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Interviewer: Sarah Brewer
Interviewee: Robert Ridinger
Transcribed by: Lane Goldszer

Sarah: My name is Sarah Brewer, and I use she/her pronouns. This interview is taking place on October 14th, 2019. I am on the Rainbow Round Table Archive Project Ad-Hoc Committee 2019-2020. My group is working on a project with the Rainbow Round Table (formerly known as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table) of the American Library Association (or the GLBTRT) to help celebrate the Round Table's upcoming 50th anniversary in 2020. That work began in 2017 with a group of Emerging Leaders, who started to gather GLBTRT historical ephemera and created an archive which will be shared through the ALA GLBTRT web page when it is complete. In 2018 and 2019 we are speaking with individuals who've been involved with the GLBTRT, past as well as present, and collecting their stories to create a digital archive of oral histories. We will also establish a toolkit. Can you introduce yourself with your name and pronouns?

Robert: My name is Robert Ridinger, I use the male pronouns. I am a subject librarian here at Northern Illinois University, a position I have held since 1981. When I first came here, I was assigned [break in audio], then over the years the Latino Studies Center, the Women's Studies Center, what was then called Home Economics, back before it morphed into Family, Consumer and Nutrition Studies. **And in the process of that, I inherited the two openly gay faculty on the campus in the Department of Sociology, Dr. James Beaudry and Dr. Joseph Harry. About a year later, Dr. Beaudry was killed in Florida doing a piece of research. I was able to buy LGBT material for the NIU collection from day one, because Dr. Beaudry and Dr. Harry were always asking for things for their courses, which at that time went under the label of deviance. That was how it was listed in the catalog, there was no LGBT anything.** I moved from western Pennsylvania and before I came to NIU I was a Peace Corps librarian in the Kingdom of Lesotho in Southern Africa from the end of 1976 to early 1980. And once I came back to the states, it was interesting to get back into librarianship because I had been gone for three years. Yes, we got the professional periodicals where I was, but I could see the technology was developing toward the Internet. I knew if I didn't get back soon and get back up to date I was going to be unemployable, and I did not want that to happen.

One of the things that has been interesting, over the years at Northern, I have been able to help and foster the growth of LGBT studies as a discipline here. I chose as my tenure project an index to the first 15 years of *The Advocate*, which at that time had no indexing anywhere, not even in the Alternative Press Index. That took about two and a half years, I wound up with a large number of drawers of index cards on my desk and eventually I had to fly a manuscript out to California because *The Advocate* itself was going to do the production in Los Angeles. So I wound up walking into their offices with these two huge plastic bags full of manuscript and discs, as I say in one of the articles I wrote about it I felt like an academic bag lady. **But they did a**

very good job producing the Index to *The Advocate* which has become, I like to think, one of the more solid pieces of the research canon for folks beginning LGBT studies.

My tenure battle was interesting --when I had this as my project I was out to all of my faculty and all the departments. So when I went up for tenure, I had all my department chairs behind me in a solid wall, and there was some interesting discussions along the way, let's put it that way, but I made it through, I was tenured in 1985 and after that I wanted to concentrate on building an archive of the LGBT press here at Northern because in the process of doing the *Index to The Advocate* I had also added here a microfilm copy of *ONE* and I had added reprint copies of *The Ladder* and *The Mattachine Review*, which basically gave us a core of things up to pretty much the beginning of the pandemic. So I was looking around for the newspapers that were never collected by anybody, mainly the local LGBT city newspapers. And so I started working with Joseph Gregg (who used to be a member of the Round Table and died of AIDS) to get a copy of *Gay Life*, which was the major city newspaper in Chicago for a lot of years owned by Chuck Renslow. Gerber/Hart at that time had duplicate copies, so Joseph let me take the duplicate copies, which I then sent to Toronto. Duncan McLaren, someone else who was working with the Round Table owned McLaren Micropublishing, so I got them to him, and we had two sets of them made, one was given to Gerber/Hart, and the other is now here at NIU. As far as I know those are the only microfilm copies of *Gay Life* that exist anywhere. And so I built on that, I went through OCLC and picked out all the records I could find of local gay papers, using Bob Malinowski's international directory, to see which ones had been microfilmed, it was amazing how many of them had been, but you had to dig for the records. The Bell and Howell corporation had done a few of them, as had other commercial houses, so I was still able to buy on microfilm on back sets, I was trying to build time depth to parallel *The Advocate*, because I knew if I got them in paper, within five to ten years, they were going to rot because of the high acid paper that, unfortunately, a lot of them were printed on. Over the years I was able to not only build the collection here but we were able to get a grant to get the San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian collection brought here. **So in early 1993, when the campus commission was set up to look at the status of LGBT people at NIU, and a proposal was made that there should be an augmented academic presence for LGBT people in the Northern Illinois University curriculum, I was able to tell them that there was no major collection of LGBT stuff in paper or microform that we did not already own.** Which pulled the legs out from under people who wanted to say "Oh, we can't do that, it's going to cost too much money." We already had it-- it's called boring from within-- but it worked. I must say not everyone could do that, but I happened to be in a position, I could do it, I had the funds, and I had faculty who were supportive, so I took it and ran with it.

