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Interviewer: Kathryn La Barre (She/They)

Interviewee: John DeSantis (He)

Transcribed by: Josiah Theddy Peralta (He/They)

My name is Kathryn La Barre, and I use she/they pronouns. This interview with John DeSantis is taking place on March 4th 2021 via Zoom. I am a member of the ALA Rainbow Roundtable (RRT) who is assisting the RRT Oral History Committee with this project in celebration of the round table's 50th anniversary which occurred in 2020. This project began in 2017 with a group of Emerging Leaders, who started to gather GLBTRT historical ephemera and began this oral history project. The 2018 Emerging Leaders created a digital archive of oral histories collected as part of this project. This year members of the committee are speaking with individuals who've been involved with the GLBTRT, past as well as present, and collecting their stories. This group has also established a toolkit so people can contribute their stories on an ongoing basis.

Thank you for being willing to share your stories with us and with the ALA community.

Kathryn: So we'll get started. What name and pronouns would you like for me to use for you?

John: I go by John, so feel free to call me that. My pronouns are he, him, his. And I guess I can volunteer the information that I am a cisgender gay male, and I've been openly gay since my late 20s.

Kathryn: Thank you. So can you tell me a little bit about yourself? I noticed - I read somewhere that you're a film buff?

John: I am, yes. And for many years I was actually able to incorporate that interest into my work here at Dartmouth College. Up until very recently I was the film studies bibliographer and I did that work for a few decades. So yes ... I've always been a big fan of film. Oh, here I am going off on a tangent! When I lived in Toronto, which is where I'm from, every year I went to the Toronto International Film Festival and this is certainly something I miss a lot now having been away from it for so long.

Kathryn: I can imagine, I mean, I'm a huge film buff myself and I've been so delighted that some of these film festivals that have been inaccessible have gone online and although it's not the same experience, watching it through your computer, as it is in person.

John: Absolutely. Just the excitement of standing in line and wondering whether you'll get in. Seeing these celebrities who actually appear in the film walk in front of the line !

Kathryn: It sounds like you are from Toronto, or from Canada, and so I'm curious what place do you call home? Where are you living currently?

John: Toronto will always be home. [chuckles] People don't believe me, but I actually have in my advance directives that my ashes will be scattered there.

I am now living in a small town in northern Vermont called Newbury, which is in driving distance of Hanover, New Hampshire, which is where I work, or at least worked until we began a work from home situation.

Kathryn: Right now we're all living in multiple spaces aren't we?.

John: I left Toronto at the end of 1991 to take a job at Amherst College in 1992. So I've been living in the US since 1992. [3:50]

Kathryn: That's fantastic.

So, tell me a little bit about your current work and your professional engagements.

John: Oh, let's see, I'm currently ,well, not just currently but for the past 25 years. I've been cataloging and am the Cataloging and Metadata Services Librarian at Dartmouth College. Prior to that I was a Russian cataloguer at Amherst College.

[4:11] What can I say about my work? So, I, I don't have a lot of time for actual cataloging although I did for a while in the earlier years, but lately I've been getting back into it just to keep myself busy. But most for most of my career I was involved in management and planning, and supervising staff.

Kathryn: Well I know I've seen you as a speaker on panels in support of the documentary Change the Subject, and so I'd be curious if you tell us a little bit more about your work with the CO-fired students and the Dartmouth coalition to change the wording of the existing heading 'illegal aliens' to 'undocumented immigrants' (for those who are unaware of that.)

John: It was it was so interesting to see this happen.[4:57] At this point in my career, but I have to say that it happened completely accidentally. And I guess I was just in the right place at the right time that I was brought in by my Dartmouth colleagues who were working with the students, because I was the person in my library who had the ability to submit the subject heading proposal to the Library of Congress through our membership in SACO. [5:21] And as a result of that, I did become invested in the whole issue to the extent that the director, my colleague Jill, decided to include me in the film, in order to tell the full story. And as a result of my appearance in the film, I got invited to appear on panels and make presentations at State Library associations - I actually have another one coming up in May. So, yes, I have a lot of mileage out of that.

Kathryn: Well I know it's a film, I use in my teaching, and we've tried at the University of Illinois to bring a panel of people - but you know the pandemic - virtual is possible but we're still, we're still hoping for some day to have a live screening, because I think that the chance to talk with other people and experience the film in person is so it's such a vibrant experience.

John: It really is. I think the, maybe not the last time I think the second to last time that I attended the live screening of it was at ALA annual in Washington DC . The room was packed and you know a lot of you know people at the end of the film are walking out teary-eyed which is the reaction that I often have, every time I watch it.

Kathryn: Yeah, me too!

John: A subsequent screening actually took place right here, not too long after that, at a public library in the area - that the director Jill and I attended.

