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Interviewer: Sarah Brewer

Interviewee: Michael McConnell

Transcribed by: Lane Goldszer

Sarah: My name is Sarah Brewer, and I use she and her pronouns. This interview is taking place on March 12th, 2020. I am one of the American Library Associations Rainbow Round Table (RRT) Archive Project Ad-Hoc Committee members, assisting in the development of the RRT's oral history initiative. My group is working on a project with the RRT to celebrate the Round Table's upcoming 50th anniversary in 2020. This work began in 2017 with a group of Emerging Leaders, who started to gather RRT historical ephemera and created an archive which will be shared through the ALA RRT web page when it is complete. This year we are speaking with individuals who've been involved with the RRT, past as well as present, and collecting their stories to create a digital archive of oral histories. We will also establish a toolkit so people can continue to contribute oral histories on an ongoing basis. Thank you for sharing your stories with the ALA community. So Michael, will you introduce yourself?

Michael: Yes, I'm Michael McConnell. I am a retired librarian who worked for many, many years in the library profession. I began my career in Kansas City, Missouri at Park College, a private college in that city. **From there, I came to the University of Minnesota where I was denied a job because I applied for a marriage license with my husband in Minneapolis.** I was out of work for about three years and then Hennepin County Library hired me in 1973. I began a thirty-seven year career with Hennepin County Library, one of the premier library systems in the country.

Sarah: Can you tell me a little bit about the beginning of your career as a librarian and how you came to be involved with what eventually became the Rainbow Roundtable?

Michael: Yes certainly, I graduated from library school in 1968 from the University of Oklahoma Library School. From there I went to a job in Kansas City, Missouri at Park College, as I mentioned a little earlier. I worked at Park College for two years. Jack, my husband, during that time, was a practicing engineer. He had just finished his master's degree in business administration, and I had just finished my master's degree in library science. He took a job with DuPont Corporation, just outside Topeka, Kansas. I took my first job at Park College which was a private college in suburban Kansas City, Missouri. So we lived in Lawrence, Kansas, where I had lived before for a number of years before I met Jack, and we commuted to our two jobs.

(3:02) After about two years, Jack decided it was time for him to go to law school. **And the reason he decided it was time to go to law school was that when he asked me to be his lover in 1967, after we had dated for about eight months or so, I told him the only way I would agree to commit to him, was if he found a way for us to get legally married. I think**

that kind of took him by surprise. And what happened after that was he said, “Well,” after a slight period of silence, “it looks like I'm gonna have to go to law school.”

And so we both finished our master's degrees and that June, I took my first job at Park College and he took his job at DuPont Corporation working as an industrial engineer. For about a year we worked at our jobs and Jack then decided after a year it was time for him to go to law school. So we looked at law schools all around the country. Jack decided that the University of Minnesota was the law school for him. I convinced him that we should move north where it was cold because I didn't like hot weather and wanted to get out of the heat. So Jack did go to law school, and I continued to live in Kansas City for about a year because I still had a year's commitment on my contract with Park College.

As I got toward the end of that contract with Park College, Jack convinced me that it was now time for us to apply for a marriage license. **Jack had been in law school for his first year and had done research and discovered that the law in Minnesota did not prohibit two persons of the same gender being married.** We decided to do that. At the same time I would apply for a job in the Twin Cities area, which I did. I ultimately interviewed for a job at the University of Minnesota and was offered a position there. I believed I was a perfect match for the position they were hiring me for, head of cataloging on the St. Paul campus.

The reason I was a perfect match for that position was that in my early studies in library school, and later, in my job in Kansas City. One of the things that I was responsible for was incorporating and working with technical professionals to begin the transfer of new technologies into the library, especially in technical services [acquisitions and cataloging]. That is exactly what they were wanting to do on the St. Paul campus here at the University of Minnesota. So I was a good matchup for that position. They were just beginning the early stages of that integration into the digital world.

In the meantime, I was to start my job there in June. In May, just before I was to start my new job in June, after I had accepted the position and was scheduled to arrive in June to begin my work, **Jack and I applied for our marriage license the day before my birthday on May 18, in 1970. As a result of that, of course, it was in the press and on the news and it blew up everywhere.** (6:50)

Well, Jack managed to not do one thing he should have done when he did his legal research. That was to understand that all contracts at the University of Minnesota have to be approved by the Board of Regents, and the regents had not formally approved my contract to be hired, although that was usually just routine and done automatically. Once a department head, like the Library Director, approves a position, you are for all practical purposes hired once you have received the letter of, “will you start work on, etc.” **But the law says that the regents have final power to approve all contracts. Well, They chose to withdraw my contract. So immediately I was out of work and that launched us on a big fight.**

(7:45) Not only were we now in the fight for the right to marry, but now job discrimination became a big deal for my position at the university.

That's where we came into play with the library and ALA and the Roundtable. 1970 was the year that the gay task force was conceived and founded in Detroit. I had lived in Detroit in the mid-60s and still had friends there. Although I was at that convention briefly, I had only a very slight introduction and interaction with Israel Fishman, who was one of the original founders of the group, and a couple of other people. I didn't really interact much with them because I was really with my friends, talking about other issues, and what Jack and I were up to in Minneapolis.

