

LGBT Oral History Project
Detroit, MI

Rickie Barkoff
(The Lady T Tempest)

Interviewed by
James McQuaid
Monday, November 12, 2018
Detroit, MI

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Information Sciences
Kim Schroeder, Instructor
Fall 2018

Brief Biography

Rickie Barkoff, also known as The Lady T Tempest, is a self-styled female impersonator performer, Detroit-famous professional drag-queen, and transgendered activist who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. While initially born and identifying as a gay male, she realized that she had always desired to be a woman and began the transitioning process at the young age of twenty-five. Rickie Barkoff describes this process during her oral history interview, as well as the obstacles she faced when it came to winning acceptance and safety. During this time, many families were openly hostile towards LGBTQ youth who came out and would often evict these children from their homes, after disowning them.

Rickie Barkoff provided many of these LGBTQ young adults with food, shelter, and a new sense of family as they worked to reestablish their lives and grow as openly-LGBTQ people. She provided housing to many people, at one point thirteen young adults at one time; among those she helped was a young man by the name of Brian, who would eventually become the Detroit-famous drag queen, Nickki Stevens. Rickie Barkoff also took time to care for friends and family personally afflicted with the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and participated in nearly nightly drag show performances to raise money to help those in the Detroit area who had come down with the virus pay for medicine, rent, and food. All of Lady T Tempest's adopted children and grandchildren maintain contact with her, and she continues to be a consistently positive force in Detroit's LGBTQ community. James McQuaid

Interviewer

James McQuaid

Abstract

In the fall semester of 2018, Kim Schroeder's Oral History Class (INF 7770 / HIS 7860), in cooperation with the Walter P. Reuther Library: Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University undertook an oral history project to gather, record, and preserve memories of individuals that saw changes in Detroit from a series of perspectives, namely environmentalists, Detroit musicians, and members of the Detroit LGBTQ community. Professor Kim Schroeder headed the project, introduced graduate students to candidates who expressed interest in being interviewed, and oversaw graduate student progress in interviewing Detroit community members and leaders. These collections, separated by the aforementioned topics, consist of audio recordings and transcripts of these interviews, along with corresponding documentation and release forms. These individuals primarily discuss their own individual experiences within the Detroit community as well as their own personal memories, though wider issues in which they have become substantially invested are also discussed.

Restrictions

An original copy of the interview recording includes a break in the interview where technical questions about the equipment used for the oral history is addressed. Because the break in conversation was substantial, the recording between these two points of the interview was redacted for a copy of the interview that flows better and does not detract from the narrative being told. There are no restrictions on the original copy.

Original Format

Audio recording presented both in .wav and .mp3 file formats

Transcription

English, See below

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

APA FORMAT

Schroeder, K., Barkoff, R., & McQuaid, J. R. (2018). *LGBT Oral History Project*.

MLA FORMAT

Schroeder, Kim, Rickie Barkoff, and James R. McQuaid. *LGBT Oral History Project*, 2018. Archival material.

CHICAGO FORMAT

Schroeder, Kim, Rickie Barkoff, and James R. McQuaid. 2018. *LGBT Oral History Project*.

HARVARD FORMAT

SCHROEDER, K., BARKOFF, R., & MCQUAID, J. R. (2018). *LGBT Oral History Project*.

TURABIAN FORMAT

Schroeder, Kim, Rickie Barkoff, and James R. McQuaid. *LGBT Oral History Project*. 2018.

Walter P. Reuther Library

Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted 12 November 2018 with:

Rickie Barkoff (The Lady T Tempest), Detroit, MI

By: James McQuaid

00:00:10

McQuaid: Okay. So, umm, for the record, can say your name?

00:00:17

Barkoff: My given name is Rickie Barkoff, my stage name is the Lady T Tempest.

00:00:22

McQuaid: Okay, thank you. I guess, uhh, we can jump right into the—into the questions.

00:00:28

Barkoff: Okay.

00:00:29

McQuaid: Uhh, before I do that, would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself?

00:00:31

Barkoff: I am sixty-six years old. I have been a part of the LGBTQ community since I was eighteen years old. Uhh, about—I'm going to say when I was twenty-five, I started my transition. I'm not only a gay male, I am a transgendered woman. I have not had the complete surgery—never plan on it. I have had my breast implants for many, many, many years. I've had my face done. I've been an entertainer for forty-two years. I was the first entertainer to ever be inducted in the State of Michigan, into the hall of fame. I am known as a living legend, and many, many, many years ago, I helped thirteen young people in the gay community survive and strive and become absolutely great citizens of this wonderful United States.

00:01:44

McQuaid: Excellent, thank you.

00:01:46

Barkoff: Thank you.

00:01:48

McQuaid: So, are you from Detroit originally?

00:01:51

Barkoff: Yes, I am, my entire life.

00:01:54

McQuaid: Uhh—where did you grow up?

00:01:57

Barkoff: I grew up in Dearborn Heights. I went to William H. Throne as a child, and then I went to Allen Park high school as a teenager.

00:02:08

McQuaid: How was it like? What was it like growing up in that time period?

00:02:12

Barkoff: Oh, wow. Umm—being a very effeminate male, it was a rough time for me, but having a very supportive mother and dad and brothers and my grandmother—uhh—it helped a lot. I didn't realize I was different at first, but I did know, probably from the time I was five years old, that I wanted to be a woman. And I knew later on in life that there was more to my life than being just a gay male and that's when I went into my transitioning.

00:02:54

McQuaid: Okay. Umm, when you were growing up, what kinds of social services did you have access to?

00:03:09

Barkoff: Absolutely none.

00:03:10

McQuaid: Absolutely none?

00:03:11

Barkoff: As far as the LGBTQ, absolutely none there was nothing. The only thing we had were the bars. There was no social media. There was no one to turn to, there was no one to talk it—talk to about it. Umm... Of course, when I started my transitioning, I had went to Henry Ford Hospital, and they had helped with that, and, uhh—other than that, you had to go to the bars to meet people like yourself, and that's what I did.

