

**UOH002731_Stevenson
Oral History Transcript**

PARKS: This is Katie Chaka Parks interviewing Jan Stevenson on November 1, 2018. This interview is taking place at the Purdy Kresge Library at Wayne State University.

So to begin, would you like to tell me when and where you were born?

STEVENSON: When and where? I was born in a freight elevator in the hospital of Cleveland University Hospitals in 1955. My father was a musician. He was a big band jazz piano player. He was the most hyper person in the entire planet, and when he heard that my mother went into labor he did what he would normally do, he panicked. And they rushed to the hospital and by the time they got there, my mother's water had broken. He was in complete panic and he saw the deliveries sign and of course said, "Deliveries, deliveries go there!" and of course that's where the loading dock was. So, they were able to get my mother out of the car and onto a gurney and into the elevator where I was born. My father fainted. And the three of us were carried off the elevator together.

PARKS: Oh my gosh that's such a wonderful story of coming into the world!

STEVENSON: (Laughs) Yup, going up!

PARKS: There you go! Now how long did you live in Ohio for then?

STEVENSON: Until I was like eighteen. I grew up in a small town in Ohio called Bedford, a small suburb of Cleveland.

PARKS: Okay, and when you were living there at the time was that a very LGBTQ friendly kind of community? Or was that not talked about at the time? Or?

STEVENSON: Martians were more familiar than LGBTQ people. No, there was no... I mean I was born in 1955 so I was there until the late 60s early 70s and there were no LGBT people in Ohio. I was the only one. And when I was about sixteen, I saw on the news that there were some lesbians in New York that had gotten arrested. And that was the first time I realized that I wasn't the only one. There were a few more, they were in jail, but there were other people in the world. That was my first inkling that I wasn't the only one, because I thought I was. I figured I was the only person in the world that felt this way. I kept expecting to grow out of it. I was completely startled when I realized that I was gay. And appalled that I was like... this, this no, no. This isn't, no.

PARKS: So was that something that was talked about in your family then at the time, or not then either?

STEVENSON: No. It was not discussed at all with anybody. At all. Zero. No.

PARKS: Yes.

STEVENSON: (Laughs) And as far as I knew there were no other people in my high school that were gay. I've since found out, you know since coming out and being out and talking to people that I went to high school with, that there were a lot of gay people in high school. But we didn't know each other, we weren't connected. I didn't know them. It was a very lonely, scary time

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PARKS: Right. Then when you sort of flash forward a little bit when you decided to become a banker, because you have a very interesting past with being a musician, your degrees in music, and then you become a corporate banker, and how did that whole process work?

STEVENSON: Accident (laughs). My father again was a musician so I started studying music really intensely when I was ten. And went to school for music every Saturday, all day Saturday, at the Cleveland Institute of Music. And then in high school I would go to summer camps and study music the whole summer. So by the time I was graduating from high school, I was on a music path and went to the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music, and then went to Yale and majored in music. But one of the reasons I went to Yale was I knew I didn't want to be a musician. I was accepted at Yale and Julliard and I didn't want to go Julliard, Julliard's a music school, and I didn't want to go to Julliard because I knew I wasn't going to stay in music. And it wasn't because I didn't like music, it was because I didn't like the music business, and I knew that. So I thought I'd get a wider education if I went to Yale and got my masters there.

So I went there, and really spent the two years studying music and pursuing my music career but at the same time looking around. And I met a lot of people in a lot of different fields. And what I found in music was I couldn't find anybody that was a professional musician that was happy. No one liked it. And my career path was to become a classical musician in a major symphony orchestra, that's what I was trying to be. I didn't know anybody doing that that liked it. So I thought, what am I doing (laughs)? This isn't the right thing. So I basically interviewed a lot of people, and the people that I found that seemed to enjoy their work the most were bankers.

PARKS: Really?

STEVENSON: And also the thing that they said was interesting about their careers, was that they got to talk to a lot of different people in a lot of different industries. Because they were dealing with financing a lot of industries. I thought ehh that sounds fun, maybe I'll try that for awhile. So I found a bank in Philadelphia where the personal manager was nuts. She was absolutely certifiable, delightful, and taking piano lessons. And when she found out that I was a musician that's mainly what she wanted to talk about. The entire interview was about her piano lessons.