So, my real formal interaction with both ALA about my job, and with the roundtable came the next year when ALA was in Dallas. By that time Jack and I had become Minnesota gay activists, and full fledged national, high profile public figures in the fight for gay rights and on the issue of employment for people who worked in libraries, library employees. That seemed like a perfect matchup for the task force. Jack and I decided to go to Dallas for ALA's annual convention. The group had been formed in Detroit. [Everyone was in Dallas](#), Barbara Gittings and Kay Tobin Lahusen were there, as well as friends that we had come to know, through our national activism. We were there working on a resolution to be introduced to have ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee [Intellectual Freedom Round Table] support my fight with the University of Minnesota for approval of my contract, to be reinstated in my contract.

So there were a whole lot of things besides getting support for my fight with the University of Minnesota going on at that time. And interestingly enough for the group, **this actually turned out to be the first professional organization [ALA] in the country [actually the world] that had its own gay caucus.** It soon become gay, lesbian, and then bisexual and then ultimately transgender caucus over the next several years. And then of course, it has evolved over the years to its current name of Rainbow. But those years were critical and very important to the formation and launch of the group. Barbara Giddings became very involved, Kay Tobin Lahusen was documenting through photographs and other kinds of things, the activities of the group and the actions of the group. And we were working with the formal organization ALA and its committees on various issues.

Dallas was a place that really was important to the task force, the Gay Task Force, soon to be Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Jack and I had already had quite a bit of experience as activists in Minnesota. And we had also begun to interact with people in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, and Kansas City on gay rights issues. We had gotten things moving on a pretty large scale. We knew how to work with the press. So we knew how to do press releases and all kinds of media interactions. In Dallas, we were working with Barbara and Israel and the rest of the group to convince them that we needed to put out press releases. We needed to get the press focused on what we are doing at ALA, because we had set up a kissing booth, which was also a [Hug-A-Homosexual](#) booth and all of that. It raised the profile of our

actions before the major committees in ALA and what we were trying to do within the profession to a level that really got people talking. So I think we had a big impact that year.

(12:48) The next year ALA was in Chicago. Jack and I went down for that convention, from Minneapolis to Chicago. That was the year that we did several other unique things. Jack met with the people at the local Chicago gay rights group, which was in those days not necessarily called gay rights groups. The Mattachine Society was the main group at that time. But there were younger gay activists also forming groups as well. During those early years, there were Gay and Lesbian groups all around the country starting to form so fast it was unbelievable. Literally, each week there would be 40 new groups that popped up after 1970. After the Stonewall riots, still more groups started to form. Then we started to see parades. The early demonstrations in New York were originally called Christopher Street Liberation Day parades. That nomenclature moved to the west coast and became Christopher Street Liberation Day West. A few others around the country also were sort of picking that up. Today, it has mostly become known as PRIDE in most cities.

But here in Minneapolis, we did not pick that Christopher Street Liberation lingo up. We had what we called a Gay Pride Picnic, for the first year -- 1971. That was just after Gay House was formed here. People from Gay House [the gay and lesbian community center formed to serve Minneapolis-St Paul people who were not necessarily students] and members of FREE, the U of MN gay student group at the time, worked together to put on the first Gay Pride Picnic. So anyway, here we called it Gay Pride. That term was invented by Tom Higgins, who was a member of the local campus group. Jack took that term to Chicago when we went down for ALA, and he worked with the group, the local group in Chicago. (15:12) He told them that we were having a Gay Pride Picnic here not Christopher Street Liberation Day. Ultimately, the Gay Pride Picnic would become marches and parades here, which we would call Gay Pride. The next year it would be called Gay and Lesbian Pride, because the women here were standing up, and demanding equal representation. That was extremely important. (15:30)

But once that terminology, Gay Pride and ultimately Gay and Lesbian Pride, hit Chicago, it was like a wildfire. It spread across the country. People dropped Christopher Street Liberation Day and picked up Gay Pride and then Gay and Lesbian Pride, and then it evolved over the years from there. So that was one of those first things. It was like ALA had the first professional gay caucus for a national professional organization. Gay Pride began here in Minnesota, and then spread across the country. Gay marriage began here in Minnesota, and spread across the country and ultimately across the world. **I said to Jack, as we began to talk about what it is we were doing and what the impact was going to be, I, at that point, said to him, "you know, we have jerked people 45 years into the future. And it's gonna take them a while to catch up." And the reality of that proved to be true.** That's about how long it took for the U.S. Supreme Court to rule for marriage equality. (16:42)

Our application for a marriage license took 44 years before it became the huge national issue that it became, and got those arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court. The decision from the

U.S. Supreme Court took almost exactly 44 years from the day we first applied for a marriage license in 1970. We found that quite interesting.

ALA continued, with the Task Force increasingly having an impact. There were more and more programs and other library issues associated with the group. That was very important. And by the next year, by 1972, or it might have been '73, I'm not sure which ALA's annual was in New York. I was asked to give a presentation about the use of the term "homosexual" as a subject heading. Because we were now demanding that the Library of Congress stop using all of these horrible terms to describe our community. We understood that "homosexual" had a particular meaning for certain kinds of things, but it did not apply to us as human beings. We felt that the term gay, lesbian, or other terminology that people who identified themselves as, should choose the terminology that best describes who they are.

We began by saying the terms that should be used are "gay" and "lesbian". We were pressing the Library of Congress to adopt this terminology into their subject headings. So my talk at ALA in New York was about how to change the terminology from "homosexual" and "deviant" and "sexual perverts", and all of the other negative terminology that was being used, to the terminology people actually used to describe themselves, that is, to what we felt was a fair description of the community of gay, lesbian, and ultimately bisexual and transgender.