00:03:44

McQuaid: Okay.

00:03:45

Barkoff: Yeah

DARKON: Yeah.

00:03:46

McQuaid: Did—were people at the bars largely supportive of one another?

00:03:53

Barkoff: Oh, a hundred percent. A hundred percent, yes. It was the only way we had to survive—were the gay bars, and without them, I don't think a lot of us would be here today. Yeah.

00:04:11

McQuaid: What kinds of, uhh, support systems do you still not see today, that you wish were around?

00:04:23

Barkoff: I think, uhh—wow. I think we have a lot of support systems; I think, sometimes, the biggest support has to come from your family. Your relatives and everything. And I think, sometimes, mothers and fathers need to step up and correct somebody in the family if they treat you differently, or rudely—disrespectful. I think there are a lot of great services out there for us. Affirmations—I know the psychiatric help, now, is a lot better than when I was a child. There was none. My mother and dad, when I first came out, they went to see a psychiatrist cause they wanted to know what they had done wrong. And the psychiatrist let them know, nothing, that I was born this way. It's not a choice; this is our life, and we have to live it this way. And we choose to live it this way, but it's not a choice. It's something we have to do.

00:05:32

McQuaid: Mhmm. So, were your parents supportive after that visit?

00:05:38

Barkoff: Oh one-hundred percent. One-hundred percent, yes. They wanted me to live my life and be the person that I am. Umm—I remember a thanksgiving when my partner and I, Steve, was at thanksgiving dinner, and we all stood up to say prayer. And my dad said, “Everybody join hands,” and when Steve and I joined our hands, my sister-in-law came over and stood between us. And my father, who we called the old man, he was from Italy, and he was very old-fashioned, but I was his baby and he asked my sister-in-law what she was doing, and she said, “I don't want my kids to see this.” And he said, “This isn't your house, this is my house. That's my child, and that's my child's boyfriend. Just like your husband is your husband and you're holding his hand, Rickie will hold Steve's hand.” Yeah; that was the end of that. Yes.

00:06:37

McQuaid: Umm, so, were you afraid when you—I guess for lack of a better word—when you came out? Were you afraid how they would have responded?

00:06:48

Barkoff: Yes, I was. And—uhh—when I did, I sat them down at the dining room table and I said, “I have something to tell you,” and I said, “I'm gay.” I was eighteen years old, and I remember the old man standing up at the table and he put both fists to the dining room table and he looked at me and he said, “Do you think I'm stupid?” And I said, “Why would I think my father is stupid?” And he said, “I knew. I didn't know what, but I knew.” And he pointed to about two feet off the ground and he said, “Ever since you were that high, I knew.” And he kissed me on the forehead, and he walked away. And umm my mother said, “Okay, so what do we do now?” And I said, “Live. You know, we just live.” And that was it. And that's what we did.

00:07:53

McQuaid: When did—when did you come out to them? Like, what year was this?

00:07:57

Barkoff: Uhh, 1970—Yes, it was 1970.

00:08:03

McQuaid: Okay.

00:08:04

Barkoff: Yeah, 1970. Uh-huh.

00:08:06

McQuaid: So, Stonewall had been the year before.

00:08:09

Barkoff: Right.

00:08:11

McQuaid: Did that kind of give you inspiration to come out, or was it something you planned on doing?

00:08:15

Barkoff: Umm, it gave me inspiration and uhh when I heard—It's always been kind of a

Barkoff: Umm, it gave me inspiration and, umm, when I heard—I've always been kind of a frontrunner—and when I heard about Stonewall I didn't know back then—they didn't tell you—that it was the impersonators that went out into the street and fought off the cops and everything. I didn't know that the transgendered community—and I applaud them for it. I thought, "If these gay people can come out and fight for their rights, then I have to fight for mine," and, umm, just like my mother and dad fought for their rights coming from Italy, and that's what I did. It was pretty scary, you know, to talk about it—being openly gay—'cause my brothers we all very tough characters and everything. And they protected me and, umm, going to high school, of course I heard all the slang that you could imagine being called. Queer, fag, a few other things that I'm not going to talk about on this tape. I don't think it's appropriate, but it was kind of brutal, but I never got beat up or anything—because of my brothers, thank god. And, umm, having a wonderful mother and father support you, truly helped me in my lifetime.

00:09:59

McQuaid: So, where do you go after high school?

00:10:07

Barkoff: Where do you go after high school? Uhh, I got a job, and I met a young man at work. And he asked me—he said, "Would you wanna go get a hamburger?" and I said, "Yes." And I had never been to a gay bar, and he took me to The Woodward, and I was totally amazed when I looked around and I saw men dancing together and holding hands in there. I thought, "What the hell is going on? Where did you bring me?" I didn't realize there were a lot of people like me out in the world. I didn't realize there were millions of wonderful gay people in the world. From there, umm, we went to Gigi's—that's when my whole life opened up, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

00:11:01

McQuaid: So, for those who—who don't know, what is Gigi's?

00:11:05

Barkoff: Gigi's is the oldest gay bar, that's still operating, in the state of Michigan. And it was owned by a wonderful gentleman by the name of Tony Garneau, and it was managed by an equally wonderful person, by the name of Michael Swazey. They're both in heaven now, and without both of them, I probably wouldn't be here today, and I wanna make sure that Gigi's gets the recognition it deserves, because it is a female impersonator bar, and sometimes female impersonation doesn't always get the thanks. You want to use us at Christmas time, and benefit time, and—umm—when AIDS hit really hard in the eighties, it was the entertainers that were raising all the money to help all the young people, and older gays, that had AIDS and couldn't afford their medicine and everything. And, umm, female impersonators—the entertainers—stepped up and raised everything we could, and I just wanna make sure everyone out there understands just because you're a gay male, and you see somebody that's transgendered, or a female impersonator, don't down them. We were there, we were fighting hard, and we will continue to fight, and we'll always be there. Open your eyes and open your mind. We're all gay, but we're all different.

