean to you? When you look back and reflect at this point in your life. So, I'm unfortunately getting ready to leave, even though they're going to have to drag me across the graduation stage, kicking and screaming. But if you had to reflect what would you say your time at Holy Cross meant to you?

M: That's an easy and difficult question. I guess because I never really thought about it all that much but, other than my family, I think those were the most formative years of

my life. I think I was amazingly fortunate to go to a place like that, especially during those four years of turmoil. Not just with our country but socially with the civil rights movement coming on, the emerging gay rights movement and the anti-war. It really grounded me in my sensitivities toward these issues and I feel very, very fortunate that I went to a place where all of those things were on the front burner. Every day, we read through the New York Times every single morning in the cafeteria. That's how our day started, my friends and I. And everywhere on campus, all of these things were part of the local, total discussion. It sounds a little stereotypical but these were not shallow times, even though we were kids. Things were really important and they were really importantly happening. And we were right there and aware of it. And I don't know if Holy Cross is what formulated my interest but it doesn't really matter, and I don't know if it was the institution or the community, it was probably as much the community, but I think the institution created its own community and they were formative years. I think in many ways I have become the person that I am because of the person I became as I went through Holy Cross.

C: That's a fantastic answer. 41:01 END tape