SB: Can you talk a little bit about how you became involved with the Round Table?

RR: That goes back to the days when I was first starting my career at NIU-- in September 1982 I started the index to *The Advocate* project and while I was working on it, I had become aware through literature from ALA and from the Round Table itself of Barbara Gittings and what she was doing, and my first thought was "This is my tenure project, I better contact Barbara Gittings

so she can tell me-- please God-- that nobody else out there is doing this." I got hold of Barbara and she was very supportive and I kept her up to date with what was going on over the couple of years it took to build the Index. Then she came back and said "You know ALA midsummer conference in 1985 is going to be in Chicago-- we would like you, and Claire Potter (who had chaired the group that created the Lesbian Periodicals Index) to come and be our featured speakers."

I wasn't tenured at the time, and my first thought was "Okay... I can do this," and so I prepared everything and went to Chicago, I figured, "Oh well, nobody I know is going to see anything about this, the ALA is such a vast conference, nobody I know is going to see this." I get to registration and I run into some friends from Texas, and the first words out of their mouths were "Oh, we see you're on a panel," I said "How did you know?" they said "Oh, there are a whole bunch of flyers right over there." **I walked over and there was a flyer that had GAY TASK FORCE, which is what it was at the time, in two inch high letters, and underneath it was the picture I had sent Barbara-- so much for being in the closet professionally, I had just been outed on the national scale, not that I minded but, I couldn't help thinking "Okay." Years later, I told one of my friends this and his reaction was memorable. He said I had "kicked down the closet door and run out skirts a-flyin'."** I quibble with the imagery but in a sense it's there.

I remember Claire and I both went into the ballroom in the Congress Hotel in Chicago and I was thinking "Well, we are at the south end of the bus line-- there might be 40, 50 people," **We had over 200 people show up, so obviously what Claire and I were doing hit a nerve-- a lot of librarians wanted there to be access to the gay and lesbian press, and then there wasn't anything.** Nowadays with online access to virtually everything on the planet if you can pay for it. **I know it seems like an age and more ago, but back in those days there simply wasn't anything and I remember saying to the crowd that "our literature is being destroyed" and that gave the last of my closet door right out the window.** This was before I had had my tenure hearing, and so, it was interesting. The first person who came up to me after that was Joe Gregg from Gerber/Hart, and all he wanted to know was where the hell I had been hiding, he had not heard anything about this project at all. I wasn't deliberately hiding it, I was up to my eyeballs in microfilm and index cards. I didn't have time to worry about that.

[11:51] SB: So did you have any difficult reactions from your coworkers after that?

RR: Well it was interesting. When I came up, my immediate boss, Dr. Joe Parot, had been doing a lot of historical work with the Polish community in Chicago, he eventually had a three volume history of Chicago Polonia so he was very familiar with using primary sources as a historian, so when I explained to him what I was doing with *The Advocate* index he was totally supportive.