Kathryn: So tell me a little bit, you know we've talked about your work engagements, but I know you are someone who has been deeply involved with a number of professional organizations. I can see that you've been involved with IFLA you've been on ALA Council and Executive Committee you've been with ACRL and ALCTS. So can you, can you tell us a little bit about these engagements across the profession?

John: It all started with ALA, that was that was my very first professional association. I joined it right out of library school, or perhaps even while I was still at library school I can't remember the, the order.

And, yeah, then I guess I kind of branched out into that you know my state association I just felt it was important to be engaged with other librarians outside my institutions. I think that was the motivation. And I guess I really, really enjoy attending conferences, which is what these associations tend to do. [7:58] So that led me to, IFLA where I became much more involved and I ever intended to. I'm still involved actually, I still sit on a standing committee within IFLA.

It's very interesting in my early career, my entry into ALA was actually the, the Round Table which was, at that time, a taskforce. And it was only later that I decided to probably do some things in ALA that related to my job, other than just gay stuff.

So, because I was a cataloger, I got involved with ALCTS and served on a number of committees.[8:40] And I kind of always had a dual role of cataloger and Russian bibliographer because my academic background is Slavic languages. So then I got involved with the Slavic and East European section of ACRL.

Then I don't know what motivated me to run for ALA Council. But I ran two times unsuccessfully. And then the third time in 2004, I ran and won. I've been on Council ever since. So I am one of the old timers on council now, as I'm still there. And then during that time I was

elected to the Executive Board, which I have to say was probably the highlight of my professional career.

Kathryn: Wonderful! So that's a very distinguished ... I think the kind of institutional memory that you bring ... is so critical - especially for ALA which tends to be a very large and sometimes unwieldy organization.

So, I'd like for you to tell us ... you've mentioned that you've been involved ever since this was a task force. And so, can you tell us a little bit more about how long you've been involved?. What year was it that you joined, and what drew you to the task force?

John: Well, this is going back. This is actually going back 30 years because it was 1991, I had just graduated from library school and I was attending the ALA annual conference in Atlanta and I was very excited because there's like it was called the Gay and Lesbian task force and they, they had, programs on this topic and they were were having a book award ceremony and it was all very thrilling for me. So of course I attended both of those events, and met some of the other people who had been involved with the group, up until that point, including you know some of those we now consider the pioneers. [10:46]

And then I every year I just kept going back to ALA. By the way I've never missed in a conference since 1991!

Kathryn: Oh that's fabulous.

John: Only Jim Neal can beat my record!

Kathryn: Wow, I'm humbled.

John: Except when they cancelled them, in the past couple of years.

Kathryn: Right,

John: So, let's see... I've been with the group the entire 30 years of my early career. I'm still a member. [11:17] Back then as you said it was it was a task force, it was called the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, before that it was just the Gay Task Force. [11:24]

My friend and colleague, Anne Moore has written a history of the organization and she covers the name changes¹, and what year it changed from ... one iteration to another.

¹ Anne Moore (2011) The History of the GLBT Round Table. In Ellen Greenblatt (Ed.) Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access. McFarland. pp. 319-323.

So I was there when it when they when they became the gay, lesbian, bisexual task force, then I think it was the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender Task Force and that didn't last very long - that was maybe only for a year before they became a roundtable with the GLBT acronym. And then, yes so that was pretty much the name of the organization for a number of years until very recently when they changed the name to the Rainbow Roundtable.[12:05]

Kathryn: So when you... You said you mentioned that you heard about it and joined as a student. Were you a student or where you're transitioning into your professional life at that point as you joined the task force?

John: Yes, well when I joined, in '91 the same year that I began attending their events, I attended that conference with the intention of looking for a job in the US because they were at that time no jobs for academic librarians in Canada - and there are still a few and far between, I might say. And had to reconcile myself with the thought that I might be moving to the US. So I used the placement center, that was the main goal in attending that conference. I'm sorry I lost my train of thought!

Kathryn: No, that's all right. Well, what was your initial role, were you a member or did you move into leadership right away?

John: No, at first I was just a member the first couple of years and I met Ellen Greenblatt, who at the time was the chair of the Book Awards committee. Ellen and I became very friendly and I told her I would, at some point, be interested in serving on that committee. [13:30] Well, in 1993 there was an opening and she invited me to serve as a member.

Well, so ... I served as a member for two years and then when Ellen, I think had been chair at that point for four years was stepping down, and I indicated that I might be interested in taking on that role. And so I did, and so for two years from '95 through '97 I was chair of that committee.

I've mentioned, Ellen, I do want to talk about her.

Kathryn: Yes

John: [14:01] You know, as we all know, Ellen passed away in 2019. She initially was a mentor to me, and then she became a close friend, and we remained close friends until her death. Her contributions to what is now the round table are immeasurable and I feel that she was never fully recognized and I hope that the day will come - and I know that they have named awards after early pioneers, like, Israel Fishman and Barbara Gittings, both of whom I met. I hope one day that that Ellen can be acknowledged in that way.

