

John Baker

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by Jeffrey Ohren & Jim Donohue

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BAKER: John Baker

JO: Jeffrey Ohren

JD: John Donohue

Transcribed by: Jeffrey Ohren & Jim Donohue, ca. 2012

Audit/edit by: Pat Young, ca. 2012

Reviewed by John Baker, ca. 2012

This oral history interview was conducted as part of the Portland State University LGBT History Capstone course, Spring Term 2012, with Instructor Pat Young.

Introduction

John Baker was a member of Right To Privacy – a gay rights organization that formed in Portland, Oregon around 1982. He describes what RTP and other gay rights groups did in the 1980s – including fund raising and making people aware of the issues.

Session 1

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JO: Ok this is Jeffrey Ohren and Jim Donohue and John Baker. It is May 7th, 2012, we're at PSU campus interviewing John Baker. Chair of RTP currently with Trimet. Alright, I'll start if that's alright. So you said you grew up in Portland?

BAKER: I did, I was born in Portland, grew up in Bend for the first 9 years of my life. Then we moved back to Portland and I've been here ever since. Went to Oregon State, majored in political science, started a master's program at Lewis and Clark in public administration and never finished.

JO: So what got you first interested in politics?

BAKER: Well, I think the first I can ever remember was being involved in a group of kids marching down the street in the neighborhood chanting slogans about Eisenhower in 1956, I would guess. And so it was sort of I think my parents were a little embarrassed because he was a bit- he was a republican and they happened to be a tad bit on the liberal side. It went from there to being involved in racial issues. I grew up in Beaverton near a Jesuit high school; I remember many meetings with neighborhood people about whether or not the black people should be welcomed in West Portland. So, it went from there to antiwar stuff and then in the 70's I got drafted. It was just sort of - I came out when I was 27 and wanted to be involved in politics. I kept hearing about it all the time, so... that's when it happened.

JD: At the beginning of your activism, did you see yourself in a position like the chair of right to privacy?

BAKER: No, I just sort of really wanted to sort of get involved and do things. I mean, I've always been, when somebody needed something I was more than happy to stuff envelopes. I never saw this as - this is not my claim to fame.

BAKER: So the first thing I became involved with was Portland town council, which was probably started in the early 1970's and went up until then, probably early '80s. And I think I vaguely remember I was, I think I may have been chair of that for a year or so. It folded.

JO: And one of the things we've been working on this term is, especially learning about the lesbian community's involvement, especially during the aids epidemic. Can you tell us anything about the lesbian community's involvement in right to pride?

BAKER: I think, I think in the early years in the movement the- there were some problems with men and women working together. And I mean I think it probably has- you know- the people who were involved in that were probably not just Portland but in other cities were people who were involved for different reasons. Probably the men who were involved probably had a tendency to be more mainline politics, as opposed to women who were sort of a social movement not the sense of fun and have a good time, but it was more a movement reaffirming women as much as it was lesbians and gays.

JD: How was the transition of the progression of right to privacy to right to pride?

BAKER: Well I'm not sure what Right to Pride is. The first one was Portland Town council and then it went to Right to Privacy. So there's a pride foundation, but that's a Seattle organization. So the question may be Right to- or Portland Town Council to Right to Privacy. So it was sort of- it was really sort of a boy's thing. It was very directed to raising

money to political candidates. It was not necessarily, this was probably came out of the division between lesbians and gay men and it was not as socially motivated as it was politically and to a large extent financially.

JO: You talked a little bit about raising money for politicians; I guess one of the questions we had was when- when and how was it when politicians when politicians started acknowledging the- I guess you'd call it the 'gay vote'.

BAKER: <Mimes rubbing bills together>

JO: Money?

BAKER: It was all about money. As much as we'd like to believe that we thought people were really nice, I really think it was all about money. So I remember the first kind of events we'd have. People want to- Portland town council would want to charge a dollar a ticket, and yeah it would raise a little bit of money but the reality was there were a lot of people out there-men and women- who could afford to help write big checks. And so as time moved on we did different kinds of fundraising which enabled us to raise large sums of money.

JD: Can you tell us about working against measure 8? What was it like and what was your involvement?

BAKER: Do you remember the years?