This only strange part of it was that over the years my colleagues have sort of looked at me as an expert on everything LGBT no matter if I have ever heard of it or not. I've had some very interesting questions come over the transom in the last 38 years. Sometimes I have to say, I

don't know anything about that but I will try to find out for you. Sometimes it's been a, "that's not quite the way it is, let me give you the missing pieces of the information you have, to make it make sense." It's been interesting, I've never really had any massive opposition or discrimination at this library, mainly because I have been so matter of fact about it. I didn't make a big issue out of it, so my colleagues didn't make an issue out of it.

And at the 1993 presidential commission on the status of LGBT people I mentioned before, I was the library representative, and I wound up being the secretary of that body, and it was that group that spawned all the changes that have happened at NIU since that time, including our LGBT studies certificate program. Which, if I'm not mistaken, we are the only one in Illinois, and possibly the only one in the Midwest, but I would have to look that up. But it was interesting to look at all the other issues that were coming up on campus. The one I can remember most vividly is ROTC, and their discrimination, in terms of how they would not admit openly gay or lesbian people. And if they found you in the military they would boot you out. Now, of course, since "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" has been passed, that's another piece of ancient history I'm delighted to see is ancient history. Let's hope it stays that way.

SB: Can you talk a little bit about how your role with the Round Table has changed or evolved over time?

RR: After I first became linked to it, after that 1985 program, to quote Tennyson, "I am become a name," people knew from me. So after that I was the annual conference program chair back in 1990. That was the year we did Chicago, and then in 1992 we had the program: "Gay Media After Mapplethorpe," I was the program chair that year. I have been on Stonewall three times, and I will probably get back onto it again when I retire and I have more time to read, and I have also been on Over The Rainbow a couple times and I was chair of the elections committee back in 2000. I've worn a lot of different hats over the years. Right now I am just between committees, I came off Stonewall in 2017 and, for the moment, I am just looking around to see what else I can do in the new configuration.

It will be interesting to see what happens in ten years with not so much with change in the Round Table, as the debates over the pronoun wars, because in five to ten or twenty years, if you look back at it, people are going to wonder, what was all the fuss about? And it reminds me of what was going on in the late seventies and early eighties. We were all gay, then suddenly we were gay and lesbian, then you were gay, lesbian and bi, then gay, lesbian, bi and trans and then to quote Doctor Seuss we went "on beyond zebra" and a few more. They are legitimate, it's just a question of what is the language going to morph into in the next ten to twenty years? And how will the indexers go with that?

[16:31]SB: How has your involvement with the Round Table impacted your professional life?

RR: Well, I would say it has been a very significant part of it, one because over the years I have been able to establish, or to help to establish, the collection of record for the Stonewall Book

Award which is in our Special Collections, and I was able to go every year to what used to be the Stonewall Breakfasts before we opened the program up and collect as many of the books as I could and bring them back with the programs and put them in Special Collections so our Special Collections curator only had to buy a few things and not everything. Lynne Thomas, who was the curator here and is down in Urbana now, went back and picked up all the old award winning books and all the honor books, so we have everything. The reason I proposed that is because our curator back in the late nineties was open to developing new ideas and I had all the books that I had accumulated from my first year on Stonewall sitting in my office demanding to be fed. I figured, "No, let's find a home for these," and I realized there was no official collection of record for Stonewall in an academic library, so I said to Glen Gildemeister, "Why don't we do this?" And he said "That's a great idea, let's run with it." And that's how our Gender Studies collection at Northern got born. It's been fun sometimes, with the questions people bring me thinking I am sure to know the answer, as if I know everything about everything LGBT. To quote Sporting Life, "It ain't necessarily so." But you do what you can.

SB: And some of those older Stonewall books are really hard to get hold of now.