[14:40] In any case, back to what I was talking about, I served as the awards committee chair and that was really, those are the golden years of my time on the round table. It was just a fantastic experience and I can go into more detail later as we talk about that.

But after that, after I was no longer chair then I, I worked on organizing the Book Awards breakfast because at that point we were holding [15:18] breakfast ceremonies, to present the awards every year at ALA Annual - for many, many years and then it turned into a brunch, for reasons I never really understood. I think it was like, 'Gay people don't want to get up early!' I think that may have been the reason, but I was not involved in that decision.

And in any case the breakfasts, and I'll talk about this later were, wonderful experiences. You know, just as wonderful as the committee work for the Book Awards. Let's see. Then after that, I didn't do anything with them for a while. Then I came back in the mid-2000s to serve two years again on the book awards committee. And that, that was the extent of my official involvement with the group.

Kathryn: So I recall, and you've just confirmed my recollection, you were leadership, when the controversy about the American libraries magazine cover - which featured the task force - broke. So can you tell us a little bit about that experience?

John: [16:20] I had only been with the group (a short time) that was 1992 at the annual conference in San Francisco. I had only been with a group for a year but already I was marching with them ... in that parade. Yeah, I didn't appear on the cover I guess I was too far back but yes, I was there. [16:40]

And then we did the same thing in Chicago in '95, and possibly... I remember being in there in '95, and probably another year - New Orleans perhaps, that we did that. And then I stopped doing it because it was all that walking, and plus you don't get to watch the parade! [16:55]

Kathryn: [laughing] That's fair enough.

John: Then, in 2015 when we were back in San Francisco and it was an incredible celebration because while we were there at ALA - the Supreme Court has just had just legalized gay marriage in the United States. So, but I thought - No, I want to watch this parade so I did not want to march that year, but by then I was too old anyway.

Kathryn: [Laughing] Yeah, I know those days well.

John: But yes, the controversy! It was really wonderful and affirming to see that photograph on the cover of American libraries and then I was absolutely horrified that fellow librarians were writing in editorials objecting to this! [17:40] I mean, I, you know, I guess my limited background coming from Canada where it wasn't so much of an issue in librarianship at all.

I was, I was very surprised at the backlash.

Kathryn: Yeah, absolutely. It's, it's something I teach a class, Social Justice in the Information Professions and this is something that we always discuss each time I teach the class. Just the

professional backlash and, you know, sometimes it seems that you know the ALA hasn't quite come as far as we would like. So, right.

So are you currently involved with the Round Table?

John: Oh, my current my involvement is as I said earlier, that I'm still a member but my involvement right now is basically attending their socials, which they hold twice a year and that means I must have been to around 60 of them, including one virtual.

Kathryn: Oh my goodness, that. That's incredible.

So what are some of your most favorite memories or favorite moments with the round table?

John: Oh, gosh, they would definitely be from the 1990s and, well, actually, they would all be the Book Awards breakfasts – those would be the best memories.

[19:11] The very first one in 1996 in New York City. I was still the chair, but it was deemed that would be too much work for the chair to organize the breakfast and run the committee, so we had an ad hoc committee to work on the breakfast and I asked one of our former members, Kathy Anderson to take the lead in organizing that. It was an incredible event. I think it was in the Marriott Marquis. And, you know, we had Patricia Warren as our keynote speaker and Urvashi Vaid² was our award winner. She brought Kate Clinton, and Kate got up there. It was absolutely amazing.

Then the following year, former Book Award committee member Joseph Eagan, organized the breakfast awards in San Francisco. And again, we had a stellar lineup of speakers and it was, it was just great. In Washington, we had Barney Frank. One year in particular, the SARS conference when ALA was in Toronto. Whoever was supposed to be running the Book Awards breakfast ceremony wasn't able to attend, and they asked me to step in. It was really very meaningful for me to be up at that podium and in my home city, introducing our speakers.

So yeah, it was, mostly it was book award breakfasts, for the most part, and some of the socials as I said there were 60 of them - so I can't point to any particular one, but there were some that were much more fabulous than others.

Kathryn: Well I know I've always heard that, the socials for this roundtable are the most amazing, of any that are held at ALA. So what do you think, sort of, has added to the legend?

John: [20:58] I think you're right that it's word of mouth! I mean, back in the early days, it was just the group. It was the GLBT librarians all getting together. And now it's like THE big ALA party, and everybody – comes, the ALA president comes and, you know, the people are just looking for a party - so it's kind of changed its flavor. Although one thing that that is still good

² Urvashi Vaid (1995) *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. Anchor Books

about it is that you know the GLBT librarians still attend, and you if you're looking to see your friends at the conference - that's the place to find them.

Kathryn: Absolutely, yeah so it's sort of home...

John: Yeah, although less so - as the older I get... When I still go into these things there aren't too many people that I still know. It's mostly younger people that I don't know.

