

Audio Recorded: November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Transcribed by: Natalie Hilmer

[00:00:03:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

This is Natalie Hilmer. I am here with Lawrence Hudson-Lewis. If you could please say and spell your full name for me?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Sure. Lawrence, L-A-W-R-E-N-C-E, Hudson, H-U-D-S-O-N hyphen Lewis, L-E-W-I-S.

NATALIE HILMER:

Today is Monday November sixth, 2017 and we are at the University City Public Library in St. Louis, Missouri. Lawrence, do I have your permission to record this interview?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Yes.

[00:00:38:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

Thank you and thank you for participating. So, could you tell me about where you come from?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Excuse me. I'm a native of St. Louis. I was born and raised here. And. Yeah, I've lived in a lot of different parts of the community because when I was growing up we were fairly poor and identifying kind of stable housing wasn't always the easiest thing. But we did make it through, but that did result in me living in a lot of parts of the city.

[00:01:23:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

Could you elaborate on that?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Oh, sure. I lived in [unintelligible] West City, Delmar, DeBaliviere area, University City for a period of time, Pine Lawn, and then what I consider mostly home to be South City. Where I live currently even, but lived there throughout my—the remainder of my high school years and undergrad years.

[00:02:05:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

So, could you talk a little about how that shaped your experience?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Well, for me it was an interesting journey in a lot of ways. Because not having any firm roots until I was a sophomore in high school meant that I didn't have some of those

traditional connections that a lot of people have. Like I don't have the memories of neighborhood friends or childhood home, that's just not what I grew up with. So, I just remember kind of the stabilizing thing for me was that I was able to go to a Lutheran school. One of the many scholarships I would receive over the course of my life. And that allowed me at least to have a stable school environment, even as my home life was a little volatile from time to time. Yeah. So, that's kind of the initial piece of where I come from. I'm not sure what else.

[00:03:29:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

Could you talk a little bit about how your school shaped your experience?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Sure. I went to parochial schools my entire academic career. I went to St. Paul Lutheran from kindergarten to first, maybe second grade? Then went to Bible Way Christian Academy for a part of my second-grade year. I think the school was closing or something. That's a little fuzzy, how I got from St. Paul to Bible Way, but I remember I was there for a little bit of time. And then I went to River Roads Lutheran from third through eighth grade and Lutheran North High School ninth through twelfth. And then college at Webster University, and college at Washington University. Worked a little bit. Did some more schooling in Chicago, then in Pittsburg, then I came back to St. Louis. So, school was an important piece for me, I always was just trying to figure out stuff and school was a good place to do that.

But how did schools shape me? Well. It's kind of odd, like, I really don't remember much of my childhood before third grade, so it's a little sketchy, but I do remember in kindergarten or first grade actually using a computer. Which was very odd because this was like the old Mac type of things where it was the grey green screen and yellow fonts and we playing with games just moving them around there. And that was new technology [00:06:00:00] in comparison to what had been before, so they were trying to train us in how to use those. And I remember the bus driver. Because he was kind of creepy. I don't know what to say, he was just a creepy guy. I don't recall his face, I just remember him being creepy. And wouldn't recognize him if someone showed me a picture of him, like completely gone. But then there was—I guess the only person I remember is Mr. Winters and I have a vague image of him, he was the principal, but nobody else really sticks out. Nobody at Bible Way sticks out, like I just barely remember being in the building. So, third grade is where the story kind of really kicks off for me as far as what I got out of school. And my third-grade teacher Mr. Dittmer, who was a strange man. He had animals all over the class room, he was always in something that looked like he was working in a nature reserve type of place, had the long—wait, was his hair long or was it just the beard that was long? He had a very big beard. I hadn't actually never seen a man before with a beard. I actually think he is like first man I actually had really seen face to face [00:08:00:00] that had, like, that near Santa Clause not just kind of hair on the face but extended out and full. Yeah, that was Mr. D. Because I guess people mispronounced his name, so we all called him Mr. D.