RR: That they are! Which is why, in fact, when I saw that Arno Press was reprinting *The Ladder*, and *The Mattachine [Review]*, I grabbed them, because you can get them on microfilm, but microfilm (unless you have a digital scanner to turn it into a PDF and email to people) is a little awkward, but it's still valuable, because there is so much primary stuff that it is never going to be digitized. It would be nice if we did live in the Star Trek universe where everything was that way, but it's not going to happen. Not in my lifetime, not in your lifetime and probably not for several more generations. If then. So it's a question of what's available, and how do we get it to people who need it, because the questions are always going to be coming. **Everyone who comes out professionally continues to do that during their career, mainly because new questions keep coming out. Coming out professionally is not something that happens just once. Of course the first time you get up in front of a room full of people and come out professionally, you have to take a deep breath before you do that. And possibly a slug of gin, but it can be done. It's worth doing.**

SB: Can you talk about what it was like and what it is still like to attend Round Table events in person and virtually?

RR: **Well, one thing I have noticed over the years is, I keep seeing ghosts in the room, so many people I knew are no longer with us. But I love the dynamics of the new generation coming up-- it's not a question of is the Round Table going to survive and flourish, we are.** I can remember, in terms of name changes, when we were the Gay Task Force. Over the years we have morphed into several different things, and no doubt we will in the future, so I was interested to observe the recent debate online over what should we name ourselves. I thought, "Oh my, here we go again, this is what, the third or fourth time we have been through this." So I just sort of sat back and got some popcorn and watched the movie, because I know it's going to change eventually again. The only question is, not, what do we call ourselves, but what do we

do, as professionals for the people who come to us. Whether they are LGBT or not, to educate them about our people, and how they go, and how effective we can be at that.

And of course, one of the more unique things I did get involved with as being in the Chicago area in the library community, was to get involved with the Leather Archives and Museum, and, at that point in time, I wound up on the board of that, and I have been with them for about 18 years. It's another area that, "Oh, you're a librarian, we need help!" I wonder if anybody realizes how frightening those words are to folks who are doing research, but out on the fringes there is always more history to be pulled out of the dust bin, so I am not worried about there being enough research or LGBT subjects for the next generation or thereafter to find.

There is going to be a lot of material, and a lot of questions; questions you and I haven't even thought of yet, and someone will uncover a major lesbian writer who was passed over in the nineteenth century, or the whole body of trans literature will develop and there will be questions coming out of that, it's going to be fascinating to watch and see how much comes up. And we are all going to be stretched. Which is not a bad thing.

SB: This question is related to what you have been talking about, did you realize that as a part of the GLBTRT you were part of history while it was happening?

RR: In a way I did because, when I got up to do that program in 1985, I had a very clear sense I was flying solo. Claire and I had brought two projects to fruition, and the very fact that we had so many people coming to hear us, was making it very clear to me that I was out on the fringes, I was pushing the boundaries. One of the other members of the Round Table, some years later, after I had completed my two more books on LGBT subjects, replied to me when I asked him, "Where is everyone else who is supposed to be working on this?" that, "We are behind you," which, they were telling me, yes you really are as far out in front as you are afraid you are. Which is not a bad thing to be. Somebody has to break trail, and, I think the best phrase I ever heard applied to that is "problems should be solved by those who see them." Because you can never assume that somebody else is going to see that problem and do something about it. If you don't try it, it may never be addressed-- if you do try, and you succeed, people will come and say, "Wow, you did this, you can do x, y, and z, and on beyond zebra." And that's when you start thinking, "Ah, okay, I am going to mentor the younger generation and teach them to carry on with all these projects they see, and I have no time to do because I am up to my eyeballs already." I think that is probably the best way to go at it.

SB: What has membership in the Round Table meant to you?