Those were very important things for us. The movement had actually become a very large educational program in addition to the push for rights. Unbiased terminology was important to how we would be perceived by others. That was another thing that I was working on with members of the Task Force on my own. After I was hired in 1973 at Hennepin County Library, where Sanford Berman, who was chair of the Social Responsibilities Round Table [SRRT] of which the [Gay] Task Force was one of the subgroups. Sandy was one of these people who had profound influence on subject headings and its relevance to various communities: the African American community, gay and lesbian community, Native Americans, women, and many others. We all wanted to see the terminology changed to make it less "phobic," I guess, less inaccurate, and more how the terminology that individuals or groups use to define themselves.

(20:24) So after New York, Jack and I began to focus on the exploding gay rights push in the country. We had by that time become national, even international personalities. We were traveling all around this country, interacting with gay activists throughout the country, giving speeches sometimes for groups as small as 14, sometimes groups as large as 3,000-3,500. We were appearing on national talk shows that had audiences of 20 million. We were going to major cities all around the country and to Canada.

We spoke in Canada several times, and many of our Canadian friends said that we were the inspiration for their push in Canada for marriage equality and for rights in Canada. Our correspondence and work with them was very important. We were also getting a lot of feedback from people in Europe, especially the Dutch, the French, the British, and Norwegians and the

Danes, and some Germans. We were also hearing a great deal from India. And we were hearing some, interestingly enough, from the Chinese, not much, but some. And then we were hearing lots from Latin America -- South America, and Central America and Mexico. So we were getting lots of requests. And we were trying to respond to that. Plus, we were still doing public speaking a lot. And, and I was working not only in the library, but I was working with Gay House, which was one of the first gay community centers in this country.

We were working with people out of Los Angeles on a similar kind of community center that was being established there. That was 1971. These were the first two community centers focused on meeting the needs of community people. This was a place where people could go for good information or could just go to hang out, have a speaker's bureau, or talk with people or whatever. So that was very important. **And we were connecting with libraries as a part of this to make sure that libraries were including in their collections, more material that portrayed gays in positive lights, as opposed to the negative, "you're sick," or "you're a law enforcement problem" or all of those kinds of things.** (23:13)

We were beginning to encourage publishers to publish gay authors. That was very important work of the group. Barbara, and other members of the Task Force, by this time, were really carrying the bulk of that work load. Jack and I were backing out of the work from ALA, we had done what we felt we could do in ALA at that point. And I was focusing really on working, through my job in Hennepin and working through the State Library organization, and with my friends who were still in ALA. I was not attending ALA annual or mid-winter meetings much, at that point in time. The demands on our time were just so great, both here and in Canada, that we just couldn't do that Task Force work any more. Also, Jack had just finished law school. I was trying to get my profession back in line, after having it completely destroyed, and not sure whether I'd ever be able to work as a librarian again. But, as Jack told me, "Well, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. You lost your job at the university. But you got a job at Hennepin County and you got to do exactly what you were really great at." You know, Hennepin was just beginning to incorporate technology into its whole library system. And I got in on the building of an entirely new library system, that is now 41 branches. It was a high tech beacon for many, many years while I was in that system, and we traveled a lot around the country, sharing our ideas with other major library systems like King County, which was also 41 libraries, and Charlotte Mecklenburg County Library, and many others around the DC area and in Columbus, Ohio. We traveled to many places around the country and shared information and worked with colleagues.

So my involvement with the Task Force during that time was minimal. I still was in contact with Barbara, regularly, and provided feedback, but I was working more with individuals, some of whom were members of the group, and some of whom were just in ALA and working in their own professional world. Most of those later years was the way I functioned with the Task Force, during those years. (25:56)

In more recent years, as more and more began to be published about Jack and me, not only a lot of articles, but a lot of books were coming out about us, or that included major sections about us and the history of those times, I began to get requests from chairs of the Task Force. As I indicated, they decided that they would like for Jack and me to come to ALA's annual meeting. They wanted to establish an annual award and they wanted us to be the first recipients of this award for gay activism as professional librarians, and the impact that we had had on that. So we were invited to come to the [2016] annual conference in Orlando, where we received that award. That was quite an eye opener for me. The reason it was an eye opener for me was that the current group is not even remotely close to the original Task Force that we had helped to found in 1971 and had worked with for a few of those beginning years. I mean, it has gotten bigger, more expansive and influential during those years. It has had an enormous impact. I did attend a couple of their meetings in more recent times. I recall I was in San Francisco [in 2001] and went to one of their meetings, just to check in and see what was up with the group. I happened to be at ALA annual for other purposes for Hennepin County Library System. I had stopped in, and saw it was a fairly sizable group, you know, several hundred people at the meeting. That was certainly quite different from those early meetings in the 70s. (27:54)

But when I got to Orlando, I was freaked. Not only did they have this amazing array of programs, but they had a special social reception where people came together and just met in this cocktail lounge and bar which they took over and provided a buffet and free drinks. You could come and meet people and talk to people who were there. And they had all kinds of other activities that you could be involved in. It was amazing. And then, most importantly, they had their awards ceremonies, which were amazing. The numbers of books for children, young adults, fiction, nonfiction, etc, that they were giving awards on were just breathtaking. I think at that one meeting, there must have been maybe 2,000 people. The room was just packed. It was so great to see all these awards being presented. **I was sitting there and the tears were just dripping from my eyes. I couldn't believe how wonderful it was to see my professional colleagues grow to this kind of influence and impact in the profession.** (29:15)

When I first started college, I began my professional studies in pharmacy. I studied pharmacy for four of the five years required for a degree before I decided, "Eh, I am not doing this. This is not for me," so I didn't ever finish that fifth year. During my first years of pharmacy studies, I met a man and lived with him for four years. I met him when I was 19, a sophomore in college. Bob and I were together for four years and then we mutually decided, this is not going to work. That was very difficult for me. But Bob was a librarian, and after I decided pharmacy was not for me, libraries was the place that I began to work. Then I thought, "Oh, this is where I belong." So that's how I wound up in library school. And Bob, now I've known Bob for, what? 59 years, and he's still a great friend. He's still alive and he was a great influence for getting me into libraries.

