Interview with Lisa Dean

CCQAP

Narrator: Lisa Dean [LD]

Interviewer: Autumn Ford [AF], David Weisman [DW]

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Location: The home of Lisa Dean, San Luis Obispo, CA

Length: Approximately 1 hour, 37 minutes. Interview starts at 0:11.

Transcript prepared by: Patrick Chea, Kobe Kehoe, Erika Gomez, Steven Ruszczycky

[00:11:00]

AF: Hello, I am Autumn Ford. Today is the 19th of May, 2019 and we have the good fortune of joining Lisa Dean in her home for an oral history interview for the Central Coast Queer Archive Project. Hi Lisa. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?

LD: Well, good afternoon. So, like you said, my name is Lisa, and I am a--what I consider--a longtime resident of San Luis Obispo. I moved here in 1981 and came here to go to Cal Poly. Like many transplanted natives, I decided to stay because I love it here. I've had varied careers here in San Luis. I've worked in a bar, I've worked in a video store, I've done many different things. So, I've found life in San Luis really, very wonderful and that's why I'm still here, and still loving every minute of being here.

AF: So you said you came here for Cal Poly, what did you study when you were there?

LD: Well. So funny story, is my high school agriculture teacher went to Cal Poly, she got all us kids into Poly. I wanted to be an "ag" teacher. Poly has always been a school that's been very impacted, so sometimes you have to get in through the back door. So she got me in under

the poultry major. So I studied chickens--and ag ed, and early childhood education. I did a little bit of everything, and I never became a teacher in the formal sense, but I think in everything that I've done, and the people I've interacted with, I have done my teaching

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and my early childhood education in terms of growing up and working with folks through all my jobs. So, I didn't stay at Poly, I didn't get my degree at Poly, I actually ended up getting my bachelors from Antioch University, and it really was one of the best things that I've ever did in my life. I enjoyed that learning experience, and being able to put those things right into work. So everything I learned, I was in a job, I was able to use it. That to me--I like the practical--that to me worked.

AF: So you said that you moved to San Luis Obispo in 1981. Can you tell us a little bit about growing up, where you're from, what was your family like?

LD: Okay, so growing up I was an Air Force brat. So my dad was in the Air Force and, we didn't move as much as many families did, but I remember we started out in Florida, moved to Nebraska, California, Hawaii, and back to California. So about every four years we traveled. I think some people really loved the traveling, but I think for me, it has made me more of a homebody. So here's where I'm stationed--this is my home base--and I can move out and do things from here and there but always come home. But, life was--life was good. All the places we went were wonderful places. Montana was a little cold, and I think that's why I don't like snow anymore. And I kinda teasingly say that black people don't do snow. Well, usually that black person is me. [smiles] So I don't do snow, loved Hawaii. Hawaii was--I think the highlight--of where we--where we lived. You know, I thought "Oh, we're going to go there and we are going to not have to wear shoes.

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We're not going to school. We get to be at the beach all day." You know, this is coming from a person who's in, you know, fourth grade at that point in time. So it's just like "Oh, this is the life!" Well, okay, yeah. We got there, we had to go to school. But, it was so different, it was so-- The cool thing--the cool thing I remember is, there were so many people of color. Japanese people. Hawaiian people. And, coming from the Air Force world, and all the places that you usually go where it's just like, you know, there's five black people and everybody else is white. It--it was so cool, seeing all these people that were different colors, and it's just like "Well, now the white people are the minorities." I mean, for a kid, what an eye-opener! So you know, we were there for four years; I think, for myself, for my sister, for my mom, that was the place that we loved. You know, it's good to come back to the mainland. But, Hawaii was really the highlight of my dad's tours.

AF: So, you speak fondly of your family, and I love your story about Hawaii. When you came to the Central Coast, were you out at that time, or could you tell us a little bit about your coming-out story?

LD: Oh, well. So I wasn't out yet. I was still discovering. So, when we lived in Hawaii, which was for me, fourth grade, fifth grade, and sixth grade. And in sixth grade, so about thirteen years old, I finally started to discover, it's like "I think I like girls." I really, you know, had more of an affinity. I didn't have any boyfriends. And it was always difficult; it was always kind of difficult, you know, dealing with guys. And not that I had many, but still it was difficult.