Where I first started to see that I liked learning, but also would have some difficulty connecting with other students. Despite my size now, I was a pretty short student. I just looked back at an old picture from eighth grade. My sister had given me a birthday gift that had some old pictures of me and in one of the pictures from eighth grade graduation, there was a picture of me standing next to her. And I was shorter than her at—and she was about five-six and I was shorter than her but now I'm six foot one I think? So, I had a big growth spurt in high school, but that to be said I was one of the shorter kids. And, yeah, because I was short, bit of a nerd as people would call me. I had a [00:10:00:00] fairly high voice, I sang in choirs for church and things where I was younger, and I was a boy soprano, so I've been on both ends of the spectrum. I went from soprano to a bass. But I was just different from a lot of the other kids. I was—I, one, got in a lot of trouble because I was very quick to speak my mind and at times that was not the most appropriate thing to do. So, I would frequently get letters sent home: talking out of turn, disruptive to the class, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I would even get suspended, but never for fighting or hurting anyone; it was just being disruptive. And one of the things I think about as a social worker today is wow, there was nobody that really saw me because for me to have been as bright as I was, and I'm not gloating, I was typically an A student, but to be that bright but still have so much social problems. No one really was paying attention to there's something else going on with this young man. And I think about that now every now and again and I'm like wow, [00:12:00:00] I was invisible except when I was making noise. Otherwise people just kind of over looked me. And that made me a, an outcast in some ways.

But what I'd learn later is that I was also different because I was just poor, and I didn't realize how much at that time class was playing into how things were going for me at school. Just because we couldn't afford the newest clothes, I had never had designer labels or things like that, just kind of wore what I had and that was that. But I guess my clothes didn't look as contemporary all the times as my peers would. Because lots of hand-me-downs, lots of second hand shops was where I got clothes from. And that was even before finances got really bad, so yeah, I guess I just never really had an appreciation that I was a poor kid.

I didn't know what the word really meant, but by third or fourth grade I was definitely being called a fag on a regular basis. And I knew that the word was intended to hurt, but never really knew why that word was being lobbed at me [00:14:00:00] when other kids got made fun of because they had a physical trait that everyone was like you and your big ears, you and your glasses. I never knew why that word was lobbed at me because I didn't have a real context for what it meant to be that. But yeah, that was a—something that in school that would haunt me in some ways from as early as third grade all the way through eighth grade.

And I actually never told my family about it because they were—my mother was going through so much already with my grandmother's health and then what would eventually become housing instability for us, that I never really told them, told her about it. But she also knew something was different because I'll never forget, and I don't—I wish I could recall how old I was, but we still lived on Delmar—no we still lived on DeBaliviere, so

that means that I was, Kingsbury and DeBaliviere, that means I had to have been in the fifth, fifth grade or lower, because I remember Mr. Eggers who was my fifth-grade teacher coming home, coming over for a home visit, so, it had to be fifth grade or younger. But all that to be said, [00:16:00:00] I remember when my mother asking me if I was gay and I was like no? But not knowing what gay was I can still recall something inside of me that yelled yes, and I was like what was that? I have no idea. I had no context. But I told her no and--because she was like we can take you to a doctor if you are, [unintelligible]. So, I guess that was one of those signs that this probably isn't the safest thing to say out loud.

But no, I've—even though I tried to talk to girls in romantic ways, I just found it easier to talk to girls because they were more talkative. The guys just didn't seem to want to talk and it was like but don't you talk? Is—it was very odd. I never quite got the male code of silence. I've always been a bit of a talker in that sense. Which is probably why I got into trouble when I was at school, because I would make observations about pretty much everything I could identify. Whether that was an appropriate time was not really, was not really my forte, it was just, it was coming out. But I learned a lot of grace over the years, so I'm not as impulsive with my speech as I once was.

But school, yes, so [00:18:00:00] by fourth, fifth grade it was clear that I could make good grades. I didn't have to do a ton to make good grades, but I would struggle with just connecting with other students. Always connected with the adults, would prefer to spend more time talking to the adults. And they be just like go and play with the kids. I'm like I

don't want to play with them. I could probably say now that what it really is I didn't want to play with the boys because there was always this type of competitiveness that I just didn't like, and I also didn't like the physicality of it. Because I never quite trusted that the guys were playing, I never got into play fights even though I know it seems to be a stereotypical male thing where there's the rough and tumble and the tossing and play fighting and all, no that never was my thing. I remember sword fights but it's like there was something between you and the other person. I remember dodge ball type of things that could get aggressive, but by the time that someone actually touched another person that was like no—that—no—I did not have a sense of that being a, [00:20:00:00] a safe thing.