But when I saw this amazing programming of the task force, in Orlando, I was blown away. And then I found out that the task force had a special endowment, this allowed them to do their programming and other work and not have to depend on others. I thought, I don't have to worry

about my professional friends or the impact that libraries are going to have in making sure that libraries meet the needs of our broad and diverse community. (31:10)

Not only will they influence publishing, but they will influence people who work in libraries and have a profound positive impact. That was just wonderful. That was absolutely wonderful. Some time after that, the committee celebrated its 50th anniversary, and I had a call from the chair. She said they wanted to, as a part of the celebration, to send us t-shirts that they had put together that highlighted the original founders of the group. We got those, and that was really very cool too.

So, that's kind of my long winded history of our involvement. **At this point, my involvement, talking with you is, I think, important, because what I see is the profession is documenting its history, which I believe is extremely important because I believe our country is in perilous times. And any country that is going to be a democracy is going to depend on access, free, unrestricted access to information, because information is power, on a personal level, and on a greater national or even global level.** If people have access to truthful information, they can transform their own lives. **And that's the reason the profession is so important and why the impact that we have in our communities is so important. And why, for us, as gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, and others in our community should be supportive of libraries. This is a place where our stories can be preserved and told, and others can access that truth.** (33:22)

SB: I agree.

MM: I'm really hopeful. I see the younger generation is coming to understand the power of information. They access information differently. That's the reason during my last years working for Hennepin County, a huge part of my job was devoted to the development of digital resources and services. So not only do we have traditional services, plus all of the learning activities that we provide for our communities, but providing digital information access for people wherever you are on the planet, or whatever time of day it is on the planet, is extremely important. I see young people accessing information differently than people from my generation did. What I want to see is for new generations to understand how to translate that digital world into the same powerful information resource that the traditional world has provided in the past for our democracy, and for people's individual and personal needs. This is critically important.

As you can see, as my staff used to say, in Hennepin County: "Don't get him started!" So, if you have questions for me that you would like to ask, please ask those and let me answer questions for you. (35:04)

Sarah: I would love to get you started. Will you talk a little bit more in depth about the [1971] Dallas convention and sort of what the aims were for that, and how that went, how the experience was?

MM: Yes, I think that there was kind of a two fold strategy or plan for Dallas. One was, raise the profile of the group. And two, press the issue of my job case. Because as more librarians and library workers come out, the fight on job discrimination in the profession is going to be important. The reason that the work of the task force was important to push, to raise that profile, was that the issues we would have to fight for as professionals would include how we're depicted in subject headings. Whether or not the collection is reflective of the community and truthful and balanced. Not that we don't want to hear what the crazy nutcases are saying about us. It's okay that they're there. But we want our viewpoint there too. So we knew these issues were going to be coming, and we wanted the task force to have an impact. **And we wanted people who were still very severely closeted during those years, and fearful, to know that when they came to ALA, there was a place they could go to talk to people. And that would be a safe place. And if they wanted to come out and do work in the open, there were people there who would support that and work to help them.** That was very important. (36:57)

But for us, when we got there, I would say the initial formation of the group was, you know, an initial formation of a group. People got together and said, I think we should do this. And I think that these are some of the things we should be focusing on. And then everybody went off to do their thing. The next year, it was more of, okay, we have some more people who are interested. And Barbara and Kay were both kind of outside the profession, they were not librarians, but they were activists and had been around in the early homophile movement. They had picketed the White House in the 50s. They were people who had some experience, and knew some things that we can all learn from. So having them come and be interested was really important. And I think that gave us a perspective. Jack was also not a librarian. He was an attorney and a licensed engineer. We were older than many of the younger activists that we were interacting with. We've been around the block a few times. And we've done some things as activists. So we knew that when we got to Dallas, part of this was going to be figuring out some direction for the committee or the Task Force, making connections with people, and not only raising the profile in ALA by attending committee meetings, and putting in resolutions and trying to get votes and just talking with people and then having the kissing, Hug-A-Homosexual booth, with all the exhibits so that when people came through, they could see and they could stop and talk if they wanted. This was a way of just letting people know this is an issue we're going to be talking about in the profession. And then making sure that that continued in the next annual meetings. (39:04)

I think making those personal connections, when we're all scattered all around the country was really important. These were people who were willing to be out and be upfront, which means they were strong people. Mostly, as is often the case, and I'll say this on tape. It's the women who are willing to stand up and who are willing to do the work. I always found that the guys like to talk a lot. And yes, some would come out and, and do things, but when it got down to doing the work and moving stuff forward, it was the women who did it. And I thought it was really important to recognize that. I wanted to make those connections to make sure that my library colleagues who were women understood there are men who respect your brilliance and your courage. We are supportive and are willing to be followers as well as leaders.