RR: Professional identification with an international body of my peers. It has allowed me to toss questions out to the Round Table network, sometimes, when I'm absolutely stuck and wondering, I can't find anything on this I've looked anywhere, does anybody out there have any clues on where I can find something on this, and sometimes it has been absolutely invaluable, and I have traded information back and forth as we all do. It has been very effective. It is also a

question of mutual support. Because, I think sometimes folks, when they come out professionally, there's a question of, "If I do this, who will I be as a professional afterward, how am I going to integrate this into my professional life?" That was one of the things that I was kind of faced with when I was asked to write a couple of things for some of the anthologies on LGBT librarianship that have come out, and I think the best way that I can put it is, your coming out starts at your desk, your computer, and how far out you go, whether it's your department, your colleagues, your library, your city, your town, that depends on how far you want to take it and what problems come up that you think you can help with. There's no one recipe that everyone has to follow, like the idea of having the Round Table all agree on anything would be like trying to herd cats. Which is not a bad thing, diversity is something we need. The idea of there being an orthodoxy that we all have to follow except for the fact that we all need to support each other, I don't think that would work, probably stifle creativity.

SB: How have you seen, I don't know if I have already asked this, how have you seen the Round Table evolve, did you talk about that already?

RR: I can speak to it. Back in the days, the Task Force, we had a small group of people who would come to all the meetings, to Midwinter, and Annual, plus all the people who would come at Annual who didn't show up at any other time during the year, and that is still true. For whatever reasons. Either they don't choose to be out, or they have too many other professional commitments but they still want to support the Round Table.

And then after we got out from under SRRT and became an actual Round Table of our own, I remember that was a very good year, once we had done that, I think, the status as a Round Table made it more attractive to people who wanted to affiliate with us in terms of not having a problem with putting that down on their vitae, being a part of an official ALA round table, as opposed to a task force which may not have been more marginal, but it sounds that way, and once we had that in place we simply began to evolve through the alphabet, and I think the best way to describe it is, it provides a forum where people can come and first of all be caught up on what the new writing is, as much as they can, and nobody can read all of it. **I can remember when it was possible to read every book on LGBT subjects that was published every year, because there were so few of them. Then publishers discovered that LGBT people have money, and they will buy books about themselves, and the lid blew off.** Now, it's just not possible, there's just so much being published, which is a good thing. And I'm not even talking about online. So it's nice to have this embarrassment of riches, the only problem is for how you are going to preserve it for the future researchers. But there is quite a lot to do.

SB: Do you think the role of LGBTQ people in the library profession has changed over time?

RR: I think we have claimed a new visibility. Back in the days when the Round Table was the Task Force, we had Barbara Gittings, may she rest in peace, and Barbara was basically flying point for all of the people who were willing to come to the Task Force presentations and there were some folks that came. Not everybody, not everybody is ever going to come. But in terms of

being visible, in the early days when you talked about the Task Force you thought of Barbara, now when she stepped down, which was shortly after 1985, you had people like Roland Hansen, and other folks emerging, stepping up to the point, we had a male and female co-chair model, which worked for a few years and then began to morph into something else, but it was an opportunity for people to step up and take up the burden of the task. I think it was more the case that it was less of Barbara Gittings personal creation, which it was in the beginning, then something that was adopted by the rest of the LGBT librarians as their own. She simply said, I have done my service, I've stood my watch, now the rest of you have to take it from here, and everybody said, yes we will. And yes we did. That's probably the best answer I can give you to that.

SB: After that time how did it continue to change?

RR: I would say the programming has become more diverse, membership has certainly become more diverse. In the beginning we had a, it was a large group that I think mainly we had a preponderance of, I would say maybe a 50/50 split between public and academic librarians. You didn't get that many special librarians coming to us (of course you still don't, the SLA is out there to take care of them). But you did have a question of how many people were going to come and offer different insights, listening to academic and public librarians trade information back and forth with two different constituencies, from how do you cope with questions when someone comes in and says, "I want to do a paper on gay liberation," to hear them say, well our people ask these questions and have the academics say well our people come in with these, sometimes there wasn't too much congruency. But, the healthy dialogue has evolved over the last, heavens, thirty-four years I have been involved in this group I think is probably the best thing coming out of that. Because we have to have that, and especially now when the internet exploded, now we can do it online, like you and I are right now. Back in the old days you had to be face to face with somebody, or you had to be on the phone, or you had to god forbid sit down and write them a letter. Now you can do in a day or two what would have taken weeks before, so I think the Round Table has become a lot more flexible. We have embraced the technology and used it for creating a planetary community which I think is a very good thing. Of course when you get reference questions from over the border, nevermind from the department down the street, it gets a little interesting, but yeah I think we have done well.