00:12:38

McQuaid: So, when did you start umm—I guess is the term performing, or impersonating...

00:12:51

Barkoff: I started in 1976. I was dating a young man by the name of Ricky, and he said to me, he said, "Do you want to go see a drag show?" and I said, "What do I want to go see men dressed like women for?" and he said, "It's cool, they're great!" and I said, "Alright, let's go." So, we went to The Escape Lounge, it was on Six Mile—I'm sorry it was on Joy Road and Greenfield—and it was a huge bar. And, umm, the DJ, Terry Jensen, he announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the beginning of the show, direct from Grand Rapids, Michigan, the wonderful wonderful Vonda Lee!" and this five-hundred-pound lady came out, with blonde hair and silver eyelashes, and I thought, "Okay—this is okay." You know, she looks good. She's doing a great job and, umm, in the middle of the song—it was St. Louis by Della Reese—and it said, "I got my part, let's go!" and the music just blared out and this huge impersonator put her leg—and she weighted well into the five-hundred-pound mark—up and above her head six times and I thought, "Oh my god, I can do this; I wanna do this!" and, umm, at the end of the night, she came out on stage, and she thanked us all, and she said, "A month from now is going to be Miss Amateur Escape," and Ricky looked at me and I looked at him and he said, "You doing this, babe?" and I said, "Yeah, I think I'm going to." And that's how the Lady T Tempest got started—but back then, she was

only known as “Tempest.” The “Lady T” came later on in life.

00:14:46

McQuaid: So, how did you settle on the name of “Tempest” originally?

00:14:52

Barkoff: Umm, as I mentioned, Ricky had taken me there. And, uhh, I’ve always been known to be short tempered, and a little bit of a storm. And, uhh, there were two reasons I got the name; one was from the famous stripper, Tempest Storm, who was a female; and the other was from the Shakespearean play, *Tempest*, cause it’s a storm that comes out of nowhere and my boyfriend decided that should be my name. And that’s the name I took. Yeah... and I’m still short tempered!

00:15:28

McQuaid: How did—how did—you said it was amateur—Miss Amateurs...

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Barkoff: Miss Amateur Escape.

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McQuaid: How did that go?

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Barkoff: Umm, it went absolutely fabulous. A impersonator by the name of Nicki Durrell beat me. I was first runner-up, she won, and her mother came into the dressing room and her mother said to her, “Give that crown to that little girl over there, ‘cause she beat you. You don’t deserve to win this,” and, uhh, I turned around and said, “Nope,” I said, you know, “I’m okay with that.” And when I walked out of the dressing room, the two owners picked me up and carried me around on their shoulders, and I felt kinda bad for the winner, you know, but that was the start of my career in 1976. And I’m still doing it proudly today, in 2018. Yes.

00:16:36

McQuaid: So, 1970-1976... Umm, what was it like being a member of the LGBTQ community in Detroit, then?

00:16:51

Barkoff: Uhh... wow. It was wonderful at the bar, it was wonderful in your apartment, it was horrible every place else. You didn’t dare hold hands in public, you didn’t dare show any affection in public, you prayed that you got out of your car safely, and into the bar. People were not very kind to you when they found out about your life. For me, personally, I was very proud I got an apartment in Taylor. I lived there maybe less than a month, and I came home, and my apartment had been broken into, except nothing was stolen except my apartment door. And when I walked in, I thought, “What the hell? Why is my door missing?” And I walked in, and I turned the light on, and it was spray-painted on the wall, “Move fag, or die!” And I called the Taylor police and they came, and they said, “Well, I guess they want you out, so we would advise you to move,” and I did. I moved that night—I called friends of mine and the next day I went to Palmer Park, which was Six Mile and Woodward area, and that’s where the majority of the gay population lived, here in Detroit. I got an apartment—and it was another blessing from god—it opened up so many friendships, and a safe place to be, and I stayed pretty much right in the Palmer Park area. You could walk around and be pretty safe and, uhh, you just worked, and kept your life private. Yeah, and then, uhh, after a while we started fighting for our rights and things that we needed and deserved to have. We didn’t want anything anybody else didn’t have, we just wanted the same thing everybody else had, except the LGBTQ.

00:19:14

McQuaid: So, did you—uhh, were you politically active? Did you go to pride fests?

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Barkoff: Back then, yes, I was. I didn’t get real involved in the political aspects until the eighties. And, uhh, that was with Mayor Dennis Archer, and he came to Gigi’s—him and his wife—and they did a rally, a campaign rally there. We went out and gathered up votes for him and everything and that’s when I really started to get involved and thought, “Nobody’s gonna stop us.” We have a right—were not doing anything wrong, we were born this way and we’re gonna live this way. And were gonna live it like everybody else.

00:20:08

McQuaid: Was there—was there pride in Detroit in the seventies? Was that a thing that was possible, then?

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Barkoff: Umm, there was pride. We had great pride in being gay people. We just had to keep it

kind of private. Then it kind of exploded in the eighties and that's when we really really let it all —excuse the term—hang out. You know, we rode down the middle of Woodward Avenue and everything, and we started going to other states, and went to their prides, and, uhh, little by little, life got much, much, much better. And we just kept moving forward.

00:21:01

McQuaid: Was the LGBT—I guess the LGB community in Detroit—was it supportive of transgender people?