And what was happening at the bank, this was in the early 80s, late 70s early 80s, what was happening in the banking industry as a whole was banking was starting to open up and become more unregulated. And what they were finding was that what they needed were MBAs, people who were older to come into commercial lending. But there were too many other opportunities for MBAs besides commercial banking, which was still regulated to the point where it wasn't paying very well. And they found that people with MBAs were too young, so they wanted to try something different and hire some people who had different backgrounds, so I just kind of happened on that. And was hired into a bank in Philadelphia. I ended up staying there nine years, they financed my MBA, I worked my way up to become a corporate lender, VP in the commercial lending area. Loved it, and it was like Monopoly, it was like really fascinating on an intellectual basis, very challenging. The people I worked with were really smart and I was really fond of them and they were really good to me.

And then the last couple of years I was in Philadelphia I became a health care specialist. And my portfolio was hospitals, doctors, practices, medical office building projects. It was a very complex kind of financing because it involved the government and city and these large institutions. It was really interesting to do that kind of work and I kind of created a little name for myself if you will, a little bit, in Philadelphia as a health care lender. My partner at the time was a doctor, and what happened was she got a job at Henry Ford [Hospital].

PARKS: Okay so that's how you ended up in Detroit then?

STEVENSON: So we moved here and I moved here and began working here for Manufacturers Bank, which is now Comerica Bank. And it was a real shock, a real culture shock moving here from the east coast, it was like stepping back fifteen years in terms of women in the workplace. I mean wasn't out a work at all, I wasn't out in Philadelphia. I didn't know any gay people in Philadelphia in the workplace, I certainly didn't know any here and it was definitely not okay to be gay at work. And so I went into general lending in the U.S. banking division at Manufacturers Bank, and I was there for about a year and management decided they wanted to establish a healthcare group, and they knew about my background, they came to me and they said, "Would you like to lead this group? We'll have some other lenders and we'll reach out and build..." Because healthcare lending, especially then, was very specific. It wasn't something that translated well to other...it was non-profit finance, non-profit accounting, you're dealing with government finance of the healthcare industry and insurance. It was a different thing; it wasn't something you could pick up in a day. And I said "Yeah, that'd be great! Finally, I get to do something like I knew what I was doing." Which is rare for me to do something where I knew what I was doing.

So anyway months went on when we were talking about doing this, and at that time also was what was going on in my personal life was my parents became very sick, both of of them became really sick. And I was spending a lot of timing going back and forth to Cleveland and dealing with them and worrying about them and what was going to happen to them and what was the next step. And then we had a meeting, this had been going on at the bank for a little while, and we had a meeting with like the president of the bank and some of the other "hoopty hoops" at the bank and my boss, my immediate boss to talk about whether or not we were going to pursue this healthcare thing. And my boss said at one point in this meeting, he said, "This is gonna be great because the only other bank that has a healthcare group is NBD [National Bank of Detroit] and the guy who runs it is a faggot and no one wants to deal with him, and the universe is open to us." And my heart just stopped. I realized at that point, I had no future at the bank. As soon as they figured out I was a lesbian, I was out. And why would I want to do that to a fellow gay person anyway? So that combined with what was going on with my parents, I resigned three weeks later. And just left the banking industry, supposedly for two years. That was in 1980. And I had been starting to get involved at that point with some people that who were trying to start up a gay and lesbian hotline. And I was volunteering on the hotline at that point. For a variety of reasons, the funding for the hotline was kind of shaky and it was gonna end and there was a lot of discourse in the organization that was hosting the hotline, it was actually a gay political group called Michigan Organization for Human Rights. And there was discord at the board levels whether or not they should be doing this, and whether does it make sense for them... they were a political organization should we be doing a hotline, which is social service blah, blah, blah. And there were about maybe a dozen of us who were the regular volunteers on the hotline, and what had just impaled my soul listening on the hotline was that most of the people that were calling in had no one else in their life to talk to. And here they are calling a complete stranger, and for a lot of people that were calling it was the first time they actually said, "I think I'm gay." And the pain, and the loneliness, and the isolation, I could relate to it, but it also broke my heart. And it was true for this group of people that were the hotline volunteers. We were like, "Oh my god, we're going to stop this?" So we created Affirmations.