JO: That would have been 80-88? Late 80's, early 90's

BAKER: I would imagine I was still chair of Right to privacy, and it was sort of, um, yeah there were two of them. And it, if it must have been 8 was the first and 9 was the second

JD: Yes

JO: Yeah

BAKER: That makes sense doesn't it? I remember going to meetings in Eugene and there were people there who were adamant socialists and who maybe even veered to the left of socialist and absolutely appalled at the fact that people would allow themselves to be put on a ballot. To have somebody vote on anything to do with lesbian or gay rights, and there were fights that went on for months and months and months There was, we were not, most of us had gotten sort of passed that we were playing the political game the way to try and get something, get certain things accomplished. But there were people who didn't see it that way. It was not a question of they thought money was bad and it was, you certain I didn't want to spend a lot of time raising money because it just wasn't worth it. So it was a very hard time and finally some people came together and started forming the campaign, the campaign turned out very well and we raised huge amounts of money, but it took a very long time to get to that point

JO: I guess on a similar note, one of the things we read was when measure 9, this was part of the height of the involvement of the Oregon citizens alliance, and we had heard that you went to the city of Portland requesting an equal rights statement measure from the city of Portland, a nondiscrimination act.

BAKER: Well, I remember that happening, but I can't, I'm not absolutely positive when it happened. I mean, I remember some of the early meeting with city councilors and some of them were not very supportive. It was sort of it's very nice of you to come to my office

to talk to use about this but we're really not really sure what you want. So I think it took a number of years to be where we finally got even just got statements from city hall about, you know, being supportive. It could have been measure 8 and 9, but I'm not absolutely positive.

BAKER: I think it took a number of years before we finally got statements from city hall about, you know, being supportive, and it could have been Measure 8 and 9 but I'm not absolutely positive..

JO: ...and they were a similar time-frame over the course of five years, ending in...

BAKER: right, right

JD: and we'll be fighting for a long time after, so...What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

BAKER: ummm, I think instead of any specific piece of legislation being passed, I think the people feel more free to be who they are...ummm, one of my favorite stories always was back in the days of Portland town council I remember, uh, somebody called the office, uh, and this was back in the mid-seventies and the guy the guy was in his seventies and he called to, to either just [chuckles] its one of my favorites and the guy and it didn't happen to me so I wasn't involved in it, but the guy wanted to know about being gay and wanted to know what this organization was all about and he, whoever he told this to, it might have been Susie Sheppard, and he mentioned that, uh, that he was married and at his age he just didn't feel the freedom to make the changes in his life that that might have made him more comfortable, had he been at a younger age, and I thought, you know, hopefully we don't see that much anymore. We hope. I'm sure we do.

JD: yeah

BAKER: [chuckling] but not as much

JO: um, I guess, what do. I guess, I'm sorry...um, where do you see the movement for equal rights heading in the future, Amanda?

BAKER: [sigh] Well, I think, uh, obviously the big one right now is marriage, uh, but I think there's uh there's lots of little stuff, I mean, I think there's still still companies where, uh, people are discriminated against and if they're not if they're not discriminated against openly they are discriminated against, uh, you know, for stories and word of mouth and, uh, ...and I and I think that will probably go on for for a long time, till people get to the point where, uh, it's really okay to be gay or lesbian and, and, uh, of course now that everything has opened up even more to transgender, and so now I think I think we're making huge progress but I think it's going to going to be, uh, a number of years before, uh, people really feel comfortable to be who they are.

JD: When doing, uh, when we were doing research on your accomplishments, we found an article where you were quoted saying that one of your best memories at that time was your first, uh, coronation of the Imperial Rose Court in 1977. [chuckling in background] Would you mind saying something about, telling us something about that? [chuckling]

BAKER: oh gosh, ummm, I, I think probably as, when I, when I was coming out, I mean drag was just sort of uh, for nice little quote-unquote "straight boys", ahh, who just happened to be gay, uh, men wearing dresses just was not...was not very acceptable, [clearing throat], and, ummm, so I I think that prob, that, that would, that would probably was sort of a, I mean I had been to, well, when I came out, the first, uh, I, I used to spend

a lot of time at Darcelle's, which was a lot different uh now then it was then, uh, so I was very familiar with drag, but, ummm, I I guess it was it was uh it was it was a very uh it was sort of impressive to see that many people in a in a large hall that night, I assumed what it meant, over 800 I guess...and the and the drag community was always very supportive of other parts of the community, I mean they, uh, they were the people who probably were the easiest the easiest targets, but they were probably most uh supportive of other uh of other people and other, other, other causes in the lesbian and gay community and always raising money and always being supportive and, and uh I don't think they've gotten as much credit as they deserve, ummmm, because they, they obviously were very very supportive. I..in the..I, I read the New York Times on Sunday [chuckling], the New York Times society page is always, always something, it's "Mrs. Rockefeller this, or..." [chuckling in background] you know, it's just, it's, ummm...you're from the east coast, you're probably familiar with this...and all the big events, all the large, the large, uh...the, the, the Metropolitan Opera, you know, the New York City Ballet, all, all the big fundraisers, and the Art Museum this and this and this, and nowadays they [chuckling] always include The Imperial Court, ["yeah", in background], which I think, which is sort of, sort of a, sort of a nice statement, the fact that those people actually do good out there to become involved in the community and they are recognized.