Kathryn: Yeah, well, and I think the membership of the roundtable has been increasing over time. I noticed, I heard that SRRT was up to 2000 members, and I don't know what the current membership of the RRT is but it's one of the bigger ones.

John: Actually we've had strong membership for a number of years. And that was proven by ... there was a certain point when ALA Council changed its rules for roundtables. I think they said that if 1% of the entire ALA membership is in a roundtable, then that roundtable is entitled to its own Councilor, on ALA council. So for many, many years now, ALA GLBT roundtable has had its own Councilor.

Kathryn: Yeah, that's an important part of showing up, I think.

So, what is the most important thing that you've learned from being part of this Roundtable?

John: So, we are all volunteers. We do this work as volunteers, but the very nature of the work is in the area of LGBT and we are all also activists. I don't think that we all we often think of ourselves as activists, but we are.

And one thing I've learned over the years is that in any LGBT organization, library related or not, there's always bound to be infighting friction. I mean, not all the time, but sometimes - you know - people do work well together. But often, and perhaps most of the time, this can lead to burnout. So that's something I've learned, and you just have to accept that, that (burnout is) part of the process. Yeah, so that that's probably the most important thing that I've learned. I'm happy to talk about my own experiences with that when the time comes, if needed.

But I think that's been an important lesson for me to put things into perspective. When I was in my 20s and just coming out, I just thought, oh, you know we're all we're all gay and we all love one another and we're all in this together and that is sadly not the case.

Kathryn: Everyone, everyone has different skin in the game, I think. Yeah, and boundaries are hard with, especially with volunteer work with a group of activists.

Absolutely. So, what has the membership of this group meant to you, you've talked about what you've learned, and you've been deeply engaged in a number of ways.

John: You know I've been giving that question some thought. At this time I am still thinking about it. [24:52] It has been important to me. It's hard to define why it was important, it was so important to me that at the time that I was actively involved as the book awards committee chair. My partner for some occasion I think it was probably a birthday, gave a donation to the roundtable in my honor. Because he knew how important it was to me.

I feel that it has had an impact on how I conducted my career because it was the first place I landed. And I think I learned a lot about working with other people, when I ran the committee, the Book Awards committee, after people left the committee they would say to me, that was the best ALA committee experience I've ever had, it was just so wonderful.

And I tried to make it a happy experience for everyone. We were kind of like our own little bubble. [26:06] I kind of shielded them from the unpleasantness of the politics of the higher level. And I think I succeeded in doing that because it was a great experience.

And then the breakfasts, I mean how many times did I have people come up and say, 'This was the best experience I had at this entire conference', things like that. All of that was very, very meaningful to me. and it felt like I was making a difference in people's lives

Kathryn: Making a difference I think in building an important and welcoming community - it sounds to me.

John: Yeah.

Kathryn: So you've got a very long view, you know from the early days of the task force to today. And I'm curious to see, to hear from you how you've seen the RT evolve and change over the course of your involvement.

John: [27:01] Yes. Little did I know, even in those early years in the '90s ... back then they had two co-chairs, there was a male co-chair and a female co-chair that the whole concept of having to define gender that way. It seems very antiquated now doesn't it?

They eventually decided it wasn't really necessary, and all they really needed were two co-chairs regardless of gender. [27:50] I think the initial reason why they had a male co-chair and a female co-chair is that at the time in the late '80s and early '90s, they felt that gay men and lesbians had different concerns and they wanted to make sure those disparate concerns were well represented by the leadership. That's my understanding as to why that was in place.

So that's one change that I saw over the years, and I've already talked about the name changes. There was a period, I wasn't really involved in this, I only became aware of it from other people who were - I think it was sometime in the mid to late 2010s, or between 2000 and 2010, let's put it that way. There was a group of younger members who seized power, in the executive committee and decided that they were going to overhaul the bylaws, and change some of the practices that had been in place up until then. [28:50]

That caused a lot of discontentment among some of the older members who were in leadership positions with, you know, resulting in very, very hurt feelings, people not only you know leaving their positions in the round table leaving the Round Table altogether and leaving ALA altogether. That that caused a ... I mercifully was not involved I was watching it from afar and you know I was displeased, let's say, by the changes.

Part of it was ... it always goes back to the Book Awards committee which has always been the crown jewel of the round table. In my day it was the committee chair who appointed people to the committee because you knew who would be able to work well with the other members and you could then ensure diversity of geography and types of libraries. Just to make sure we had a balanced committee and that everyone was working well together.

That was one of the things that they decided they didn't want to have. They thought the Book Awards committee should not have that kind of power, and I think, to this day, all of those appointments are made by the executive committee. The Book Awards committee chair just walks into a committee that's been appointed by someone else - but the whole point was that they wanted this to conform with ALA practices and that's what happens with every other ALA committee. So it's, it's hard to take issue with it now, when their goal was to tighten things up and make sure you know we run it the way ALA wants things to be run. But it was it was disappointing to lose that personal touch. [30:45]

Kathryn: Absolutely, that really does change the engagement, and the potential outcomes, I think, in a very substantial way.