And, you know, librarianship is, I still believe a female dominated profession. One of the things that I found working in the profession is that women go about doing work in a different way than men. Men are highly competitive, and it's, "I win, you lose." Now, this is a broad brush. I don't think that's a winning strategy, quite frankly. So I learned from women who are managers that you work together, you cooperate. That's a management style that gets results. You sometimes are a leader and sometimes you were a follower. Sometimes you contribute to the interactions or the work. Other times you are silent because you don't have something positive to add. I learned over the course of my career, that that is what works. I think that's part of the reason our country's a mess. Women have not had the strong voice they need to have about how we work together to accomplish positive goals for everyone. Not just so you can be the king of the hill.

Sarah: Will you talk a little bit about the friendships you made through the roundtable or maintained through the roundtable, sort of the social side of the organization? (41:48)

MM: I would say probably the strongest of those was Barbara Gittings and Kay Tobin Lahusen, and the reason for that was that we corresponded a lot all those years Barbara was the chair of the group. I didn't really know many of the other members very well. I met them during these early stages, like Israel and Steve Wolfe and a few others, a few of the other women, but they were from Halifax, Nova Scotia, or they were from New York, or they were from, you know, some other place that was quite distant, so I couldn't really interact much very easily. During those early years, it was letters or phone calls. There was no email, frankly. You know, it wasn't easy. However, all those letters and correspondence and happy s and "oh that was great job on that project", kind of stuff got us there. **All those records are now in [our archives](#), at the University of Minnesota Libraries in the [Tretter Collection](#), but for many of those, the interactions were less personal, and more on the professional level.** (43:06)

Although for some of these folks, for example, Steve Wolfe, who was from Boston, he had his deal about subject headings, and he and Sandy Berman, who happened to be our head of cataloging here at Hennepin County Library, were good friends. And so that was a kind of triad that I often interacted with. But for most of us, unless we happen to travel to that area, unless Jack and I were going and interacting on an activist level, we didn't really get a chance to interact with them, except at ALA annual. That was mostly during those first three years. But Barbara and Kay were kind the exception since we were all national gay rights activists and fought for our rights in many venues across the country. We remained lifelong friends.

And frankly, many of my male friends from those years either passed away, or some died of AIDS. So many of the people that we knew during those activist years, the AIDS epidemic took. So much of the leadership that we interacted with during that time was simply gone overnight. And many of the women during this period of time, and it was certainly true here in Minneapolis, were saying to men, you know, we're going to go and form our own organizations. You guys deal with your stuff we got shit to deal with, and we don't need you to help us. Women were getting their act together. This was a time of activist feminism in our country and locally too and that was true of many in the profession. So I respected that and when asked I was happy to

participate, when not asked to participate that was fine. You do your thing. In my profession, I just worked with my colleagues, and I never encountered negative kinds of interactions. I think what they found was that I was a respectful colleague, and I offered to be a follower when I needed to be. I advanced in the system because this is what I believed. I always worked with, I'd like to think, some of the brightest and best. And you know if you're really bright, you get the credit for your work. I'm not stealing your credit. That's basically how I felt. Did I kind of hit that?

Sarah B: Yeah! (45:58)

MM: Okay.

SB: Yeah, I'm just thinking about which direction to go next. Do you want to talk about your job at Hennepin County? When you first started there? Obviously you were quite publicly out. Did you ever have trouble with that, in that position?

[47:40] MM: Oh, this was, as Jack said, "this was a blessing in disguise." I was trained as an academic librarian. Because I had studied pharmacy I believed, when I was in library school that ultimately what I would do is, I would wind up in a medical library, so I'd be a medical librarian. That's what I thought I would wind up as. When I came here, I took the job as head of cataloging on the St. Paul campus because that was focused on the Agricultural Sciences, plus other sciences that I had experience with, and part of my studies in my master's degree was history of science and history of medicine. So I had quite a bit of background that matched up with what was happening on that campus. So I was ready for that.

When the job was taken from me, it was devastating. I mean, I had worked in Kansas City for two years and acquired all these skills. And while I was in library school, I was working at University of Oklahoma, while I was taking my library school classes, in their technical services area, and they were just beginning to automate. Most of the automation during those years started with cataloging and acquisitions. That's the area where I was working. I was head of acquisitions, cataloging and periodicals in the college library where I worked after graduating from Library School. I picked up a lot of my technology experience there. In Kansas City, I was working in a consortium of libraries: public libraries, community and technical schools, universities, private colleges, and special libraries, and I was coordinating Interlibrary Loan activities for the college library where I worked. Some of that work was being automated. Periodicals in these institutions were being entered into databases that were being developed so that members could access all these periodicals without having to buy them for your library. This was true especially for expensive specialized periodicals. Instead of six libraries buying this very expensive periodical only one would buy that for their collections. This plan and cooperative agreement would allow us to provide access and delivery service for copies of articles from these collections throughout this consortium in the Kansas City Metroplex area. And that included libraries in both Kansas and Missouri.

That was the experience I brought here to Minnesota. When I lost that job, it was devastating. For two years, I thought I'm done, I'll have no professional career. I dropped out of pharmacy because I thought this is not for me. I got into libraries and I learned skills that most people in the profession had not yet learned. I was part of a smaller group of people in the country, who probably had these kinds of experiences. So I kept applying for jobs, and I was not getting picked up, and it happened to be a bad time in the library job market anyway. I was here in this area, in the Twin Cities area, where there were limited possibilities for jobs, especially for someone with my kind of background. What I finally did was start over at the bottom. Hennepin County Library advertised a job for an "intermittent intermediate clerk". So I applied for this job which was in technical services. It was basically an entry level clerical job. But my job would be working in technical services with data entry, and other kinds of things along the line of work that I had been trained to do before I graduated from library school. So I figured, if I can just get to work at the library and they find that I'm okay, I'm not scary, then perhaps I'll have a chance to get back into a professional librarian position. (50:37)