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So, it was kind of coming up. Didn't have anybody to talk to. Didn't have anybody to ask questions. We were brought up Catholic. So, in my mind, you know, you didn't talk about sex;

you didn't talk about, a lot of different things. So it wasn't a question I could ask my mom, or my dad, you know. Not that they had issues, but it was just, it wasn't a question that you would ask. So I kinda in sixth grade is where I first started discovering "Okay, okay, I'm a little different." Had a lot of little crushes on some little girlfriends and it was like, "Oh. Well, okay." So, we come back to the mainland, and a couple years where you know, seventh, eighth grade, really nothing happened. But, it was when I started going into college--I mean, not college, but high school--I still had, you know, no boyfriends, I still had a lot of very good women, or girlfriends. And it's just like "Oh, I really like this person" and "They're the best." And, you know, just a lot of feelings, but not knowing really how to, make that happen. And I didn't have any examples; I didn't know any lesbian women or any gay women or anybody. Then I met, my sophomore year, one of my best friends that was in FFA [Future Farmers of America]. And she moved out of her house and moved in with her girlfriend. And it's like "Oh okay." We still never talked, I still never fully came out, until I came here to Poly. You know, so, I knew I had those feelings. I knew I never acted upon them. I didn't know how, I didn't know where, I didn't know who to talk to, didn't know any of those things. I got to Poly, stayed in the dorms the first year. And, I had a roommate that was really a nice

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--my very first roommate, was really a nice young lady. And at some point, we took a trip and she asked me some question, and I said "Well you know, I really wanna date a woman. I wanna be with a woman." And what was, what I still remember about that is--Poly is still a pretty, well, a pretty white community still. San Luis is still a pretty white community. It's not a bad place, but it's still pretty white. So, on the campus, you have, you know the few minorities that are there. So, in the black community on Poly, you know everybody knows everybody knows

everybody. And I was not accepted in that community because I spoke well, I hung out with white people. I mean, they were nice enough to me, but I was still considered an Oreo, because I don't, I'm not them. You know, I am very proud that I speak well and communicate with people and I have friends of all colors. But, it made it for a tough time. And it made it for a tough time, you know, coming out to her, because she was a light-skinned, black girl. So it's just like, well, this is kinda what I want and I've not done anything and, you know, so here I've given you something that's really, pretty potent that you could really harm me, when I'm already on the outsides of our little community, because I've never been around a lot of black folks. I have always been around white folks. So, she didn't do anything with it, I mean she was very sweet about it, but it still took me another couple years before I was able to make some friends. I actually made friends with this one girl, who, her roommates read her diary,

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outed her to everybody in the quad, and really harassed her. So her girlfriend and I talked, and she moved in with me for a little bit. And I'd moved off of campus by this point, in time. And so I was able to have an outlet, somebody to go "Well, how did you do this?" "Well, you know, when did you come out?" and "What's this lifestyle about?" "I mean, I know this is how I feel, but how do I connect with our people?" You know, so, I didn't come out for a couple years, for a couple of years, it was just kind of starting to randomly meet gay folks. You know, and back in the day, they didn't have the GALA [Gay and Lesbian Alliance of San Luis Obispo], they didn't have whatever the gay student union at Poly is called now. I mean, they used to have meetings. And what was so funny, they were like super-secret meetings. So, you couldn't find out, 'til you called the number, and then they would tell you where the meeting was, because they didn't want to publicize it because they didn't want people knowing where they were. And so, at that point in

my history, I had gotten a job at Mervyn's and I wasn't out there, but I was a little more comfortable in my skin. And went to one of these meetings and met two or three of my co-workers there and they were like [feigned surprise] "Ah! You're here?! Ah! You're here!?" I mean, it was really so clandestine, so funny that you had to be like that, you know. But once I started meeting people and having the outlet, that really helped to formalize my education, I guess, you know. Get to meet more people, ask more questions, do more things, going to more parties or starting to go to parties, and going "Oh, okay. This is who we are. This is how I meet people." You know, I used to be--I'd always say--I used to be very square, you know. [00:12:00]

Buttoned-down shirt [whispers] "Hi." I wouldn't say a word. You know, it was like "Oh my god, who are you? What are you? Ah--" And now I would say I'm a hot mess right now. [laughs]

AF: So, what was it like coming out to your family then?

LD: [tilts head back, slowly] Oh. Rough. It was rough. So, the person I would have expected--I think I would have expected a little more support from my mother. But, it was rough for her. So, I went home for a visit, and of course, I always had the short haircut--my mother always called it a "mohawk"--but short haircut; my mom asked me one day, as I was getting ready to come back to Poly, and she said, "Are you a lesbian?" And I'd never said anything to her about it. And I looked at her, and I said, "I'll write you a note when I get back to school. Gotta go." [laughing] So I left. And I was like, "Oh my God. Oh my God. What do I do? How do I? Like what? Okay. [deep breath] Okay." So I came back, and I wrote her this letter and said, "Yes, I am" and, you know, "I have a girlfriend now" and "this is who I have always been." And, she just fell apart. She fell apart. [Lisa imitates her mother] "You're just following people" and "You don't know" and "this is a phase"--and I mean, all of the classic things you hear. And I'm

like, “No, it’s not a phase” and “Nobody’s convinced me to be--this is me. This is who I have been waiting to be, my entire life.” This--this is right. Things have clicked. I don’t have to try to go “Oh, how do you date guys?”