John: Yeah, yeah, it was very hurtful for me to see, even as recently as you know 2012 - 2013 Book Awards committee chair resigning abruptly in fury over something.

Kathryn: Oh goodness.

John: Yeah, ... it's about feelings and being human. We have work to do, but we're human beings with feelings, and feelings get hurt, and I really hate seeing that happen.

Kathryn: Oh yeah, absolutely, absolutely understandable.

So I know speaking about feelings, and sometimes people not feeling very good about changes or the way that changes are implemented. I know, I started to be more involved with the RRT, as the name was changing, and there was a lot of discussion and a lot of sadness. Some support and a lot of sadness about the most recent name change.

John: [31:53] I have a lot to say about that. And this is not going to be very popular with the current leadership of the roundtable. There were straw polls taken at the socials ... 'Put this piece of paper in a hat (or whatever) to choose which name you think we should change the name to. I'm not even sure who came up with the idea that the name should be changed. I think

it was just a small group of people who were in power at the time who thought that it should be changed. Finally it somehow made it onto the ALA ballot. And there were some choices that should be made that one of them was Rainbow Round Table, one was LGBT Round Table. There may have been a couple of others. Interestingly enough, one of the choices was not the current name. So I maintain to this day that that it was, if you will, an illegal ballot because it did not give anyone the choice to retain the current name. We did not have that choice. And then after Rainbow Round Table received the most number of votes, then they started crowing about how the membership overwhelmingly approved the name change! When if you look at the voting tally it was incredibly close. It was a very close vote. So this shows that, and I know ... lot I've heard this before - people like me being referred to as bitter old queens who can't accept change. So, yeah, I own it. Fine. [33:26] But the fact is that there were, you know, a very large percentage of the current membership who did not approve the change. I still disapprove of it. The word Rainbow is incredibly overused, the 'Over the Rainbow' list the 'Rainbow list' the Rainbow Round Table! Enough with the Rainbow. Sorry!

Kathryn: No, that's, that's fine.

John: I'm not apologizing to you! I'm apologizing for all the people watching this who don't agree with me.

Kathryn: Yes. Well I think it's important to capture this because it was such an outpouring of discussion and, and, you know, real, real grief, I think, from my experience, so I felt it was important to, to engage with that.

So we'll sort of shift back into your more ... personal experiences with how - for example - involvement with the Round Table has impacted your professional work or career, either from day to day to long term.

John: Yes, well I mean, just by being involved with the Round Table - of course - then GLBT librarianship became an interest of mine and it's it's something that I have carried with me although I haven't entirely ... I mean it has impacted my work over the years as well.

So, for instance, I as a cataloger or I took a great interest in subject headings and for a number of years I maintained a list of LGBT related subject headings. But of course, you know LC kept establishing new ones and then it just became impossible to keep that updated. But for a number of years I did it and I kind of became known for it and people would still, years later, after my list was defunct contact me, "I hear that you have this list of subject headings..."

So that was one thing I did and then I was working ... at Amherst College - Special Collections had this treasure trove of materials that had been donated by a gay alumnus and it was like ... these are print materials and stuff that you just can't get anywhere! And it's just amazing that they had them. And it was driving me crazy that no one knew we had them. They weren't catalogued. [35:43]

Kathryn: Oh my goodness.

John: Well I mean we all know about Special Collections backlogs and priorities and things like that and so I couldn't let it rest. So, I decided I was going to, you know, you know announce the availability of these materials to the world so I actually compiled, with the support of my library, a print bibliography not only of everything in Special Collections in that area, but everything in the library.

Kathryn: Oh, that's okay. Oh brilliant!

John: They must be available! The title of the bibliography: *Gay and Lesbian Materials at the Amherst College Library*³, which I did with my, my friend and colleague who was working at Amherst at the time with Matthew Jaquith. Hi Matthew!! So yes we published, several copies of it and distributed it to libraries and individuals. Library of Congress got a copy. They catalogued it so they created an authority record for me. Very cool.

Kathryn: Yeah,

John: That was so that was one area that I felt I was influenced by my involvement with the round table. What else... I became kind of a, a cataloging activist and after that list of subject headings that I created it occurred to me, you know, a lot of these headings were newly created, and there were gay works being published long before these headings were available, and they don't have headings applied to them! I'm thinking works of fiction, of course, so that I'm gonna go back in and add appropriate subject headings to older works of fiction, so that they could be, you know, located through a subject search. That was very gratifying.

And let's see, oh, I was never the official Bibliographer for GLBT materials at either of the two libraries that I worked in, but people who were entrusted with buying materials in that area were aware of my expertise and I was often consulted and brought in for opinions and things like that.