SB: Have you made friends and professional connections through the Round Table?

RR: Some, I don't see them as often as I would like, I can think of the librarian at the community center in Montreal, I've linked up with him quite a few times. He comes to ALA frequently. I've had more connections through the Round Table in terms of the visibility I've had with my writing, too many people out there have read too many of my articles, and have a sense that, well we need someone to write on an LGBT subject, let's call Rob. One of the problems I thought was interesting, was that an example being, I write a column called Off the Shelf, for the Round Table, and that got started because I wanted to see what was out there and some aspects of LGBT literature that I never saw articles about. Not so much this is everything that's out there on

this thing, on India, or China, or Japan, but this is what I can find, this is how the books relate to each other, if you want to do collection development on this subject, start with these, feel free to find something else.

Well the problem with that was, the editor at Harrington Park press in New York, heard about the column I had done on literature related to the AIDS quilt. And he said, we have a blog can we repost it? I was just floored because most of the time you do stuff for the Round Table, and it goes up on the website and that's fine we all read it, and maybe we share it out. He actually contacted the board of the Round Table and asked permission to repost some of my columns, right now, that LGBT column on the AIDS quilt has over 3300 hits. It's, my child is out in the world and doing well! But where that led to, was that Harrington Park Press was doing a book on male sex workers. I thought okay, this is a bit of a reach even for me, they said, well we have the editor in Queensland, Australia, and he got ahold of me and said, well, this gentleman in New York said you were a very good writer and we would really like you write something for this book. And my first thought was "Oh Lord, what do I do now," so I decided to do something on male sex workers in literature, I found a whole bunch of interesting stuff, but, the idea of having written a column, that got the attention of somebody in New York, that told somebody in Queensland who got back to me here in northern Illinois, faintly ridiculous is the only way I can describe it, but that's one consequence of having written so much stuff I think. It's fun, I like doing it, I'll probably keep on doing it, even after I retire, which will be in a few years, but you never can tell what doors are going to open. Who is going to read what, and decide hey, we want to talk to him. He can write something for us, can't you? Maybe, maybe not, it depends, but it's fun.

SB: Do you have any favorite memories or moments from the Round Table?

RR: I have three. The first is, what it felt like to get up in that ballroom in 1985, absolutely petrified of coming out professionally, in front of this ballroom of two hundred strangers and taking a deep breath and walking up to that microphone, and just making my presentation.

In 1997 when we had the annual in New Orleans, I was there representing the Leather Archives and Museum. I was on a program with Mr. Carmichael from the University of North Carolina who I think I could describe as the only living male southern belle I've ever met, and he was preceding me in the program, and when James Carmichael got up and made his presentation my first thought was "Oh boy, I have to follow him." But I had a plan. Under my suit coat I was wearing my leather vest with my club pins, and a friend of mine was in the audience, so I came up to the podium after Jim sat down, and thinking I said "Pardon me while I step into my phone booth--Vanna?" -- and my friend came up and I whipped off my suit coat and I'm standing there in my leather vest and I gave the lecture in that, I figured that "I'm representing the Leather Archives, I'm going to look the part." And it was very interesting, I don't think anyone expected me to have a Vanna White in the audience, my friend Lloyd did a good job.

And the other one I remember is back in 2015 when we were in San Francisco, we were there the day the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage. I was on a panel about how to have programming for LGBT people in your library, and I remember after the word came down, I walked out, and the entire city had gone rainbow, the whole city went nuts. That was their Pride Parade, you could not see the pavement on Market Street for people and rainbow banners and flags, it was a moment of history. I never thought I would live long enough to see that, but then I never thought I would live to see the changes that have come at Northern either. I'm just happy I was able to do something to foster them, and to see what was going on. There have been some vivid moments during the past, it's been fun.

SB: Will you talk a little bit about the changes at Northern?