And what I would find out later is that I could take a hit because I would be hit by a—the brother of a classmate of mine. I was punched in the eye and I was just like ow and why did you do that? I wasn't even playing with him. Just let it ride. There wasn't any major swelling or anything. And I even got jumped walking down the street from my school one day, and I don't know how it all happened, but I was able to get back to the school and let the teachers know what happened. I don't even know if I told my mother that. But it was something about—I could physically take it, but it was one those things which I don't understand this, this violence, this—it's just not me. So, fortunately I developed a stature that could deal with those types of interactions.

There was those two and then I wouldn't really have another physical altercation until I met Carl, who wound up being a good friend through grade school and high school. But

yeah, the first day we met [00:22:00:00] we had a fight. [Laughs] No one got seriously hurt, there was no blood shed, there was no concussions, nothing like that. But it was definitely that stereotypical these young people are losing it and now they're just fighting with each other. Broke it up very quickly, one of the teachers did, and then we wound up in the principal's office. And I think we—for—something happened, and we wound up laughing in the principal's office. And from there we were pretty much friends. [Laughs] So I guess I get how that works for some situations, but he was one of the few people I had that type safe feeling with, I guess, even though we had that, we never had anything else really beyond that.

Yeah. So. School, school, school. I would be academically successful in school. I did music in school. And that's when I first started to play a saxophone. Yeah, that's what I played when I was in fifth grade. I think that's right. And. Huh. Music in middle school just made me think about an altercation that [00:24:00:00] happened. Context: my father was not around when I was growing up, and so I never really got that father son dynamic. I didn't have ill feelings towards my father except to say I didn't understand why he was around—why he was not around, but I never really had bad feelings towards him. The things that I heard about him, I would repeat, but having an emotional he's a no-good type of person even though I heard that about him, I didn't really feel that about him.

But the reason that that all popped up into my head was the—recalling one incident at school where I had had some type of altercation with a student. I guess there was maybe a fight or maybe it was just one of those verbal things that escalated or—could have been

the day that I brought a little toy gun that shot out—What are those things called? —little suction darts that shoot in and shoots and connects to the door. Well I figured that I could put a crayon in and it would shoot across the room. So, I think that may have been that day, no? Anyway, there was mischievous tendencies and I liked gadgets, I'm a big fan of MacGyver. But, somehow or another, one of the kids, his name was Chris, I remember this now, we had had words or something, but his dad came. And [00:26:00:00] I don't remember exactly how he said it, but it was like you can let other people treat you like this, you got to do something, [unintelligible]. So, his father, not him, pushed my instrument down the steps, he kicked it down the steps. In that moment I was so angry that all I could think about throwing them both over the railing of the stairs. I didn't, because I'm not in jail, [laughs] but the thought flashed very clearly to me. But it was one of those moments of I didn't get that parenting style, one, and two, I didn't understand why an adult would behave that way. Because all the adults I knew, even though I didn't always like adults, they, at least a majority of the time, acted in fair ways, and I just didn't understand how that was a fair behavior. Huh. The randomest things just kind of pop into your head.

But music became important. I would sing in choir, play music, I would start doing music outside of school. So, my life really became music and school, which was good because it kept me occupied because there was really nothing for me to do at home. And sometimes depending upon where we lived I wasn't actually able to be there by myself. So, [00:28:00:00] yeah. School and music kept me grounded. Which I guess for some people

what kept them grounded was sports, books, reading, but it was school and music that pretty much kept me grounded. Yeah. So that's a piece of school.

High school would be an interesting journey. Yeah. Hmm. What's popping into my head right now is a verbal altercation I had at school when a guy that—the son of a family that my mother and I were actually living with at the time had shared with the whole school that we were homeless. Which we were because we were living with them. And there was such an embarrassment that I experienced in that moment that was—there was nothing I could do about it there was just that exclamation that was there. And that was probably one of the times that I realized that it was probably better that I didn't have many close friends [00:30:00:00] because I didn't have to share how difficult life had gotten with us.

Because housing instability was something I dealt with probably from [exhales] second, third grade up through my sophomore year, so that would be seven years? So, it's one thing to think about housing instability as an adult, as a child that's really a tricky thing. But from kindergarten through ninth grade we lived in our own apartment with my sister, me and my mother, my sister, we lived there for a while. Well, I was told I was born into a house, I never was—remember the house but. I, first place I can recall is an apartment on Delmar and I remember it being a fun space and that we watched a lot of TV. It was the eighties, so my sister had control over the tv and there was all types of random things on the tv.