So, yeah, what else I guess - I haven't done a lot of publishing that area. Ellen Greenblatt who by the way I should also mention was known as a pioneer through her groundbreaking book *Gay and Lesbian Library Service* (1990) McFarland⁴, published a follow up to that and I

³ *Gay and Lesbian Materials at the Amherst College Library: A Bibliography* (1994) Amherst College Library. spiral bound. (From Goodreads: This is a thematic collation of basic bibliographic citations for books, periodicals, and audio-visual materials. All of the included materials are expressly on or about gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual experiences, and/or people and were owned by the Amherst College Library (Amherst, Massachusetts) at the time of publication. Materials are grouped by genre (fiction, biography, drama, poetry, etc.), and subject (couples, family, education, military, travel, humor, etc.). The work includes two indexes (author and title), and an Acknowledgement, Preface, and Introduction. Circulating and non-circulating materials are included as are cataloged and non-cataloged items.

⁴ Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt [Eds.] (1990). *Gay and Lesbian Library Services*. McFarland.

submitted an essay in her follow up book and I cannot give you a citation for that book but it was (published) sometime in the 2000s⁵. [38:13]

Kathryn: I will chase that down for the transcript. So, I promise.

Well, and you're showing this really beautiful way - you know - one of the things that students always struggle with is, well, how can I be an activist at work, or what would that look like and so you've just given this really beautiful series of examples of how to, to take your area of agency and to move really important things forward as an activist.

John: I should also add that you know none of this was done surreptitiously it was all done with the knowledge of my employers and and I should say in some cases with their blessing and other cases with their tolerance.[38:50]

Kathryn: Right. Well, you know, and, and I have a mentor who always says you know whoever has paper, the paper on the table first is the one who, who leads the discussion and so simply by suggesting these initiatives that you've just described, I think you were able to move forward, a really beautiful series of, well, to uncloak resources that were hidden and make things accessible that that simply weren't.

John: That that was very gratifying and of course I'll never know whether it made a huge difference for any researcher, but maybe it would - maybe it did.

Kathryn: Well, you know, I think it's true that sometimes we're cataloging for somebody 50 or 100 years in the future so ...

John: That's a good point.

Kathryn: I think you can take that to heart. Absolutely.

John: Sure.

Kathryn: Let's see. So, other things you made me want to ask you - as you were talking about the breakfasts - Can you sort of describe a breakfast, what that felt like, what that looked like, what work of organization went into it. You named a number of just absolutely amazing speakers that were part of these breakfasts ... But set the stage for us.

John: Oh my gosh, yes. Well, I mean, it takes a village.

Kathryn: Yeah.

⁵ Ellen Greenblatt (ed) [2010] Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access. Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company.

John: There's so many parts and then one person has to be just keeping track of all the different parts. So you know working with the ALA office on the first of all the space, you know, make sure that we have a decent room we've had some lovely rooms we have had some really ugly rooms - just basically a conference room with dividers in the convention center. It's always nice when we have it in a hotel.

Kathryn: Yeah

John: Both the first two - in San Francisco and New York - were really nice rooms. And then the catering then - you decide on the food. We always did buffet, I think that that in later years when I was no longer involved with it they moved to ... table service, you know, bringing it to (the table), I think that it took too long for people to go through the buffet. But the nice thing about the buffet is that you can accommodate different diets. And sometimes the food is better. I mean you can't control the food it's supplied by the hotel or the convention center. So there was that part of it.

And then, oh, let's see, making sure that the publishers will fly the winning authors in, and that they could accept their awards in person and be prepared to deliver an almost always very inspiring acceptance speech. Back in those days, and I think they stopped doing this in later years, but we always decided to have a keynote speaker, sometimes more than one keynote speaker in addition to the winners of the awards. [41:48]

So, we had we had the privilege of selecting those keynote speakers, and usually we would try to find someone local, because we didn't have money and, you know, even in those days the honorarium given to the award winners was considered modest, but we did give them money.

Oh, and then we had to arrange for the plaque they were actually given a plaque. So, and I remember for many years I was the one printing off those plaques at a local printer. Every year I would go in and they would say so we know why you're here!

Kathryn: It's that time again.

John: The plaques and then. And this is where a good we need a lot of help as you can tell it so you know a lot of planning. The beautiful program booklets and I have a huge collection of them, you know, glossy cover and, you know, every year we would get the list of all the winners of previous winners of the Book Award and profiles of the current winners and just, I can't remember what else we put in there but there's a lot of information in these little booklets. And ... then, the giveaways - the perks!

Yeah, so we, the Book Awards committee, would receive review copies from the publishers and so we don't end up with all these books, many of which we don't really want to keep in our personal collections - so we would somehow have those books mailed to the convention center, and then we'd wrap them up in ribbon and put them on the chairs of everyone attending so that everybody would walk out with a pile of books.

Kathryn: Wonderful.