00:21:11

Barkoff: Oh, wow. Uhh, when I first decided to transgender, I was about twenty-five and I was, uhh, I was watching television with my partner Steve—and back then we called 'em lovers, we didn't call them partners, we called them lovers—and we were watching the Lou Gordon Show. And Lou Gordon was like the... talk show host almost equal to Oprah back then for the Detroit area. He was a heterosexual gentleman and he announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the beautiful so and so," and I don't remember her name and I thought, "Who is she?" Well, she was a he and I was absolutely fascinated, and I sat up in bed and I said, "Oh my god, that's me." And my partner, Steve, said, "What're you talking about?" and I said, "That's me." Because back then I was this little guy with a lot of hair, a great big disco hairdo, and a Fu Manchu mustache, and extremely feminine and very tiny—I only weighed about a hundred pounds and uh I said, "That's me." I knew all my life there was more to my life than just being a gay male. I didn't realize it was wanting to be a woman. Not female, I wanna make sure everybody understands that—not all transgendered people want to have reassignment surgery and I was one of them that didn't. The gay community—a lot of my friends turned against me, they said it was an easier way to live your life, because I could hide behind makeup and implants and, uhh, women's clothes and I didn't have to tell anybody that I was male. And that's not the reason I did it—I had to do it for my own sanity and that I wouldn't, uhh, to be very honest, that I wouldn't take my own life. Because I knew there was something missing in my life, and that was it.

00:23:40

McQuaid: Was Steve—was he supportive?

00:23:43

Barkoff: Not at all.

00:23:44

McQuaid: No?

00:23:45

Barkoff: Not at all. He liked his, uhh, his partner just the way he was; and about a week later he moved out and wished me the best of luck. And, uhh, we decided to divide everything in half, and I was sitting out in the hallway of our apartment building and I was cutting all of his pants, his shirts, his socks and underwear all in half and by neighbor came out. She was a wonderful woman, her and her husband, and they said, "Rickie, are you okay, honey?" and I said, "I'm fine," and she said, "Did you and Steve break up?" And I said, "Yes, we did," and she said, "What're you doing?" And I said, "He said, 'we were gonna split everything down the middle' and I'm splitting everything down the middle." And she said, "Honey, that's not gonna solve anything. Why don't you give me the scissors, and let him come and get his stuff, and you stay in our apartment until he packs everything up and leaves?" And I said, "Okay." And, uhh, I went down to Henry Ford Hospital and I explained that I had heard on the Lou Gordon Show that that was the place to go, and I made an appointment, and unfortunately, I walked in and I was presented to the wrong doctor. And this older gentleman psychiatrist looked up and me and he said, "You'll never have a family. You'll never have kids. No one will ever want you, you won't have a job. You'll have no life at all!" and I burst into tears. And then there was a knock at the door, and there was this woman who was also a psychiatrist and she said, "Are you Rickie Barkoff?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And she says, "You're with me, you're not with him." I said, "Oh my god, thank you!" and I ran to her and then that's when we started the hormonal treatment and psychological part of my transitioning. And then, as time went on, the whole gay community—uhh, ninety-nine percent of them—got behind me, including Steve. He accepted me and, from that day forward the Lady T Tempest was born and, uhh, did all she could to help the gay community, and at sixty-six years old, I'm still helping the gay community every day. I work and I live as a woman, not a female, and I have the respect of all my coworkers and if you do have a judgement on my life, they don't speak about it 'cause, I wouldn't tolerate it.

00:26:38

McQuaid: How long would you say it was before the gay community really turned around and supported transgender people?

00:26:49

Barkoff: Uhh, I think the huge support came during the 80s, when AIDS hit so violently, and we needed money desperately for our community. There was no insurance that was gonna pay for the AIDS medicine or anything. It was a way to get rid of—and excuse my expression—it was a way for the heterosexuals to get rid of the faggots, and they thought it was a gay disease, and it wasn't. And god have mercy on their souls for thinking that way about us, because they lost their sons and daughters—their mothers and fathers—they lost as much as we did, and it got to the point that when our telephone would ring, we were afraid to answer it, because we knew another friend was gone. And it uhh—it was heartbreaking. And then we realized the power that we had as transgender, and as impersonators, and uhh, that's when we started doing shows every night, and raising thousands, and thousands, and thousands of dollars to help these unfortunate young men and women that were stricken with AIDS.

00:28:18

McQuaid: So, let's talk about Miss Gigi's. When did you—when did you win that?

00:28:31

Barkoff: I won Miss Gigi's in 1983, and the reason I had to wait until 1983 is because Michael, who I spoke of earlier, wouldn't allow you to enter the contest—even though we were best friends—wouldn't allow me to enter the contest because I always held bar titles. I always had some title—Miss Flaming Ruby's, Miss Ruby's, Miss Gold Coast, Miss Menjo's—I always had something and uhh, Michael, who was also known as the famous Vanessa LeSalle, said, “You're not coming in here and getting a title—getting the Miss Gigi's title—and then going to go around to all the other bars and perform with all your other titles.” And I said, “Fine,” then I won't, and then I waited a whole year, and I didn't enter any contests, and I entered Miss Gigi's in 1983 and I won it the first year I entered. and there were probably—which nowadays is a phenomenon—there were probably thirteen or fifteen of us that entered and, uhh, nowadays the impersonators do huge productions. Las Vegas productions. And one of the bar tenders at Gigi's recently, his name is Randy, he's a young gentleman—his wife—err husband is an impersonator—and he said to me, he calls me Granny, he said, “Granny, what did you do to win Miss Gigi's? What was your talent? What kind of production did you do?” And I said, “I didn't do a production—we didn't have productions back then. I did ‘You Came a Long Way from St. Louis’ and I did the splits”—or the famous, as people call them, the Lady T Kicks, I did thirty-seven of them in a row and got a standing ovation.

00:30:29

McQuaid: So, what's a Lady T Kick?

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Barkoff: What's a Lady T Kick—it's almost the splits, but it's, umm, you do it in five-inch heels, and you go down to your knees and back up. And I did that thirty-seven times in a row while still pantomiming, and the place went absolutely nuts. And when it came to question and answer time, the question was, “Describe yourself in one word: why you should be miss Gigi's.” And I looked over and I said, “Legendary” and I dropped the mic, and walked off stage, and everybody—the whole place got quiet. I didn't thank the judges, I didn't thank anybody, I turned around and walked away, and as I was walking away, I heard everybody say, “Did that bitch just say legendary and walk off?” and they said, “Yep, she did.” I took—uhh—I got perfect scores on question and answer, and got perfect scores on talent, and that's how I became Miss Gigi's in 1983. And there was a female DJ, and her name was Jenn Ward, and shows back then were on Tuesday nights, and I was doing a show, as Miss Gigi's—as Miss Tempest—and she was playing, I have to think of her name, she is a—she was a rapper in the eighties—and in the middle of the song, I can't think of her name, I'm sorry everyone, in the middle of the song it said “Lady T” and that's how I became the Lady T Tempest because of her song, and I can't think of her name; help me out.