As it turns out, I didn't know it at the time, but one of the county commissioners for Hennepin County was a gay man and he knew about us. I was pretty naive. I didn't know . We certainly were learning the politics, but I didn't know that, and basically, he said, to the library director, "I think it'd be okay if you hired him." I think that was the "OK" for Bob Rohlf, who was the library director and who was beginning to build this Hennepin County Library System, to hire me at a time when they were doing their whole technology groundwork. The library system was just being created. The county was taking over the various city libraries in the suburban cities and making them into a single system. Minneapolis remained separate at that point. So there were 14 libraries in Minneapolis and ultimately 26 libraries in suburban Hennepin County. And the system was building buildings in many of these suburban communities. At the same time, we were building this all new online system. So I went to work in that system. (52:14)

And it turns out that there was a person in that system, who was a fairly high level manager. She was in charge of several of the community libraries and in the system, Gretchen Wanderlick. She is the one who calmed all of the fears that any of the highest level managers, the Director, Deputy Director, or division managers might have. She was a division manager, or what would have been called a division manager today, in charge of public service. And so, I went to work for Sandy Berman as an intermittent intermediate clerk. After some time in that position, I applied for a job, to be in charge of HCL's federal depository collection. That was because the person who was heading up that collection had had a family crisis. She had to quit her job and move back to Iowa to take care of her parents who were critically ill. She was going to have to be there for some time and was not going to return. It turned out that in library school, federal government publications was one of my major studies. So I was a good match for that vacancy. So I finally had the opportunity to join the system as a librarian. At that point, Gretchen basically had told them, "I think this is okay." And I'm sure that Bob Rohlf, the Director, had a conversation with the commissioner, who said, "I think it's okay for you to hire him." So I was hired into the system. That was February 1973. I went from intermittent intermediate clerk, to full time librarian.

They were just opening the Southdale Library, which was a, quote, library of the future. This library had all of the new technologies. It had a media lab. And it was completely different from anything else. It turned out to be a library of the future in many ways because people came for many years from all around the planet to take a look. I remember people from Japan, Spain, the UK, Germany and Sweden and other places came to see this library. It was a big deal. That's how I was hired into the library system. From there, I took on increasing responsibilities in my career.

I retained control of responsibility for the federal depository. I then took over another system wide duty, that was focused on pamphlet files, those were days when ephemeral kinds of information were kept in pamphlet files, under subject headings, and people could come and get that information in addition to books and other materials. Of course, all that kind of ephemeral information is available online now. During those years, that was something that was an important information resource in the system. There were other responsibilities that I took on during that time as well. I was asked to develop a staff training and development program. I did this with some of my other colleagues in the system. Staff training and development was a major program for the library system. All people who came into the system as new employees had to go through this training regimen before they could be put on public service desks. And technical people also had to have training. We worked as a group to put that training system together. I was in charge of that for almost 20 years actually. So the staff development and training program that we had for Hennepin County was my baby for a number of years.

And then, as we began to do more building in the system, I began to interact on many of those kinds of issues. I began to talk about design for Information Service environments, and for new library buildings with Bob Rohlf, that was his real focus for many years. He built a lot of buildings and then after those buildings were up, after we'd been in business for a number of years, we had to redesign buildings to meet the new needs of the future and to incorporate new technologies, as they came online. We also had to adapt for different services, as communities changed and evolved. So I began to work in that area as well. And I became kind of, I was promoted at that point, to, I'd been working in public service, I worked on public service desk giving direct service to the public, and then I was in charge of services and in charge of departments, and then ultimately, I was promoted to be in charge of several libraries in the north part of the county. That's when I went to Rockford Road Library. That would have been about 1980 or thereabouts. And so my responsibility became, as a principal librarian, I moved from an entry level librarian to senior librarian where I was in charge of several services and staff, to principal librarian where I was in charge of several buildings, plus system services. And then after that, I became much more involved in renovation and building of new buildings and working with architects and others. (58:24)

When the Director, Bob Rohlf, retired I began to move to a higher level. I was asked to take a coordinating librarian position which would be a kind of the executive committee level, for the system. I then was responsible for building what were called 21st century libraries. That

included Brookdale Library, which was one of the new area libraries that was being built. (59:00) That was a transformative library environment for the system. It included all kinds of new approaches to library service both digitally and in person. And in traditional collections, as well as in learning. We provided a lot of classes and taught a lot of special skills to people: how to do job resumes, how to apply for jobs, how to use Microsoft online office products, and a whole host of other things that were valuable to people -- language learning labs, and all kinds of things for kids and teens. So that was huge. That was, that was a big part of my job. By that time, I was traveling around the country, sharing ideas with other large systems, looking at their technology and stealing some of their ideas, and they came and looked at our technology and stole some of our ideas. We were really into raising the standards and quality of library service, not only in our own communities, but nationally. (1:00:11)

It was shortly after that, that people at my level moved out of direct contact with the public for delivering service. Because I was, at that point, managing people, budgets, services and design, strategic directions and other kinds of things for the system with my colleagues at the same level. By that time, I no longer had "a job", I don't believe. That was my last three years in the system. I believed I was managing projects. By that time the county system had taken over the libraries in Minneapolis. So now we went from 26 libraries to 41 libraries. Soon after that merger of the system, we had to begin integration of two cultures that were very different. They were similar in many ways, but very different in other ways. (1:01:16)