JD: It almost seems like they're accepted in society as drag queens..

BAKER: Right!

JD: ummm, no matter what they're fundraising for...

BAKER: Right, right...right...I really...

JD: That was it, with all our questions...uh, is there more that you would like to, that you can add, or, ahhhh....

BAKER: Well, let me see...uh, I think I saw something about where we're going in the future, and, uh, I thought something about, uh, marriage, and people say "Oh my gosh, well, when the very issue about marriage was sort of, I mean, all of a sudden you all talk about marriage as though this is something that you think where the movement ought to be going, I mean, we talked about it years and years ago, uh, and it was, it was a, but I remember the vast majority of people would say things like "oh, we couldn't, we couldn't possibly do that, they wouldn't like it"...

JD:well, you know, people "wouldn't", who's "they?".. [chuckling]

BAKER: well, society in general, and uh, so it's, it's, uh, it's incredible, I mean, this movement has moved so fast, uh, and, uh, twenty years ago, I mean, people couldn't imagine what would be happening now..

JD: Look back, when, uh, Anita Bryant was up on her high horse

BAKER: right...right...right.....right...

JD: and how that made everything almost go south...

BAKER: right...right...and, and there's, and there's, ummmm, there's a lot of political types even in this city who were not as supportive, I mean, I remember, uh, after, after Right To Privacy I became involved with, uh, there's a guy in Portland who has, died several, well at least fifteen years ago at least, more than that, [unintelligible name], we started a democratic club, uh, uh, to give money and to endorse candidates and to give money

and it was incredible, I mean this was, this was probably back in, in, uh, early, mid-nineties, and, and, we would ask candidates questions about whether or not they would be supportive of, of gay marriage, and it was incredible, the number of people who said no. "You know, you're nice people" [laughter] "you can have the right to go to work and you can have the right to live next door to me, or whatever, but actually that's one thing we really don't want to do."

JD: That was such a big issue during, um, September 11

BAKER: mm hmm

JD: ...the people who had lost their partners...umm, just trying to collect the benefits was a nightmare.

BAKER: Right...right...

JD: ...and it shouldn't have been, it didn't have to be that, that difficult..

BAKER: Right. You know, I agree...

JD: ...but if you were a female, a heterosexual couple, it automatically, you got everything...

BAKER: Right, right. Exactly. Exactly. And it's, it's still that way, the Federal tax laws are, uh, are not geared to, uh, to be supportive of lesbian and gay couples. Uh, uh So I, I, uh, up until recently, sort of had a partner and, uh, I carried him under my health insurance, because he didn't have any, and, uh, and so the value of the health insurance is, every year is added on to my income. Well, this is added on to the tune of, uh, \$12,000 a year,

which has a devastating effect on my, on the taxes that I have to pay at the end of the year. So, that's not fair, you know, and, and politicians don't talk about that. I mean, it's little stuff like that just sort of...

JD: ...puts you in a higher tax bracket...

BAKER: ...higher tax bracket, right...plus I have to pay tax on, on that money even though I didn't earn the \$12,000 a year, I actually, it pushes me into a higher tax bracket and the \$12,000 is added to my income, so I pay, so I have to pay tax on it...so...

JD: wow...

BAKER: so it's, it's, it's, there's lots of little things like that that...and people talk about 'em...ah, but they're just things that haven't, ah, ah, haven't, haven't gotten to the powers that be in, ah, Congress [chuckling] in probably the foreseeable future probably are not going to happen.

JD: Yeah well, by the time they hear this, a hundred years from now, maybe things will be a lot different..

BAKER: Right, right...

JD: [chuckling] John, thank you very much [applause, gentle clapping] ... for your time...

JO: Thank you so much...

BAKER: Uh huh

JD: We appreciate it...

BAKER: Uh huh..so, if you have any more questions, would be more than happy to give you whatever information I might or thoughts or whatever...

JO: Thank you!

JD: Thank you!

[End of Session 1]

[End of Interview]