00:32:31

McQuaid: Umm...

00:32:32

Barkoff: Umm... Let's see, she was a white rapper, and uhh, in the 80s that wasn't quite the thing, but uhh, I can't think of her name now. But anyways, that's how I became the Lady T

Tempest. Yeah.

00:32:49

McQuaid: So, by the time you had won Miss Gigi's, you had been doing a bunch of—a bunch of competitions and you were winning them.

00:32:56

Barkoff: Yes, I was known as a—not to interrupt you—I was known as a contest queen.

Wherever they were handing out three to five-hundred dollars, I would role in and hopefully win, and I was lucky enough to—to win. Yeah.

00:33:14

McQuaid: How competitive were the competitions?

00:33:17

Barkoff: Oh my god. They were beyond competitive. You were like—you walked into the dressing room. You didn't talk to anybody., you had your dressers with you and, uhh, oh wow. And it was your friends, your sisters, your family. You know, and the gay community, and you just became this evil spirited queen and I definitely understand, uhh, why they called us that, because now when I think about it, in fact I on Facebook—about a year ago—I posted an apology to people 'cause I wasn't always the kindest queen. Umm, I thought I was one of the best and I let you know that, on no uncertain terms and I remember later on—it had to be the early nineties—and there was a pageant, and they were offering a thousand dollars, first prize, and you had to sign up by 7:30. And all the entertainers, the contestants were lining up and I was sitting in the car, with my friends, and I saw everybody get out and the show director came out and he said, "Who are my contestants?" and everybody lined up and I opened up the car door right at 7:29 and I stepped out. And everybody turned around and they said, "Lady T, are you MC'ing the contest?" and I said, "No." They said, "Are you special entertainment?" I said, "No." And they said, "You certainly aren't going to enter—" and he came up to me and he said, "Contestant number fourteen?" and I said, "The Lady T Tempest." And, uhh, I happened to win it that night, and half of the audience booed me; the other half gave me a standing ovation. The first runner up, it was her half that booed me, and I took the microphone and I said, "At the end of the year, after 365 days, when I give up this title, if I haven't done everything you wanted me to, then boo me. Don't boo me now; at least give me the chance. I understand that your best friend lost, at least respect me for winning." And that kind of changed things for me. It kinda turned everything around and I thought, "Wow, I'm not the only queen on the planet, and I should be a little more, uhh, kinder, and back away from being such a bitchy queen." And that's when I really started to help all the young entertainers. Yeah.

00:36:24

McQuaid: That's actually a really good segway into this question I had. A lot of LGBT people in Detroit see you as a mother figure. Umm, and I know that you took in a lot of—a lot of young LGBT people. Can you tell me about that a little bit?

00:36:46

Barkoff: Yeah, I can. Umm, I was in my early thirties and a friend of mine, Lannie, he said to me—I have my own house and he said to me—he said, "I know a wonderful young guy, his name is Brian, and he just idolizes you—he goes to all your shows," and I knew who he was talking about. It was this young guy who used to sit and just stare at me when I was entertaining, and he was uhh he was quite effeminate. After the show Lanny introduced me—his name was Brian—and we talked, and I said, "I understand you're looking for a place to live and stuff," and he said, "Yes, I am," and I said, "Well, I have a room." I said, "You'll have to pay rent, you know." "Oh my god, really? Really?" and I said, "Yeah." Now Brian is the famous the infamous Nickki Stevens, who is just everything in Detroit, and god bless her for being that because without Nickki, I don't think Detroit would have survived. I don't think the gay community would have survived. Nickki started the calling me Ma thing. And, of course, Nickki then had a friend who needed a place to live, and that friend had a friend, and before I knew it, I looked up and I had thirteen young gay people living in my home and I thought, "What have you done, old lady? How are you gonna do this?" And, uhh, I went to the State of Michigan, and I asked for help, and they said, "There's nothing we can do for you. Put 'em out." And I said, "Put them out? How do you—what do you mean put them out?" I said, "You can't—they've already been put out." Mothers and fathers or, you know, from neighbors being so cruel to them, you know, and I took them in. We survived umm we never got evicted. They were well fed—they were loved. They respected me in every way. It was god's gift to me for not having children in the traditional

They respected me in every way that was good given the fact that I was a mother in the traditional way, and I always wanted to be a mother, and it was an absolutely wonderful and, uhh, hard time in my life. I wouldn't trade it for the world. I still see all of them to this day—the ones that are alive. They still call me Ma. They still respect me, I respect them. Umm, and it's just—it's part of my life and some of my friends said I was crazy. Some of my neighbors said, "Have you lost your mind?" You know, how are you gonna do this? And I did. And I would do it all over again, and they would do it for me. I just—about two years ago I got to see one of them—her name is Nicki Chase. The other Nickki I was talking about was Nickki Stevens, this was Nicki Chase. And, uhh, Nickki Stevens was having her big annual Christmas party at her house, and I was there, and Nicki Chase asked everyone to be quiet at the party, and she said, "I wanna say something to Ma." And I haven't seen her in probably fifteen years, maybe twenty years, and she said, "There was no one tougher than you." She said, "If we didn't have that bed made and we weren't up and out looking for jobs, or cutting lawn, or cleaning somebody's—washing somebodies' car or waitressing someplace... you were really tough on us—you were as tough as hell, ma." And she said but today—she told me that she, uhh, she went to college and she has a fabulous job with Ford Motor Company, and she travels all around the world and she said because of the chance that I gave her, that she's able to do that. Like I said, Nickki Stevens is on top of the world here in Detroit for the LGBTQ community—Timmy, who is the owner of Menjo's and a few other establishments here—ummm, and there weren't only gay people, LGBT that I took in. I took in some heterosexual girls that were great friends with the young gay people and that caused an uproar with their families—I took them in also. I also—I also took in a lady with special needs who had a gay best friend. Umm, and it was just something that I was compelled to do. And I did it. I don't know how, I'm gonna be very honest, because sometimes I would wake up, I would walk out of my bedroom, and see everybody laying on the floor and everything, with their blankets and everything, and I'd think, "What the hell did you do, old lady?" You know, but it worked, and I love each and every one of them to this day.