PARKS: So this is sort of how you came to activism in a sense?

STEVENSON: Yeah. I'd been involved in non-profits before. I had been on the board of Women Organized Against Rape in Philadelphia and had done board level non-profit work, and also had done as a musician, I was involved in a lot of arts non-profits. So I had exposure to the non-profit world but this was the first time that id actually done direct service was doing this hotline work, and it blew me away. It did, it just blew me away. So what we did was this group of people got together and we created Affirmations. And we kept the hotline going, first in a house in Detroit that was owned by two of our board members, Sue [Susan] Pittmann and Chris [Christine] Puckett. They had kind of a side business where they would buy houses in Detroit and fix them up and rent them, it was kind of a little real estate thing they had going

and fix them up and rent them, it was kind of a little real estate thing they had going.

PARKS: Now is this in 1989 that you started this?

STEVENSON: Yes. No no 79/80. Wait a minute, no you're right 89. Right, that's right! I'm sorry wrong decade!

So we started doing it at this in this house in Detroit, and we were there about six months, and then we rented a suite in a little office building up in Ferndale and moved it up in Ferndale and started there. And what happened to Sue and Chris, they were on the board, they were original board members of Affirmations, they were part of the twelve, and they were a couple and lived downriver somewhere. They got into a fight with their neighbor over their fence, and it escalated and they one day went out and started to build this fence. The guy hated living next to lesbians and was always yelling at em about it and stuff. So he walked out with a shot gun and killed them.

PARKS: Oh my God.

STEVENSON: Right in the front yard, right in front of the neighbors and everything. Blew them away.

PARKS: Oh my goodness. Was he ever prosecuted for that?

STEVENSON: Yeah, he was prosecuted and he died in jail. Umm and...it was horrible. It was devastating to everyone around them, certainly to the twelve of us, and to their families. It also taught me, because at that point I was the Executive Director of the community center, I basically morphed into being a sort of de facto leader of this group of twelve and then became the President and then the Executive Director.

PARKS: And that was in 1993 correct?

STEVENSON: I think so. I think I ran it as the president for three years, and then as the executive director for three years. I think that's about right...I think. Close (laughs). I actually tried to hire someone else as the Executive Director and they turned it down, so I became the director.

But what it taught me when Sue and Chris were murdered, was that it terrified the gay community that that happened. They became symbols of the violence against gay and lesbian people. And being close to them as friends and coworkers, I had a different perspective on what happened to them than what it meant to the community at large. It was a real lesson to me about being a leader and how to frame things. And I realized that what it meant was that it undermined the community's feeling of safety, that they had none. And they felt vulnerable, and they felt frightened, and they felt frightened for themselves. And it was causing people to run away and go back into the closet and to feel disempowered. So what we as a group did, was responded to that by being very public to our reaction to the murders. It taught me a lot about using the public sphere to communicate a message of outrage, and how important that would be not only within the political environment and an effort to make change happen, but also what that meant as a leader speaking for people who were too frightened to speak for themselves.

PARKS: Right. Now do you remember how that was then portrayed through the media at the time, the murders and then subsequently what you did after that to sort of spread the awareness?

STEVENSON: The media actually was pretty good about it, because it was so blatant, right, like it wasn't like "Were they killed because...?", it was like they were murdered because they were lesbians. They were murdered by their neighbor because he hated living next to lesbians and he didn't like it, so he did what he thought he could do about it, which was blow em away. And it was so violent and so atrocious. The media didn't really back away from framing it as a hate

crime, course there was no hate crime legislation back then, so there was no political sphere to frame it other than this is horrible and this happens to gay people all the time. And this is not the first time, it's not the last time, this happens to gay people. And its important for the Community Center as an institution to be aware of that and to be the spokesperson for the community when this happens. So that was kind of a learning experience for me in terms of how to be a community leader and when to step out. And people felt like us stepping out was very brave, to be out there as gay and lesbian people right after a shooting. I didn't really feel like it really took that much courage, because I didn't really feel that someone was going to shoot me. I didn't really fear that directly. But I was struck by how people reacted to that. Like oh, wow this is hitting a nerve that I don't have, but I see it happening in the people that are looking at me for leadership.