Then we would move in with my grandmother, so we went from a two-bedroom apartment into a one-bedroom apartment. That's where my grandmother lived. And it was just what I knew. My grandmother and sister slept together in the bedroom and then me and my mother would sleep together on blowout mattress in the living room.

[00:32:00:00] From there, we stayed there until my grandmother got sick and died suddenly, well not suddenly. But she got sick and died and when she died we didn't actually have the place in our name, so we had to move again. There were too many of us to technically be in there to begin with.

So, from there we went to, well now, shoot, how did that go? I want to say from there we went to live in with Uncle Kelly and stay with him for a few months then, wait no, how did that go? Because Deidre moved out early because she and my mother couldn't get along. I want to say we moved to Uncle Kelly in Selber Courts near Goodfellow and Natural Bridge. Then we moved to West Gate in U. City. Then Mom lost her job, so we wound up moving in with the Tubbs on [00:34:00:00] whatever that street is in Pine Lawn.

And from there in, I guess seventh or eighth grade, we would actually move into a hotel and we stayed in that hotel eighth grade, ninth grade, and part of twelfth<sup>1</sup> grade. So, two and a half maybe three years. And that was a hard transition because that was the time in which I knew no one could ever come over. So, spent a lot of time just in my own spaces and doing what I needed to do in school. Still got in some trouble, but not as much. By

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<sup>1</sup> Narrator meant tenth grade, not twelfth.

eighth grade I had mostly kind of settled down into normal social norms. [Laughs] But still, outbursts every now and again. Then, in sophomore year, we would move on to Park and we would be in that one bedroom until I moved out at age twenty-one and my mom st—continued to stay there for a few more years. [Coughs] Excuse me. So, what was that? One, two, three. Delmar, DeBaliviere, Selber Court, West Gate, Pinelawn, First Western Inn, Park, between kindergarten [00:36:00:00] and sophomore year of high school, seven. [exhales] And each one being more crazy than the next. But we were very happy to finally settle into Park.

But the people that did know about our housing instability were folks at church. And the church that I went to had some very supportive individuals that made sure I got to go to school. I believe my mother told me this story, but there was an anonymous donor from the church that would every year donate money to make sure my tuition was paid for school. Because they wanted me to stay in the Lutheran school. So, I got a lot of support from a lot of people, even a lot of anonymous people, to kind of stay on top of school stuff. Which is one of those things that definitely gives me an orientation towards community because I recognize how important it is to have a community around young people that just values them for being there. Not that they have to have anything particularly all that special about themselves.

But I finally started to fit in with this small group in high school, one of those individuals is still my best friend. She and I met freshman year and as she says, she's very fond of saying our relationship can now have a seat at the bar [00:38:00:00] because we just

celebrated our twentieth high school graduation and she has been my best friend ever since. We had one rough patch one semester of high school but that was it. Everything else, it was like whatever that was, I don't even recall all of the details, I probably said something stupid that offended her. But after we both got over that, best friends pretty much throughout.

But that's also when I started to realize that even though I liked girls, I still didn't like them in the crazy way all the other guys I knew liked them. I tried having a girlfriend or two, but none of them really worked. Very lovely young women, they were great people, but it was just like, mm nah. So, it would be during one of my years of boys' choir. Probably—we were on Park at this time, so probably my junior year. I'd have one of my good friends from the boys' choir tell me that he was gay, and in that moment, it was like that's what it is, I'm gay [laughs] and it was like [00:40:00:00] oh there's that word again that I've forgotten all about. But it was the word that resonated with me. And then I started to make friends, like friends that got me for the first time. I wasn't weird anymore. I was the smart guy, I talked a lot, but I wasn't weird. So, I've also valued being a member of the community in that way because for the first time I wasn't an outsider, I was just different. That uniqueness that comes from each human being that doesn't separate you from other people but it's just who you are, just that personal piece. And that would come with some unique challenges.