The city system, which had been through a very tough period of time. And its community libraries were in pretty poor shape. They had a new Central Library, which was very demanding of resources and where a lot of the money was going. But the city's community libraries were suffering, I felt. At that point, with a second colleague that I had worked with for many, many years, Ardis Wiley, we were given responsibility for the 41 libraries basically. Central Library, all the libraries in the south part of Minneapolis and the south and southwest of the county became my responsibility. So I was essentially responsible for 21 libraries. And Ardis was responsible for the other 20 libraries. So we were the ones that were dealing with the staffing, budget issues, services, and other kinds of things. And then we had to split up other responsibilities. I was responsible for outreach services, youth services, service to people who were incarcerated, and a whole host of other things. I was also responsible for working with the library foundation. And I did a lot of work with the commissioners and the county administrator and department heads in the county for issues that affected the library. So that's where I wound up in the last three years. My job was pretty much, six days a week, 10 hours a day. So by the time I hit that last year and told them it was time for me to retire, I was ready. (1:03:05)

SB: Yeah, I bet. So it sounds like it worked out okay for you, despite the detour?

MM: You know, Jack was exactly right. It was a blessing in disguise. If I had gotten into academic libraries, I don't think I would have had nearly, anywhere near the career I had. Public Libraries are kind of an open box with endless open doors that you can go through. You serve people who are still in Mother's womb, and people who can't, because of their condition as older

adults, can't get out of their home. And people who come into the library with every need you can possibly imagine, and are shocked that you've 'saved their life'. (1:03:58) **I can't tell you how many people came to a public service desk and said: "I'm so glad I came here, you saved my life." That's the joy of public libraries.**

You learn something every day. You know a little bit about almost everything. You know a lot about some things. And it's not just the library service, but it's all of this other stuff. You learn about managing people and doing that well, helping people develop their careers, and watching with joy as they become just amazing people in their own right. Building buildings, working with technology, providing environments, working with people in the community who love their libraries. I mean, all those things. Just amazing.

Jack was right. It was a blessing in disguise. I had the most fabulous career with the most fabulous, brilliant people. I'm so proud of the work that I was able to do, and helping to create one of the premier library systems in this country with amazing people. And I had some really great male friends, but I'm telling you, my female friends and colleagues in this system were the brains that built the system. Bob Rohlf said that to us at one point. He said, "You know, I built the buildings, but you people built this system." And he was looking at us, all, my colleagues, my female colleagues, because he knew that his deputy director Laura was the real powerhouse behind what this system became for those early years, and that we were the ones that worked together under her guidance to put this all together. We built this system. So it was great. I feel very, very proud of that work. Very happy about that. (1:06:06)

SB: Okay, we're coming up on an hour. So we might want to wrap up. But do you want to talk about some of the pamphlets that you pulled out?

MM: Well, all I wanted to do, is I wanted to talk about this, this brochure that was published in 1990 by Barbara Gittings, it's thirteen years of the history of the Rainbow group. And I think the reason...

SB: It's called *Gays in Library Land*?

MM: It's called *Gays in Library Land: the Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the American Library Association, the first sixteen years*, I said thirteen, sixteen years by Barbara Gittings. The thing that's wonderful about this is that it does talk about the personal level and the people who were involved, and the things that people did. These things that when you read about here, you might think, "Well, yeah," but at that time, you know, putting out a bibliography of positive works that could go out to libraries everywhere in the country so they could buy these materials and get them into their collections was a big deal.

Or materials that that people didn't talk about, because it was hush hush and we had to keep these behind lock and key, or in a dark room, and you had to know they were there, and ask for them to get to see them. (1:07:31)

All these things people just wouldn't believe, they wouldn't believe that this happened during those times, especially in our profession. This was a way of freeing up that thinking, because if you are a librarian, you know about intellectual freedom, and how you have to represent all viewpoints. So that was really important, and I think this is-- if people have a chance to do the research and look, this is one of the things that I think is very important for us to know about. (1:08:02)

SB: Thank you!

MM: The other thing that I wanted to mention was that *Look* magazine article about Jack and me that was in the January 26th, 1971 *Look* magazine, on the American family. This was a special issue, when the question of marriage and families was being discussed a lot in this country, because there were communes and there were, you know, there's talk about all kinds of marriages and what was valid and what was not valid and that kind of thing.

And because we were featured as an example of a couple that was outside this mainstream, I think that this was very important. I don't think that most people understand, in this country, the impact of Minneapolis and the Twin Cities, not to discount other parts of the state. Because Mankato and Duluth and other places in this state like Rochester had activists, GLBT activists who had very important contributions and had big impacts. You see that when you go to the other parts of the state. **But I think what people don't understand is that this was a place of activism that had profound impact. It wasn't just New York and San Francisco and Los Angeles.** (1:09:34) These places, of course, had a huge impact because they were in huge, important population centers. But the ideas that came from here, went back to those coasts and other places in this country, and informed people to think in ways they have never thought before. Marriage Equality was something that was talked about first in 1953 in *ONE* magazine, but it was looked at in a way that was, "we wouldn't want to do this because that would just trap us. We'd just be, you know, it would make us trapped like straight people are, we couldn't do all the things that we would want as gay men." That was a time when gay men were focused largely on their sexuality, not their wholeness as a person. (1:10:32)

I think that we brought transformative thinking about that to many gay men. And certainly lesbians saw that very quickly, after we brought this up as an issue. They began to see this. So I think this was transformative for the community. It took a long time for the community to digest that and incorporate that into their thinking. But it did come.