00:42:45

McQuaid: Were you ever—were you ever afraid when you let people into your home like that?

00:42:51

Barkoff: Never.

00:42:52

McQuaid: Never?

00:42:53

Barkoff: Never, uhh never, never ever ever. I've been a pretty tough bird. I didn't take much—if I can use the expression, I don't know what I'm allowed to say on this recording, uhh—I didn't take any crap from anybody. Umm, if you didn't follow the rules, you were out. I gave you a chance, that's all I could do. Uhh, and uhh, no—I was never afraid. Now, sometimes, some of the young people were afraid because a friend of ours, his name was Ricky—Rick—and he was living in a hotel room, and he was afflicted with AIDS, and he had huge sores all over his body, and everything. And, uhh, a friend of mine said, "Ma, he's gonna die there by himself." And I drove to the hotel and I went and got him, and I carried him into the house and took care of him, and they were afraid because we didn't know anything about AIDS. We didn't know other than being sexually transmitted, how you were gonna get it and they said, "Ma, what are you doing?" and I said, "I'm doing what I have to do. I have to help this young man," and that's what I did. And then, uhh, when his family found out—his wonderful family—that I was getting about between three and four-hundred dollars a month from the State of Michigan to take care of him, they came and got him. Transferred everything into their name and, uhh, took him back to that hotel and left him there. And a few weeks later, his social worker came to my home, and she said, "I just wanted to tell you Ricky died," and his family left him back in that hotel and stuff. Yeah. And, uhh, so, when people ask, "Are there any regrets or anything?" The only regret was that Ricky trusted them. He always wanted to be with his family, and he thought maybe they were going to finally help him and take care of him, and they let him die there like an animal, and uhh... the only regret I have is that maybe I didn't try to convince him to stay, but that wasn't my—that wasn't my doing. That was his doing, and I understood that he wanted to be with his mother and father, his brothers and sisters. If I would have known that they were going to do that, I would've kept him, but uhh.. that's the only regret, honey.

00:46:16

McQuaid: So, let's talk about—about the epidemic.

00:46:24

Barkoff: Okay.

00:46:26

McQuaid: Umm, when did you hear about it?

00:46:32

Barkoff: I heard about it in the 80s of course. Uhh, it was spreading like wildfire and when you saw your friends that you hadn't seen in six months coming into a bar—because you gotta remember we didn't have restaurants, we didn't have social media, we didn't really have telephones—there were no cellphones or anything. There was no computers, no Facebook, no anything. And they were thin as a rail, you know, you knew something was wrong. And, umm, that's when it first started to hit—and it hit hard. Umm, I remember a dear friend of mine Carrie Phillips, I remember she was a former Miss Gigi's, she won before I did, and I remember my friends all going there and they said, "Carrie wants to see you," and I said, "Oh, okay," and I didn't realize she had been that, uhh... decimated by this horrific disease, and she looked up at me and she said, "Ma, make me stuffed peppers." I said, "What?" She said, "Make me stuffed peppers," and I said, "Okay." And I left; I went to the store, got the stuff, went back home, baked 'em all, brought 'em back about three hours later, and she was able to maybe eat a bite, and she died about a day or two later. Umm, but every day we got a phone call that one of our friends was gone and it just kept going, and going, and going. And it didn't stop. And uhh, it was as horrific as you think it is, it was. Yeah. It's nothing like now. You didn't dare—and you didn't tell anybody, dear god in heaven. If you told anybody, you got fired from your job. Everybody was petrified, including me. Umm, we all started practicing safe sex, and that seemed to slow it down for a while, and uhh, that was it, my dear. We lost friends every day of the week. Every day. There was no day that was a day without AIDS. There was none. There was none at all.

00:49:31

McQuaid: How long was it before you—before you found out that safe sex would help?

00:49:38

Barkoff: Uhh, probably about maybe a year, maybe longer. Umm, the young man—the young heterosexual little boy that was ten years old. Ryan White—was that his name?

00:49:54

McQuaid: Yeah.

00:49:55

Barkoff: When we found out you could get it through blood transfusions and stuff. I have to say, and I'm going to say this, and it's not a—it's not on anything that Michelle Obama said the other night on her interview, which was absolutely great, and Michelle Obama is one of my idols. When she said she can never forgive Donald Trump for what he has done to the Obama family, I can never forgive Ronald Regan for what he did to the LGBT community; cutting off all of our aid to AIDS. That was just cruel on his part. Absolutely cruel on his part, to take all that away from us; and him, and his Republican Party, destroyed us by unfunding the AIDS.

[The interview was paused here for a brief recess]

00:51:07

McQuaid: So, I'm pretty sure we left off, umm, with—with the epidemic.

00:51:17

Barkoff: Yes.

00:51:18

McQuaid: Right, and so, about a year in, people started to understand, "Okay, well safe sex helps," blood transfusions—you can get it through that, umm, you mention that—that Reagan didn't do much.