John: In addition to that, the publishers would send copies of books of the winning authors so we could, add that and then of course, since the authors are there and then you have a free copy of the author's book then there's the book signing, of course. So yeah, all of that. And just trying to, and my role was of course making sure that all the speakers were happy, we had a head table and, I kind of had to look out for them. Some of them brought their partners.

In Orlando, oh, I don't know how many people know this - but I couldn't get anyone to work with me on the breakfast setup. At the awards breakfast in Orlando - that was the first time we were in Orlando - so I co-opted my friend Brian Vetruba. 'Hi, Brian!!' He got up at five in the morning with me. And we did the whole thing ourselves. Set up the room, the books, and the chairs and all that stuff.

Barbara Grier I believe she was in Tallahassee and she brought her partner with her and they were at the head table, and she spoke. I had met a young poet named Steven Reigns [44:49] at a gay & lesbian writers conference in Provincetown. He was an up and coming poet, he had been published at that point. And I don't know how it came up but I told him about this Book Award and the breakfast that we do and he said he'd be interested in coming to speak if, if we ever needed him. So sure enough we were in Orlando, he was living in Tampa. He drove in from Tampa, and oh my God, he gave such an amazing speech. He has since become ... the poet laureate of LA and he's had a remarkable career as a poet ever since.

But yeah, those were some really good memories and I hope that gives an idea of all the work that went into planning it.

Kathryn: absolutely! That's wonderful. I think it's these things that are so invisible - all of this labor that goes in to making these beautiful things happen - and so much effort went into making them so. So, I think it's important to capture that.

As you were involved, I mean you've spoken about all of the people that that have become your friends and people who have been professional connections for you. Are there any other people that you'd like to talk about that you've become close with or continued involvement with over the years, through your work with the RRT. [dogs barking]

John: I'd love to talk about that. I hope you can hear me over the sound of my dogs barking in the next room.

Kathryn: Yes.

John: So I will amplify my voice to talk over that. I had not anticipated this happening during the interview. Oh my goodness. [dogs barking] So it yes at the time that I met Ellen back in 1991, I

also met the co-author of the book that I mentioned awhile back - Cal Gough has remained a very dear friend to this day.

Dee Michel who, again, was one of the pioneers in the 1980s, he was a one of the early male co-chairs. Very good friend, who else do I want to mention from that era.

I mean I have so many friends that I met that also happened to be in the in the round table that I may not have met through the round table. Right. But I can, I can point to certainly those three.

[47:20] Oh my gosh, how could I forget Roland Hansen! Roland was the male cochair in 1991 when I first joined and I thought the most prestigious position I could even imagine. I was in awe of him, and never dreamed that the two of us would become good friends over the years. That's what sticking around long enough will do!

And then Roland has been co-chair or chair on and off for many years, including like very recently right up until his retirement... Roland and Bill, his partner - husband have done so much! I don't know if he's done an oral history already - if he hasn't he should! But they've done so much for this organization, especially ... when in talking about my memories I neglected to talk about the 25th anniversary celebration of the ... I think it was maybe it was a round table by then, maybe it was still task force, this would have been 1995 I guess it was a task force still. Yes, it was a task force still in 1995 but 25 years! So Roland and Bill planned this elaborate extravaganza dinner at the Continental Hotel in Chicago. ... Very well attended with speakers and so on. We included the Book Awards presentation as part of that - so I got to get up on the podium and introduce the winners and so on. Yeah, it was... That was a great memory! Well done Roland and Bill - every time you organize one of these events they are wonderful! They were in the process of organizing our 50th anniversary dinner until it had to be cancelled.

Kathryn: Yeah ... So, when you joined the task force and throughout the time of your involvement - Did you ever realize that you were part of history and that you were making history?

John: [Laughs] So at the time I realized that the organization was part of history. I was aware that it was the first LGBT professional organization in the country, and I felt privileged to be associated with it.

[49:45] It's only in retrospect, that I am looking back, that I realized that I was part of that history because I was there all along with them and all these changes were happening but at the time that it was happening I know, this is just my life and I wasn't thinking that it was part of making history. *Making History* by the way it the name, one of our Book Award winners - by Eric Marcus⁶

⁶ Eric Marcus (1992) *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990*. London: Harper Impulse.

Kathryn: So how about reactions on the part of your colleague, your colleagues and employers to your involvement with the Task Force and Round Table

John: You know they were always aware, I mean I, as I said earlier, I didn't do any of this in secret. I guess it would depend on which employer we're talking about. I had one supervisor who felt that you know ... any professional involvement of any kind, you know was, was of you benefit - that it made you a better librarian what you know whether it was LGBT librarianship or cataloging or whatever. So, you know that that was encouraged.

I have heard of library directors who will only support conference attendance as someone is on a committee and that would even include the GLBT Roundtable. I think that was the case. I think my late friend Cat Walker told me that he had to be on a committee but that this kind of work was certainly an endorsed and approved by the employer.