PARKS: So, then what was the community response to Affirmations in general, even before this time and then at this time when you were being more publicly visible?

STEVENSON: Well Affirmations was very much a fledgling organization. We were struggling to get up on our feet, you know money and all that stuff. It definitely increased the invisibility for Affirmations and we did a vigil, we did several vigils. We did some events to try and raise money for Chris' orphan who was thirteen at the time. That's a whole other tragedy that is heartbreaking in and of itself is what happened to him. He's in jail. His grandfather, who was Chris' father, took him in but did not want him to know that his parents were gay and wouldn't let him have any contact with any of us. He got involved with gangs and involved in a shooting that left a little girl dead and has a life sentence now.

PARKS: Oh my gosh that's just...

STEVENSON: It's horrible. It's just like cascading generations of horror.

PARKS: Right! Well and it's so hard too because Affirmations would have been a place that would have been a safe space for him after all of that. That it's just...

STEVENSON: Right. Well and the art gallery at Affirmations is named after Sue and Chris and he didn't even know that, until after he'd already been convicted and was put in jail. He reached out to me from jail and started to learn about his mothers' legacy and he didn't know any of it. So..

PARKS: Coming back to Affirmations in general, how do you feel that the center has changed from the very beginning of towards more modern times now?

STEVENSON: Wow (pauses).

PARKS: It's a big question.

STEVENSON: Yeah it is, it's a big question. It's gone through lots of ups and downs in the last twenty-five years. Probably one of the highlights was when Leslie Thompson came in as the Executive Director in 1995, along in that range, I don't have the timeline probably quite right. But her vision was to lead the organization to eventually to the Capital Campaign that resulted in that fabulous building that's now in Ferndale. And she was Executive Director I want to say about eight years, six to eight years, something like that. She really led that campaign and led a Capital Campaign kicking and screaming forward to raise five million dollars to build the building, and its really remarkable. It's become a home for the gay community. And when stuff happens, like when pulse happened, hundreds of people just instinctively went to Affirmations. And what's happening now with the election, after the election of Donald Trump, people went to Affirmations because they were so upset and they wanted to go home to find out what their people were saying. And its been a place for people to vent their fear and their nervousness about what was gonna happen and what is happening. It's also a place where people can organize and do something in response to the backlash

PARKS: Now moving in a little bit of a different direction, you and your partner in 1994 purchased *Between the Lines* and the subsequent media source group, so when did you decide to purchase that? Why did you decide to do that? Was it a part of outreach connected with Affirmations?

STEVENSON: Well, okay. Sort of. It wasn't anywhere near that thought out (laughs). Susan [Horowitz] and I were both on the board of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, D.C., that's how we met. She was from New York, she had owned a printing company there and had done that for thirteen years. It was an out lesbian owned identified lesbian printing company, great business model I'll tell ya (laughs)! She was on the front lines of the New York City gay rights movement. She was grand marshal of the parade one year, she helped organize New York Pride, she published the New York City Pride Guide through her printing company, was very involved during the early years of the Aids crisis, and was an activist in New York. We met on the board, my relationship with my doctor had fallen apart, and we got together and she moved out here to be with me. She sold her company in New York and she was kind of casting around for her next move. I also had resigned from Affirmations. I gave them like a four-month notice, so I was in that four-month period where I was still working at Affirmations but I was cycling out.

And one thing that was so frustrating as an organizer in the early 90s was it was very difficult to communicate with the community. I really wish there'd been a newspaper. There had been a couple of starts, most of them didn't work. This is before the internet, before social media. Really the only way to communicate with our members was to call them, there's only so many phone calls you can make a day. So it was really hard to frame issues and to speak about things except through the mainstream media which always translated it into straight speak about gay people, it was never about gay people talking about gay people. So I really wanted a paper to work. I didn't think I was going to do it. But Susan moved out here and *Between the Lines* had started and there were a couple of students from U of M [University of Michigan] that started it up. It was monthly, it was very radical actually, it was started by radical fairies that started it so that the paper was outrageous, but I loved it! So I said "Susan the people that are working on this paper are really having a hard time, they really need some help and are great folks love em to death, why don't you go meet em and see if there's something there for you. Just as one of the things you might want to do while you're here until you find your way." I figured she'd probably start another printing company, that's what I thought she'd do, foolish me.