00:51:36

Barkoff: He destroyed us. He absolutely destroyed all the help for the young people, older people, anyone who was afflicted with AIDS, he stopped all the—the government assistance and everything, and I—I will never ever forgive him for that. Him and that witch he was married to. She was as disgusting as he was, as far as I'm concerned. When Rock Hudson, the famous actor, reached out to Nancy Reagan because she was an actress, she turned her back on him, and it was the great wonderful illustrious Elizabeth Taylor that came to our rescue and started her own AIDS foundation and, uhh, Ronald Reagan, we didn't care about then. He can go to hell and

burn, for all I care. You know, yeah. When I had friends that were losing their battle every day just because this gentleman, our president, whatever the hell you wanna call him—not even human. Destroyed the assistance for AIDS, I have no mercy for him at all.

00:53:03

McQuaid: Was AIDS something that was in the news at the time? Did people talk about it?

00:53:10

Barkoff: Oh, every day. Every day. Every day you heard on the news a different horror story of a nurse, or a hospital turning away people with AIDS. Both male, female, gay, straight, black, white, it didn't matter. You couldn't even get help sometimes. Doctors didn't wanna help you. Hospitals didn't wanna help you. Yeah. It was unbelievable. It was a horror story, yeah. And, uhh, somehow, we survived it, and those of us that didn't contract it, are here to tell you about it. Those that did, and are gone, are shining down from up above, wanting us to talk about it. Umm it's not done, it's not over, it's just in kind of a—maybe a recess state, right now. It's still there. But we, in the gay community, learned what we had to do to survive this deadly disease, and I guess maybe I have to say, “Thank-you” to Ronald Reagan.

00:54:35

McQuaid: How so?

00:54:36

Barkoff: Because we became a stronger community because of the—you know—him being such a bastard. I know we're not supposed to speak about a president that way, but maybe I have to thank him. Maybe I never did, and maybe I should. I lost a lot of friends because of him, but because of him we became a much stronger community and we fought back twice as hard as he fought against us, we fought back. And him and his Republican Party have never been kind to the gay community. You can stand up on a stage and say all you want about gay rights and you're gonna do this and you're gonna do that. Nah. Not the Republican Party. I don't want any young people today to believe that. They're not for us—they never have been, they never will be. President Obama, we have to give so much credit to. I never thought—never in a million years—would I have lived long enough to see gay marriage, and I got to see it, and I'm still seeing it today, and it's probably one of the greatest—other than having all the kids live with me and I calling them kids, I want everybody to realize they were young adults when they needed me, and uhh—that was, I thought, the greatest gift I was ever gonna receive. Then when President Obama passed—when the United States Supreme Court passed us the right to marry each other, that was an outstanding gift, in my lifetime. Yeah. And I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

00:56:33

McQuaid: So, you mentioned that the—the performers helped a lot in raising funds either for AIDS research or for medicine, for people who couldn't afford it.

00:56:50

Barkoff: Yes.

00:56:51

McQuaid: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Like, you said that one point, you were performing every night to raise—

00:57:00

Barkoff: We did benefits almost nightly. To umm, not only medicine and research, to pay their rents and stuff. Uhh, to—because most of 'em had lost their jobs, once the job found out you had AIDS, nobody would, you know, “Oh my god! You can't be with another human being. You can't touch somebody, cause you're gonna get AIDS from me.” You know, that type of thing, it was so... I don't mean to be rude, the heterosexual community just thought, somehow, by standing next to you, if you had AIDS, that you were gonna get AIDS. That's not how it all worked. We did our homework; we did our research. We figured it all out, you know, to survive; we had to. You know, if the straight community—if you wanna use that term—would have done the same thing, if they would open their eyes, their brains, and their hearts, maybe they would've realized, “Oh wow, we can fight this. We can help them fight this. It's not only fags that are getting AIDS.” Excuse my expression—that's what they called us back then. Umm, it's not only the gay community getting AIDS, everybody's getting AIDS. Children are getting AIDS, and uhh, they needed to learn that.

00:58:38

McQuaid: Is this around when you started getting more invested in—in politics?

00:58:42

Barkoff: Yes, yeah. Very much so. Very, very much so. Because I thought, you know, we're doing all this—this work, to keep our family. We have blood family, the gay community, and we have what we call “our family,” which are gay friends and everything, and we become family. We're not blood, but we're family and we're not gonna let anybody stop that, and I realized that we needed help. We couldn't just do benefit shows, we needed help from mayors, from senators, from governors, you know, we needed help. We needed social workers, we needed psychiatric care, we needed medical doctors, we needed everything, you know, we needed to know how to cope with losing so many of our friends, which were family to us. Yeah.

00:59:53

McQuaid: What other political issues have been important to you?

00:59:59

Barkoff: Oh wow. Uhh, course the marriage. Umm, the—another great gift that was given to me is when the transgendered community was allowed to have their birth certificates and everything changed, if they were deemed—if you wanna use that word—mentally female or male. That was another huge step in the direction for the transgendered community. And, for myself, it was probably one of the greatest days of my life, when I got to go and change my driver's license and everything. I remember many, many years ago my mother and dad asked me not to change my given name, which was Richard—very few people know that—that was my given name. My mother and dad asked me not to change that until they left this earth, and if I could do that for them, because that was their gift to me, and I said, “Of course,” after all they did for me, and nobody had to know that my name was Richard. And after my mother died, many years ago, I'm gonna say probably twelve or thirteen years now, uhh, I went downtown and it was really strange because I petitioned to have my name changed and, where you get your name changed is where you also get a divorce, and pay alimony, and child support, and everything, and I remember getting called up to the front, and the judge was there, and she looks at me and she said, “Are you here for a divorce?” and I said, “No.” She said, “Are you here for child support, alimony?” I said, “No.” And the bailiff, I believe—I don't know what the gentleman is that stands next to her—he says, “Uhh, keep going,” and she covered up the microphone, the judge, and she said, “You are not Richard.” And I said, “Yes, I am.” And she said, “Oh my god,” and she said, “You look great,” and I said, “Thank-you, thank you, thank you very much.” And she said—this was her word—she said, “I get some real bruisers up here.” She said, “They don't look anything like you, you're little—you're only five feet tall!” I said, “Yeah, I am.” And she said, “Of course, name change granted.” And I left there and, uhh, that was phenomenal. It made me feel like a whole new person and I got to go to Secretary of State and change my driver's license and everything. It still had the “M” for male, of course, you know. That I wanted to change desperately, but we didn't have that right and, uhh, once again through President Obama and the Democrats, I even got that right. And, uhh, two of my best friends, who are my kids as I call them, Eric and Ivan, they took me to Lansing, and I was able to change all of that. Yeah. And when I went down, even though it was legal, when I went downtown Detroit to do it, they wouldn't do it. They sent me to Lansing to do it. Yeah.