And what I saw is that what happened here, went out to the to the rest of the country and then lay dormant for a while, because those who talked about sexual orientation and homosexuality, really, were talking about a part of us, not all of us. And it took a long time for that language of love, commitment, involvement, to reach that core of thinking with people. When that happened, when it really began to happen, was when, all of a sudden, people began to understand that language. (1:11:52)

We talked about that for 10 years, and then we decided it was time for us to get off the public stage. So we refused after 1980 to talk to the press, we would not talk to anybody. We absolutely refused people. They kept coming to us, they wanted us to talk, but we decided it was such a negative environment for positive discussion if we were going to be the lightning rod for those who defined us as “sexual creatures,” that we decided not to participate., This was because those who believed that we were primarily sexual beings were the ones that were doing the talking. We said, fine. If you believe that, and you believe you can get past being defined that way in a sex negative culture, go ahead.

It didn't work for them in the long run. It took a long, very hard struggle. And then AIDS came and took a huge toll on top of that, and killed many of the people that we had taught about this. So that voice was quiet. What I see now is that that voice has re-emerged. A few years ago, when we began to talk about that [love, commitment, relationships] in this country, marriage equality quickly became the law of the land. It became the law of the land first in other countries, but those words first went out from here.

In the early 70s, the Dutch were among the first. There was a man who was teaching down in one of the colleges in Northfield, who came and heard that message from us and took it back to Europe. And I saw that. You look at the letters in the Tretter Collection from people during those times. They took that message back to their countries and that message began to become a reality in those places. (1:13:31)

So now what you see is that it's exploded across the country, we're starting to see a sweep now around the entire planet. Those words that I said to Jack, “we've jerked them forty-five years into the future and it's going to take them a while to catch up,” were true. It took them forty-four years to understand that, and now that reality has been able to transform everywhere. Now Korea, Japan, China, India, Vietnam to a certain degree, Thailand, is talking about that. All kinds of countries in South America and Central America already have either made marriage equality the law of the land or are moving in that direction. (1:14:23)

So that came from Minnesota. It wasn't from that one article where they talked about “we wouldn't want to do this” -- [the 1953 One magazine article]. It was from what we said here. And I think the same thing is true about the transformation of our major information source in this country: libraries. I think that those subject headings and the discussion in the profession, which then went from the library profession to other professions, was transformative. That began with that small group in Detroit and what we took from there to Dallas, where it began to get larger in our conversations with all of our colleagues. I think that was huge.

The term, Gay Pride that went from here to Chicago, then ultimately became Gay and Lesbian Pride, and then, ultimately Pride. That was another thing that was transformative because it talked about something that the religion spoke of as sin, pride and gay were

both sins. Tom took two words that were in the religion, really bad, really naughty, and turned them into a positive thing that originated here. And there are many other things. The first trans protection in this country was on the Minneapolis City Council in 1975. Way before anybody else did it. (1:15:53)

And we also have had many other firsts, this was the place where Honeywell was confronted with changing its policy toward hiring gay people. Jack, when he was student body president [at the University of Minnesota] said, “no more corporations may recruit on this campus, if you have anti-gay policies. You must have open protection against discrimination in your corporations, or you can’t recruit on this campus.” That went from this campus all around the country. I mean, they’re just so many things that started here. The east and west coast did lots of stuff. Very important stuff that has influenced all of our lives. But a lot of those ideas came from here. The first National Gay Conference was held here. It appeared to be chaotic and a big mess. However, ideas from that conference were taken back to the coasts. There also were a lot of people from here who went to other major cities. They also raised those issues. So yeah, that’s it. (1:16:54)

SB: All right. Well, we better wrap up before we go another hour, but thank you so much for talking with me.

MM: I’m thrilled too. Thank you. Thank you for doing this. I think this is extremely important.

SB: Yeah, we’re really glad to have your voice in our collection.

MM: Now tell me, which library are you with?

SB: I’m currently working at Metro State University.

MM: Oh, yes.

SB: And at the Genealogical Society in Mendota Heights.

MM: Oh, yeah, oh great.

SB: Let me read this closer. This has been an interview with Michael McConnell, done as part of the oral history project for the 50th anniversary of the Rainbow Round Table of the American Library Association. This interview took place on March 12, 2020. Michael, thank you so much for having me in your home in Minneapolis. And thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

MM: Glad to and thank you.
(1:17:52)

Further information and archival sources for topics mentioned:

- [American Library Association Archives](#):
 - ALA Archives holds many materials on RRT history, including the 1971 conference photos linked above, and the *Gays in Library Land* pamphlet (which is [soon to be] available digitally). See Record Series 49/35/1 and 49/35/10.
- [The Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies](#) at the University of Minnesota:
 - The Tretter Collection holds LGBTQ+ materials with an international scope, and a focus on the upper midwest and the Twin Cities. Many of the topics Micheal mentions are covered in their collections, including:
 - [Michael McConnell's papers](#), which includes the *LOOK* magazine article
 - [Gay House records](#)
 - [Queer Student Cultural Center \(QSCC\) records](#), the queer student union at the University of Minnesota, which includes material covering Jack Baker's tenure as Student Body President, including Micheal's job discrimination case, their marriage, and the Honeywell recruiting case
 - [Barbara Gittings papers](#)
- Michael's oral history interview with the [Minneapolis Interview Project](#), which focuses on Michael and Jack's marriage case throughout their lives.
- [The Wedding Heard 'Round the World: America's First Gay Marriage](#) by Michael McConnell and Jack Baker as told to Gail Langer Karwoski, University of Minnesota Press 2016, 2020. (Book)