Anyway she went out to breakfast with the publisher at that time, a lovely woman named Shannon Rose, came back from breakfast and I said, "So how'd the breakfast go?" And she said "Great I bought the paper!" I said, "You did, I thought you were buying breakfast!" (Laughs). She said, "Nope I decided to buy the paper! Shannon's leaving town and she was looking for a buyer and so I bought it." I said, "Oh, great, okay!" (Laughs). So we talked about it and actually I had already been coming to Wayne State, I thought I wanted to become a teacher so I thought I'd get a teacher certificate and do that. So I said, ill help for awhile, I know a lot of people that can help sell ads so let me help you get it going.

So twenty-five years later, still doin it and it's been quite a ride. It has been quite a ride. It certainly wasn't something that we sat down and said "Let's start a newspaper in Michigan" and said "This is what it's gonna look like". It's been a completely organic, accidental kind of thing. But we clearly come at it from an activist point of view. I mean there are gay papers out there across the country who come to it from journalism backgrounds or business backgrounds exclusively and wanted to do a gay paper. Some of the gay papers are actually even owned by none gay people and even holding companies that own many papers including a gay paper. That's not where we're coming from. Were activists. We own it. We're progressive and we want equal rights for LGBT people and everybody else and we don't make Republicans happy with what we write about.

PARKS: I could definitely see that and I think that's wonderful! So then in general with Pride Source Media Group and then your subsequent digital site too, how do you feel that that has effected the LGBTQ+ community in the Detroit and even broader?

STEVENSON: Well I think that we've been successful in our mission to have LGBT people tell LGBT stories. That's been our main goal, and to frame issues from our perspective. And that's been our goal, I think we've done it some degree. We've certainly missed it other times. Its not been perfect, its not been a straight line of success, but we've certainly tried as hard as we can to employ LGBT people, to have them be the voice of LGBT people, to cover the community and what it's doing, to frame its issues, to talk about its struggles, to fight for the community when we can, and to be involved. Both Susan and I have remained involved in the community. One of the things that I've often said about journalism, because Susan and I, neither one of us are classically trained in journalism. I have some education and a business degree and stuff like that, and Susan's got a lot of expertise in production, but we feel passionately about the issues. And we've looked to our staff who are trained journalists to help with the framing of that, and sometimes they've had to slap us down when we get out of line. But we've learned a lot about what it means to frame issues and fight. We've remained involved in organizations, some publishers won't. They think it's a conflict and say it's a conflict for us to be actually involved in organizations and helping with the community. We figure there's a difference between having a vested interest and a conflict of interest. We'd rather have a vested interest.

PARKS: Now how large of a staff do you have that works with all of these different mediums?

STEVENSON: The most we've ever had was sixteen staff. That's awhile ago. Right now we have seven. And we have freelancers. That has been the result of the recession, which was devastating, and also the change in the way papers are created and the technological advances in newspaper publishing in general, and the rising internet. So all of those things have made it more difficult to finance, and easier to do with fewer people. And balancing that has been hard, and continues to be hard.

PARKS: Well I know that you've written, just yourself, over 191 articles.

STEVENSON: I have?

PARKS: Yes, you have!

STEVENSON: Oh!

PARKS: Do you have one that sticks out to you, that has stayed with you all this time? It's a lot to pick from.