01:03:46

McQuaid: Did—were they ignorant that the law had changed? Did they? What was the reason they gave to send you to Lansing?

01:03:55

Barkoff: That they were ignorant, yeah. They weren't gonna do it. Yeah. They said you have to take this to Lansing. They were—they were very rude and crude—cruel about it. And I thought, if you think an hour ride is gonna stop me from living out a dream, you're all crazy. We got in the car, we went to Lansing, we did it all. They were so nice and so respectful in everything; wished me the best of luck and everything.

01:04:28

McQuaid: Great.

01:04:29

Barkoff: Yes. There are good people out there, believe it or not. There are good people.

01:04:37

McQuaid: So, with—with everything that's gone on, from the start of your career as a performer, to the epidemic, to the recent changes we've seen, what's the most striking change that Detroit has gone through, in your opinion?

01:04:53

Barkoff: In, uhh, the LGBT community, or just in—?

01:04:58

McQuaid: Uhh, both.

01:05:02

Barkoff: In both? Wow. Umm, the biggest change I—I'm going to say is the openness. And I'm so proud of young gay people. I just moved to Royal Oak over a year ago and I had those huge windows in my apartment, and I was looking down onto the street—onto Main Street—and I saw two young ladies stop in the middle of Main, and it was around Christmas time, and they just hugged and kissed each other and I thought, “Oh my god, we can do this. We're able to do this.” And then to see young women holding hands, young men holding hands, to walk through the malls, and see two guys holding hands or sharing a pop—it might sound silly to some people, but in my day, forty-some years ago, you would have never done that. Oh my god, if you would've gave your pop to somebody? Oh god, they would've destroyed us right there. It's just an absolute, wonderful change in the way, I'm sure in some people's minds they think it's disgusting, but they don't say it anymore. I don't hear the cruelty from people anymore. Uhh, and I think I'm going to be a little bit judgmental on the LGBTQ—I think that sometimes, years ago, we forced it into the face of the straight society. Yeah. And I was one of them, unfortunately, you know I would do stupid things, like I hadn't had my face done yet, I hadn't had my breasts done yet, and yet I would go into Hudson's, which is now Macy's, and I would try on dresses and stuff, you know, looking like a guy, no make-up, no nothing, and making these people let me do it. You know, and asking them, “Is my money pink? Is there something wrong with my money? Isn't it green like everybody else's?” You know, and I think sometimes the gay community did that to themselves. You know, we were pretty forceful, and back then, our big thing was we'd call each other Mary. We'd be in a restaurant and we'd say, “Oh Mary, please!” and then everybody in the restaurant would turn and everybody would know. And we had a bad habit of snapping our fingers for the things we wanted in restaurants and stuff and, uhh, I think today, everything is going along quite well. I think the change in the attitude and respectfulness of each other is wonderful. I'm hoping that I'm not gonna say his name—the forty-fifth president—doesn't destroy that for us, and I don't think he can. I think we are way too strong, and way too smart, and way too together, for anybody to stop us now. If we don't want anything that anybody else doesn't have, we just want the same as everybody else has.

01:08:53

McQuaid: Well, let's talk about umm—number forty-five.

01:08:59

Barkoff: (Laughs) Okay.

01:09:02

McQuaid: Umm, how have the last two years shaped your outlook on—on the state of things in the country? Like, are you hopeful, still, in spite of the last two years? Are you concerned?

01:09:16

Barkoff: I think we are at the most horrific time we have been since I was a child. I think racism is stronger now than ever. I'm afraid that this man is going to come after us. He's gone after everything else, and I'm sure the gay community is going to be hit by him sooner or later. He's already tried with transgendered armed forces and everything. These ladies and gentlemen are fighting to save our lives, do you really think anybody really cares what they have underneath their uniform, or when they shower? How ignorant are you? You know, you're supposed to unite the United States, not divide us, and this gentleman has divided us horrifically and I'm hoping—and I think we saw it a week ago—on Tuesday night, we saw a blueness that we need to continue. We need to always remember our rights are not something that we can take lightly. We have to keep working towards it and we have to keep defending them and we have to keep being who we are. Don't let anybody put you back in the closet and this gentleman, if you want to call him that—this man, if you want to call him that—he has an ignorance that I've never seen since days of the late fifties, when I had black friends—my aunt was married to a black gentleman—and I remember her kids were not allowed to drink from the same drinking fountain I was. And I thought that was just cruel, and I was only a child then. And uhh, I'm afraid that this man has those thoughts in his mind that we can really go back to the fifties and live and we just have to make sure we're strong enough, and together enough, that we don't allow him to do that to us.

Yeah

01:12:12

01:12:10

McQuaid: Thank you. Umm, is there anything that we haven't discussed in this interview that you'd like to speak to, that you'd like to talk about?

01:12:17

Barkoff: Oh wow. Uhh, I think we have covered everything. I just want everyone out there to know for anything that listens to this recording—this interview, to know that we're human. We're loving, we're kind, we have hearts and souls. We're not coming to change your daughters or sons, your husbands, your wives. We are here for a reason—God made everyone equal, and gay people—LGBTQ people—are equal to every other human being on this earth. That's it. And that's from a sixty-six-year-old transgendered entertainer, who has been to hell and back, and has survived, and will continue to survive.

01:13:03

McQuaid: Thank you, so much.

01:13:05

Barkoff: Thank you.