[Laughs] First thing that pops into my mind when I think about after I told—after me and my friend at that conversation, I started meeting some unique individuals. And there was

this one person whose name I cannot recall, but this was in the days before instant messenger and text and everything, everyone was still on the phone. Oh my god, this guy would call and just be so obnoxious that my mother was like who is this on the phone and I was like I don't even know why I talk to this person. But it was like but I'm going to talk to them. It was just very odd. I think that's part of being a teenager, there's a lot of odd things that you just find yourself a part of. But I remember my mother meeting one of my friends for the first time, [00:42:00:00] and he was a fun person, and he came to the house one time in this bright neon green head-to-toe outfit. And all she said was mm, mm, mm. And that's when I knew oh, there's something different about when you're this, what I would learn to call, flamboyant. And she would be like why you are spending so much time with him? And I'm like cause he's my friend, I wasn't thinking anything other than that.

And we would hang out together, go different places, but it was also kind of a dividing line that I started to see. I had my gay world and then I had everywhere else. So, it's like everything was moving in parallel tracks. I never really integrated a lot of my spaces until I was an adult because it—I guess even with the housing instability from childhood, you learned, at least I learned, there were things you talked about with certain people and not with other people. And so, having these parallel, I guess you could even say parallel lives, was something I was taught how to do very early.

Which is also something that's been helpful because it meant that I could—even if I was different in a space, I knew how to navigate a variety of spaces because I knew how to

segment my way of thinking. So, I could navigate being in West County with [00:44:00:00] St. Louis Children's Choir even though I was the poorest black kid and probably one of the first black males that the group had ever had. But that's one of those things that music still was a safe and important space for me. I would do St. Louis Children's Choir for two? Maybe three years? The first entre to the Children's Choir would be a joint event that happened at the Scottish right down near St. Louis University College—University. And then from there I would join the YMCA Boys' Choir in addition to everything I was doing with school. And then from there I would join the, oh gosh, what did they call that group? I'm forgetting, but it was something with the Neighborhood Housing Association. The music wound up being a very important part of life to me and would allow me to experience and explore things locally, nationally, and, by college, internationally.

But everything, no matter successes were there, everything stayed in its own lane. Music was in its own lane, academics was in its own lane, family was in its own lane, friends were in its own lane, [00:46:00:00] society was in its own lane, church was in its own lane, and very few people or opportunity was there for crossover. So, what that meant for me is that I had fewer close friends because there weren't many people that could navigate all the spaces I was in. And people were just like you're doing what? I'm like, yeah, got to do this and they were like who does that? Well, me and all the other people in the choir. But you know when you start thinking about it, the choir had about fifty or so folks from all over the area, but there's hundreds of people in your schools, high schools. Hm. Well that was all completely random. But I guess it's in part what happens

when you say talk about something, where do you come from? That's part of where I come from.

[00:47:16:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

Do you mind talking a little bit more about your experience within the community? The LGBT community?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Oh, sure. First it was just a small group of friends that it was our private secret. And that was before I even considered dating [laughs] or anything. I didn't know what it would be like. So, I would get introduced to [00:48:00:00] my first [pause] I'd get introduced to my first kind of companion when I was in high school and he was from a different high school. He was actually from an alternative high school. I had no idea it was no idea it was an alternative high school, I just knew it was a high school. And he smoked Black and Milds, I remember his smell. [Laughs] And he was a cool person, but he was like you're too nice. I was like what does that mean? This would become a theme that people were like you're too nice. [Laughs] I actually had one person that I dated break up with me because I wouldn't argue with him. I was like I don't understand, but thinking back to what I've been sharing here, I've never appreciated tools of violence and, in part, because I was raised with corporal punishment and at times that went beyond appropriate levels of redirection and was just acts of violence. So, I think I never wanted to be in a situation with someone that that felt to be the only way that we could resolve things.

But high school still. It was a lot of phone conversations because, being on the bus, there wasn't a way for me to just hop over [00:50:00:00] and hang out with friends. And I was always doing something, if it wasn't choir, it was something after school, it was homework. Yeah, my—I would have something going on almost every night. Either between school or choirs or other extracurricular things, like plays or things like that that I would do. But those phone conversations is one of the things that helped keep me sane because you just got to connect with people. And we would talk for hours, like, I don't even remember how it was, we just kept talking about the randomest of things.