STEVENSON: I don't know if I can remember any of them! (Pause). I think that probably the political ones. Interviewing politicians and listening to them kind of wake up to what's happening to the gay community. I think I did this interview... I got to know Jennifer Granholm [former Governor of Michigan] pretty well, both before, during, and after her governorship. I remember one time interviewing her right after she'd become Governor, and she was appalled at the right wing in Lansing. She said, "They're a bunch of Neanderthals! They want to turn us back, they have no vision for civil rights, they want to take everything away from everybody, they're mean!" And looking at her and I'm going like, yeah. Because the LGBT community has been a target, and continues to be, a target of radical right wing activists for a long time and we'd heard all of it. And for her it was the first time she'd been the target. As a Catholic, and as Governor, and as a woman to hear the vitriol was new to her. And she said, "Can you believe this?" and I said, "Well Governor, yes! As as a matter of fact, I have!" And her eyes kind of opened up and she realized that this was new to her. Kind of like my awakening as an activist and realizing the role of a leader, I saw that happen in her, and saw her realize that there was real danger to a lot of people that she had never seen before as a Harvard trained attorney in Michigan. And she was astounded. So that was a very moving experience for me, I don't know if

she remembers it, but it was a very moving experience for me and to write about that and to talk about educating the political environment.

That's been an ongoing thing that the paper and Susan and I have done as political activists, is to make the political realm understand what's at stake. And I think more now than ever, it's abundantly clear what's at stake. And I'm gratified that I feel like there's a lot of leaders who get it, and twenty years ago there weren't a lot of leaders who got it.

PARKS: Along those same lines, how do you feel that your work or professional goals have changed since the 2016 election?

STEVENSON: Since the 2016 election? (Pause.) What we've done since then is reached outside the gay community. I feel like even though we're under-researched and we're under-organized and sometimes it's like herding cats getting the gay community to do anything in one direction, most LGBT people who identify with the community understand that our civil rights don't exist in Michigan. We don't have any. That marriage is not a guarantee of anything. That you can get married on Saturday and fired on Monday for being gay, for getting married. That happens, and that there's people out there fighting against us.

One of the things that's happened politically in Michigan is that other communities are starting to accept the LGBT community as a partner. For example, when John Kerry ran for President he would not embrace the LGBT community as part of his constituency for fear of alienating too many moderate democrats who just weren't there. That's really not the case anymore. The Michigan Democrat Party in particular, and the National Democratic Party has embraced the LGBT community as part of it. There's an LGBT caucus within the Michigan Democratic Party that's very active, the chair of that is one of the vice chairs of the party, and we're an integrated part now of the progressive movement. Since 1996 we've created a voter guide every other year, and we've always talked about the other endorsements from other progressive groups. This is the first time in 2018 where we're actually in a real partnership with the ACLU, CIO, UAW, Planned Parenthood, the environmental groups. And the voter guide that we've created is actually the voter guide that they're using and sending to their constituencies and it says whose supporting progressive groups. Which candidates are supported by progressive groups, which aren't? Which are supported by right wing groups? And that's the information that's being disseminated across the state by not only us, which is what was happening when we first started, but also by the UAW, and Planned Parenthood, and the Sierra Club, and the League of Conservation Voters, and NOW.

They're using that information that we're creating and embracing us as a partner, so that's different. And hopefully we'll find out Tuesday [midterm election day], it's broken down some of the silos because now the progressive community and women understand that the attack against the right to make decisions about their own body are very similar to the attack on gay people for the right to be able to be who they are. There's a connection there. It's not the same thing, but we have the same enemies, because they want to control us in the same way. And African American people, a lot of them, understand that when the right wing goes after gay people, that's often a canary in the mind that they're next. So, it's not always an easy partnership with a lot of these groups. I mean it's not kumbaya. It's work, but it's good work. And we're getting there.

PARKS: Now do you feel that these partnerships are a direct result of Donald Trump coming to power and this sort of move towards right wing almost nationalism in the United States? Or do you feel that this is something that would organically happen on its own either way?

STEVENSON: It's been happening for twenty years, fits and starts. I mean like any other movement it's not linear. There's moments when things suddenly change. The election of Donald Trump I think scared the hell out of people, because we've seen this. We've seen what happens when people embrace a demagogue and want to give them unlimited power, it's never gone well. We have the benefit of knowing history and can look back and see what's happened before. We've seen that

we have the benefit of knowing history and can look back and say, watch out we've seen this! But that's no guarantee that it's not gonna happen again, so I think people are really frightened, and rightfully so I think. One of the things that [Andrew] Gillum says in Florida about [Ron] DeSantis, his republican challenger [for the Florida Governor race], is that he's not calling him a racist but racists see him as a racist, that's why they're supporting him.