RR: Changes at Northern-- I would say we have now an expanded LGBT studies center, which goes under the heading of Gender Studies. We were able to build on the academic course recommendations of the 1993 commission to create an overview course which I coordinated three times, and after that we diversified into the structure of LGBT studies curriculum we have now for the certificate. Shortly thereafter, the president of the university added sexual orientation to the protected classes of employees. There was no lawsuit involved, I'm not sure about external pressure, he simply went ahead and did it which spared Northern an awful lot of upset that some other schools that I know of have gone through in terms of looking to see what the problem might be for giving their LGBT employees equitable treatment. Northern didn't have to go through that because of what he had done so that made it a lot less stressful on campus. And we have a fair number of out faculty members across the disciplines, so it wasn't the question of, okay, I'm that way, I'm coming to the campus, who do I see in the faculty that mirrors me. We had a fair number of them, and over the years we have kept that number reasonably constant I think. Being close to Chicago is fairly easy I think, people live there and come out here and teach and back up as well but I think it's probably been the evolution of a very diverse community.

[41:15] SB: I think in one of your articles you mentioned being out before there was those protections for faculty, can you talk a little bit about that?

RR: Ah yes, that was when I did the Index to *The Advocate* there were no such protections at Northern. Back in those days you could probably have been fired. I don't know that anyone actually was, but you could be denied tenure "for reasons" and sometimes they would give you a reason, and sometimes not. I didn't have to cope with that in the sense that I was comfortably out, my colleagues had no problem. I went up through the system, there were other issues, but not because of that, I'm not sure, in terms of what's happened at Northern, how many people might have been affected by that-- vulnerability, let's say. Decided to stay in the closet and not come out until after they had tenure, maybe quite a few, maybe not, that's something there's no way to tell. Since, I would say there's a good number of people at Northern who are comfortably out and who have been writing for years and that's something I'd like to leave as part of my legacy. That I helped to make it possible to do some aspects of this, not everything. For

example where I live is not within the city of DeKalb. The city of Dekalb went ahead and passed an LGBT rights ordinance a few years ago, the activists who were involved with that came to me and said, we would like you to get involved, and I said I can't, I don't live in the city. I didn't want to spoil the legitimacy of what they were doing, to have it be everyone involved with this was living in the city, what are you doing bringing in people from outside. I would say it's a very healthy environment here, and it will continue to be.

SB: What is the most important thing you learned from being on the Round Table?

RR: That you have to follow your dream. If you have an idea, something you think should be done, take a deep breath, check to see if anybody else is working on it and go for it, because you have no idea what the fallout may be, and what doors, what you do, is going to open for other people, who may have thought about what you are going to do, who didn't step up to it for whatever reason, or couldn't. The fact that you opened a door, they could walk through. That's what's important.

SB: Can you describe the GLBTRT in three words?

RR: I would say, the first is essential, in the sense that it has to be there, there has to be a group like that, a professional society. And we are the oldest professional group for LGBT people in the nation. That's something I wish people would bear in mind a bit more. I would say, flexible, over the years we have had to adapt to a lot of different changes in curriculum, in society, and we have been able to do it quite successfully. And I would say activist, we're not afraid to define issues and take them on. Sometimes we can't get very far, but we will put issues out on the table for discussion, and be certain people will hear about them, even if they can't do very much about them, they should hear about them, they should at least be educated, so that in case people come to their reference desk asking about them they can have some idea of what their patrons are coming from even if they have to say "Well, I don't even know of two books on that but let's find that." I think it is an essential bridge.

SB: Is there anything else you want to share or talk about?

RR: No, I think I pretty well covered it all, all I can think of.

SB: Well thank you so much for talking with me.

RR: Thanks for calling, Sarah.

SB: This has been so enlightening and I am really glad you were able to share.

RR: Good to talk to you.

SB: You too. This has been an interview with Rob Ridinger done as part of the oral history project for the 50th anniversary of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table or Rainbow Round Table, of the American Library Association. This interview took place on October 14th, 2019. Rob, Thank you so much for sharing your story.

RR: Glad to do it.

[END VIDEO]