But it wouldn't be until I was in college that I learned about a gay community. And that was one of the things that being in the music department—in some ways I think I chose music initially because I thought all the guys were going to be gay. And so, it was like this is perfect, I'll make friends, then I learned quite a few were, but there were a lot that weren't. But they were still cool people, so that was good. I would discover Growing American Youth which was a—and still is, a support group for LGBT youth in the St. Louis Area. That's where I would meet [00:52:00:00] Diane Elze, who was one of the facilitators and a social worker, who would, in part, inspire me to become a social worker as well. But just beginning to navigate the community at around age seventeen. I wouldn't discover Growing American Youth until I was eighteen but—or was I nineteen? Either way I was in my late teens. And every Thursday night we'd go there then hang out at Coffee Cartel or MoKaBe's and just stay out until late. Which at that time was like eleven [laughs] because I still had to come home. And it a great time to just connect and

be a part of a community that just seemed completely new and exciting. And a space that just felt almost home with everyone. People had their squabbles I wasn't in that mess, kind of, so I know wasn't a completely pollyannaish existence. But just not feeling like an outcast was a huge success for me about being a member of the LGBT community. Why I value this community so much to today. Lots of friends would be made. A couple of boyfriends [00:54:00:00] here and there.

But I focused primarily after high school on just making sure I completed college and then went on to grad school. But being in college I also had the—one of those moments of oh shit, this gay thing really does impact everything when I had the chance to go to Europe. And being in a household where conversations that were being had in German, because I was a German student, again I was different, [laughs] I would have conversations. And I would never remember my host mother and I talking about something that was on TV related to homosexuell, or schwule as she would say, as they were called in the media. Because there was a various—varying opinion of whether to say gay or homosexual was the right term, the politically correct term in German at that time. But just seeing how she just kind of shook her head like I don't understand how that exists. It was like wow we're everywhere and it's like there's—people are still confused about us everywhere too. But I would make friends abroad who were gay and kept me sane [laughs] while I was there. But I also wound up having some of that discomfort that some of my other classmates had because [00:56:00:00] it was like, well, I already know what it's like to be a minority in a place. It's not any different than being an American in Europe because you're a minority. And I was a multiple minority, black, gay man in

Austria. Yeah. That was different because most of the people I encountered had never met a black American. They all thought I was actually an African immigrant or worker. So, it was very odd, interesting in many ways.

But yeah. It just always felt like home. And I'll never forget going to my first Pride in Tower Grove Park where it just like there are thousands of us! Look at all of us! Oh my God! And you see the bears, you see the people in s—in the leather gear, you see old lesbians, and old gay men. Like never forget even just being out and about and going to a book store, seeing a book about two gay men who had been together for fifty years. And I'm like how in the world did they make it through the thirties, forties, fifties? Because I couldn't imagine it. So yeah, there was always just the marvel that these groups, these people who were ostracized by so many, could form such an amazing community. And there is a little naivete that comes with that because I know that we have our disagreements [00:58:00:00] within the LGBT community. Some are very, very challenging related to race and class and even gender. But still, there was something so just organically amazing about being a part of this group that seemed to accept and welcome everybody regardless of difference. So, I really just enjoyed that.

[00:58:38:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

Would you mind elaborating on like some of the dynamics that you noticed? Like you mentioned that there were some things with regards to race and class. Is there anything that impacted you specifically?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

Oh yeah. White guys wouldn't date me. We could be friends. We could be associates. And I don't know if this is St. Louis specifically or not, but no, I never dated a white guy. But I also had the image from my mother in particular, who still somewhat chuckles about this, but after I came out to her, because she caught me kissing another guy so kind of there was a story that had to be shared, she just pretty much said you can't bring a white guy home. So, there was definite social beliefs on both ends that kind of influenced how that dating journey would go. But that would be one of those things where I just knew that [01:00:00:00] for the—a majority of the community, that that was just a line, that was going to be an off-setting line. Because it was even difficult for heterosexual interracial couples at that time. My mother had a good friend from work at one time who was in an interracial couple and they went through hell, they were disowned by family it, it was horrible. And to imagine some of our people having to deal with that type of dynamic on top of being gay I—it just would have not worked for so many people, I'm sure. So, that was some of the race stuff.