I don't know what's in Donald Trump's heart. I really don't. I don't know if he has a heart. I think he's all about him. And I don't know if he would sell us out to the next greatest thing. But the people who really hate gay people, think he will. He's got Mike Pence right there next to him who would love to make us illegal again.

PARKS: Now, sort of along those same lines, what do you think the next legislation should be to support the LGBTQ+ community? Is there anything in particular? Or right now are we just combating anything that harm what people have already won?

STEVENSON: Well on the federal level the Equality Act is a must. What that would do would be extend full civil rights protections in the work place, public accommodations to LGBT people nationally. That's been introduced many times, it's never really gotten anywhere. It would require a change in the House and the Senate. I hope if it passed the House and the Senate that Trump would sign it... I don't know. Barring that, at the local level in the state, the Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act does not include LGBT people, which is why LGBT people in Michigan really have no rights and can be fired from work. I threaten my straight employees sometimes; "I say if you don't behave I'm going to fire you because you're straight." "You can't do that!" And I say "Yes I can! Your sexual orientation is not protected in the civil rights." They're like "Oh that's not fair!" And I say "Really?" (Laughs). It's always a fun conversation.

PARKS: So sort of in general thinking on your whole career to date, is there anything I suppose that you're most proud of about your activism throughout the years?

STEVENSON: (Pause). Oh God. I don't know if I really think about it like that. I'm more inclined to think about what I wish I'd done. I don't know, I think probably...I feel really blessed to be gay. As a white kid from a small town in Ohio, I had every chance to grow up to be limited and narrow. Being gay has opened the world to me in ways I certainly wouldn't have experienced had I been not gay. I met people, and were challenged by people, and taught by people, and reached out and looked for mentors who were very different from me and had very different backgrounds from mine that really taught me a lot. And I've learned a lot, and I have a lot to learn, but I've learned a lot. I think that that's been an amazing journey for me that I really embraced. I'm really glad I'm gay. You know forty years ago when I was a kid growing up, I would not have said I'm glad I was gay, it was terrified I was gay it was horrible, how could this be! But it's really been a gift. I feel like I've gotten more out of it than I've given.

PARKS: Well I think many other people would maybe say otherwise. You're very humble!

STEVENSON: Well...

PARKS: Well along those same lines, what would you say to future LGBTQ kids that are growing up and people that want to be active in the community and they want to be allies for the community?

STEVENSON: Be fierce. Don't be afraid. It'll get better. It does get better. When I look back at what it was like for me when I was in high school with zero outlet, zero support, zero. And what young people have now? And to think about what they could create for the next group? It's really exciting. Hang together. Don't demonize the enemy. Try to stay open.

One of the things I say about when I was sixteen, the only thing I really miss about it is the last time I knew everything. One of the things about getting older and the blessing of getting older is realizing what there is yet to learn. There's so much more. And I think that young people really

have an opportunity to go places that are unimaginable right now, so go for it. Stay open to it. See what happens. Take care of each other.

PARKS: Is there anything else that you'd like to cover that we haven't touched on yet?

STEVENSON: You know I own a Doggy Daycare?

PARKS: You do? Well you have, what is it, four pets? Is that right?

STEVENSON: Well right now I just have three. This is not part of ... my sister started a Doggy Daycare in Plymouth sixteen years ago. About six or seven years ago my sister started to get really sick, and Susan came to me one day and she said "You do realize your sister is running her business into the ground." And I said "Yeah, I know." She said, "You do realize that if she goes bankrupt that she's going to end up living with us." And I love my sister. I could run a business but I could not live with my sister. So we went to her and took over her business and kept it going so she could be independent. And she died two years ago, so now we own it. So my day is like a sitcom. Doggy Daycare, gay paper, I never know what's going to happen!

PARKS: That's wonderful!

STEVENSON: So it keeps me light!

PARKS: Yes, well good you might need that sometimes.

STEVENSON: I need it a lot! We had a canine costume contest on Saturday that was a blast (laughs).

PARKS: Well thank you very much!