Then I've had ... library administrators question, 'Why are you involved in work that doesn't ... in outside professional work that doesn't directly relate to the job that you're doing,' that sort of thing. But, again, it was, it was always tolerated regardless of the site, no one ever told me to stop doing something.

Kathryn: That's good. That's good. And, you know, I hear a trend about those kinds of challenges that just seem to be increasing. I know at my institution, I have to write a justification for how my involvement with professional organizations - especially if I'm receiving assistance to go to a conference - I have to justify how it benefits the institution. And so I I hear that from others, that that involvement with the RT is questioned under those circumstances by some employers.

John: Yes, and I mean I've done other things besides the round table that fall into that category, like for many years, I was on OCLC Global Council and for that matter, I'm still on it. And ALA Council, and yes and I have been challenged in the past to justify how that how that benefits Dartmouth.

Kathryn: Yeah, yeah, unfortunately short sighted I would say.

So, you know, in a sense as we come to the end of our time together - I'm wondering if you'll reflect a bit about whether or not you think that the role and perception of LGBTQ people in the library profession has changed over time.

John: You know, I think it probably has. I've always thought of libraries as a safe space for LGBT people. I didn't mention earlier when I was talking about my background but librarianship is a second career for me. I didn't become a librarian until I was in my 30s, and the reason I went to library school and not the only reason, but one of the reasons was you know that I was single at the time and I thought that I would meet other gay men. [laughing] And presumably that experience would continue in libraries, and in fact that that has proven to be true.

So it's always felt accepting. [53:58] I've always been out in the workplace. But in terms of the perception I think that these days it's just, it's no longer an issue that anyone thinks about. You know we have GLBT librarians and library staff working alongside us, nobody really thinks about their sexuality, it's just part of who they are. I think probably when I first started it was like 'Who else is gay?' Oh, you know, trying to guess who's gay in the library. So it seems that doesn't seem to happen anymore ... it's just it's just a fact of life now.

Kathryn: It's part of the world and ... I think what you're talking about too is this: I think there was a lot of discomfort in workspaces with people who are different than you, ... so ...

John: [55:12] Perhaps because I've spent my career in in in Toronto and in New England where I, I have not encountered that at all, but I'm aware that there probably are parts of the country where that that's that may happen in workplaces and

Kathryn: Yeah.

John: Wow.

Kathryn: Yeah, I think we still have a way to go, but things are getting better, I think, slowly over time. So... my last question to you is really just this - Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to add to this conversation today?

John: Oh, let's see. Oh, There they go. [dogs barking] My dogs again.

Well, we have touched on the idea a bit about representation on the Round Table. There seems to be a - what is the word I am looking for - maybe a division between the younger, and by younger I don't mean chronological age, although in some cases that that is true - (I mean) younger to the profession, younger to the round table and the, the older pioneers who, you know, feel that our voices are irrelevant, ... that this doesn't matter.

I know my, friend Dee and I talked about this. One of the reasons I wanted to do this oral history interview is because, I think I'm like the only one around left who could still talk about what it was like to work with the Book Awards committee and the breakfast awards planning committee back in the 90s.

So I wanted to be sure that, you know, to record that part of our history. So, yes, we may not be actively involved and, although some cases - and I'm going to call out a couple of people because I think they deserve credit for this. Some people who I also consider pioneers, like my late friend Cat Walker, who served on the round table Executive Committee, right up until the time of his death.

And my friend, Anne Moore who continues to serve on the executive committee - who's been past chair of the round table and has done a lot of a lot of work with documenting our history with her close liaisons with Kay Lahusen who's the ... the partner of the late Barbara Gittings.

So I applaud them for representing our generation in the current leadership. But for the most part, I feel like more of an outsider these days than then then I did back in the '90s.

Kathryn: Yeah, and I think that that goes to the heart of the sense of whether or not you feel represented by the round table and it sounds like there's work to be done there - to make sure that, there's a better balance of people who, who really laid the groundwork here. Those who are new, whether they're young, or whether they're just new newly joined members.

John: That being said, I'm very grateful that the round table has continued to exist and that it's still going strong and it's all due to the fact that we have volunteers who are willing to do this work so I - I applaud them as well.

Kathryn: Absolutely, and I think you've just you've given us a really beautiful picture of, the warmth and the vibrancy of this group over time... I'm so appreciative for for your talking with me today. So, I think, unless you have anything else you'd like to add...

John: Well, I want to express my appreciation to you and your very thoughtful questions, and the way that you followed up with them. I think it's really helped me get through this interview. So, well done!

Kathryn: Well, thank you!

So I'll read the ending statement: This has been an interview with John DeSantis, done as part of the oral history project for the 50th anniversary of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Roundtable, now the Rainbow Roundtable of the American Library Association. This interview took place on March 4, 2021.

Thank you, John, for sharing your stories and memories of the Roundtable.