I also had the—I guess because I had woken up racially in my teens and really started to see that there was something different about how people would be treated, that I also I had as an image issue of what would it mean to be in this sexual relationship with a white guy in particular. And it was like so many of the negative images that I had been taught and heard about white men in particular start to flood. It was like [01:02:00:00] oh no. I couldn't be in a situation where someone thought that they could use whatever words

they want to use just because they're angry or—no that—no—that wouldn't work. I couldn't do it because this is a time when, even though we're talking about the late nineties, the use of the N-word was still profoundly used as—by racists. So, it was not a time in which people were as casually and flippantly using the term as they do now. But it still had weight and power and I just could not imagine being in a relationship where that word might get thrown out and—yeah, no, couldn't do it.

Also saw that I spent a lot of time with women still because they were talkers. If you talked I like to listen, occasionally would talk myself. But I'd see just kind of separations of where people would congregate, hang out, and notice there would be spaces where there's no women, then there's space where there's all women and I'm the only guy, but there's very few spaces where it seems we all come together except at clubs. Now at the clubs, I experienced from St Louis something that most people from most parts of the country told me they never experienced. I experienced integrated clubs, I experienced [01:04:00:00] very nice gender inclusion, I experienced racial inclusion. But I also went on the days where I knew black people were going to be there, so I may have been a part of a segregated system and not have known it. Because I later would find out that there were some deliberate steps taken by some of the club owners to admit or deny access to their clubs to some blacks. Which hurt to hear, but it's part of the history.

But I also have for my own experience that I cared so much about this community because we were also in a very challenging part of the HIV epidemic. And as a person who found out very early myself that I was living with HIV, I wanted to be a part of

something that was bigger than me. Because at the time, the year I was diagnosed, was the year that something called protease inhibitor was released. So, ninety-seven, or it was ninety-six, one of those two. And that was the turning point for people living longer, healthier lives with HIV, but we were still seeing people dying fairly regularly. And it was something that only in the gay community did I experience any one was ever talking about. And it one of those things that kind of made me mad [01:06:00:00] at school because it was like how was I one of the smart kids but never knew anything about sexual health. Which would lead me to my social work practice because it was like everyone needs these skill and knowledge base. But it was a space where that conversation could be had more comfortably than it could be in broader settings, even though I would definitely encounter people within the community that were they were not in a space where they could talk about HIV. I would even encounter friends who—not even so distant in the past, I'd have a friend who I met, and we had been really good friends, been close, and I knew him almost ten years before he told me that he was living with HIV as well even though I told him right away. So, it wasn't like something that he needed to hide from me, but it still carried a weight for him.

But yeah, this community had all the people that I ever wanted to experience. I had the old queens who were like grandparents and just—you just loved to be around them, to listen to them talk. I had the drag queens and transwomen who were just like big sisters all over the place. Had my lesbian friends and gay friends. It was just so amazing, [01:08:00:00] just to finally be in a space where it was like I have friends. And I could overlook probably some of the challenges that I instinctively knew were there, but didn't

actually have words yet to place it there. It would take kind of going through some social justice and diversity courses and classes before I would develop a language to make sense of some of the things I was seeing. But that would take time too.

[01:08:42:00]

NATALIE HILMER:

So, we're almost out of time. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about or elaborate on?

LAWRENCE HUDSON-LEWIS:

No, I've rambled enough for today.

NATALIE HILMER:

Ok, thank you for talking to me.

[End of interview]

Word List:

1980s

1996/1997

African immigrant or worker

Austria

Bible Way Christian Academy

Black and Milds

Carl

Chicago, IL

Chris

Coffee Cartel

DeBaliviere Place

Delmar Blvd.

Deidre

Diane Elze

Europe

First Western Inn

German

Growing American Youth

HIV

HIV Epidemic

Kingsbury Pl. and DeBaliviere Ave.

LGBT community

Lutheran North High School

MacGyver

MoKaBe's

Mr. Dittmer

Mr. Eggers

Mr. Winters

Neighborhood Housing Association

Park

Pine Lawn, MO

Pittsburg, PA

Pride in Tower Grove Park

Protease inhibitor

River Roads Lutheran

Selber Courts near Goodfellow Blvd. and Natural Bridge Ave.

South City

St. Louis

St. Louis Children's Choir

St. Louis University

St. Paul Lutheran

Tower Grove Park

Tubbs

Uncle Kelly

University City, MO

Washington University

Webster University

West City

West Gate, University City, MO

YMCA Boys' Choir