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and “How do you do this?” and “Well, nobody’s asking me out” and--I don’t want to wear makeup. Everyone wanted to make me up. I don’t do makeup. No. “You need to wear dresses” “You need to do this --,” and I’m just like “No, that’s not me.” So, through a series of letters, we talked. She cried. I cried. I cut her off. I mean, it was just finally, I was like “Okay. Fine, you don’t accept me. Then I don’t want to talk about this anymore with you. This is it. I’m not changing.” And the funny thing is, I still have those letters. I have every one of those letters. And so then my dad wrote me a letter and said, “I don’t care who you date. I love you,” and “you are my daughter” and “I’ve always loved you.” I mean, blew me out of the water. I did not expect that because my dad is a quiet man. He’s--you know--a military man and military guys are just quiet. And he’s bookish, he likes watching TV, the news, I mean, those kind of things. So I did not expect that from my dad. So that from him it was easy, my sister it was easy. Mom, it took her a few years and she, finally--she just--finally came around. It was just like, “Okay, well--” So, you know, I would bring the few girlfriends that I had and if I got the chance to come home, we’d come home. [Imitates introducing people to her mother] “This is my friend.” “This is who this is.” But even to today, sometimes she goes, “You just need a good man.” [laughs] And I’m like [smiling], “No, Mom. No, I don’t. I’m happy.” So, it was a process--it was--it could have been worse, and I have seen worse.

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I have seen people who you know, got kicked out. Whose family stopped talking to them, and who've been cut out of the family will. Seen that. So, in comparison, mine was smooth. It was very, very smooth. So, I think, being here, in college, allowed me the ability to grow, to talk to other people, because if I'd have stayed home, I don't—I don't know if it would have happened. Or, it still would have been so compressed and that clandestine lifestyle. And you know, been there, done that. Not anymore. I don't--I don't--you're in my world. I mean, even at my office, this is who I am. I'm going to say what I need to say and if you don't like it [making good-bye gesture with hand], find another job. You know--I'm not that direct like that--but it really is. I'm pretty well out, I don't shy away from anybody anymore, and I don't have that [whispers; simulates heavy heart pounding], "Oh my god. I have to tell you I'm gay." Because in the beginning, it was--it was traumatic. It's traumatic, because you don't know if you're going to lose people. You don't know what kind of reaction. So, I remember, it, I mean I don't know, worse than going to the doctor. The heart just gets all clenchy and you know, you can't, it's like "Okay, well I gotta tell them. Okay, how do I--" How do you have this kind of conversations? I remember having the conversations, trying to not use any gender, trying to say, "Well, the person I'm seeing" or "We're doing that" and it's like [rolls eyes] "Oh my god in heaven. I'm tired. I'm tired of this." So, I think, as you get a little older, you get more comfortable in your skin, [00:18:00]

you do what you gotta do.

AF: So you mentioned that it was clandestine, in SLO at the time, when you were here before you went to another university to finish your degree. [LD nods] So where were the spaces that you would go, when you were having these clandestine meetings, when it wasn't like a big--

when it wasn't an open thing--when it was more of a "We need a space to be, but we also can't be open about it."

LD: So, really, when I was at Poly, so for the first couple years at Poly, wherever they had the meetings in the rooms on campus. Then off campus, there--GALA was in its infancy at that point in time and Linnea's was also a place that was accepting. So occasionally they would hold dances. People's house--house parties. That was the big thing back in the day. A lot of house parties. And that's, kind of, when I met some of the people from work, they would take me to parties. And the first house party that I went to was [pause] it was phenomenal, it was scary, it was all those things, because I'd never been around that many gay people. Just like going to a black dance for me, it was like "I never been around this many black people. Oh my--there are more than five of us here?" It was--it was really very reaffirming. Cause it's like, "Oh my God. I'm around my people." And either direction. It was like when we had the black dances at Poly, and I'd go and I'd be like [shocked expression] "Wow!" Or the same thing with the gay folks. It's like [nodding] "Yeah--" because you could be who you needed to be, you didn't have to worry about somebody not liking you, hurting you, or any of those things. So, there weren't a lot of spaces, but I think it was parties and that's, you know, how I learned about the lifestyle. [00:20:00]

I had a couple of good friends that--he would throw parties at his mom's house and they would invite me to the party. And like I said, I was pretty square back in the day. And, I'd be at 11 o'clock it's like, "Oh, hey. It's time for bed. I gotta go to bed." and they're ready to party on. So, there was really nothing formal, other than maybe, every six months, a dance. Or, a Halloween dance or when it was time for a theme. So, the first [recalling], 1981, well, first ten--fifteen years, it really wasn't a lot other than the few little parties.

AF: So, from that, I want to go back a little bit. Because when you were younger, it was a time of great upheaval in the LGBTQ community. There were the riots at the Compton Café [Compton's Cafeteria] in San Francisco. There was the Stonewall Riots a few years later. Do you recall hearing anything about those having any sort of conscience about those? Or did it just not end up on your radar until much later?

LD: Probably not until much later as--So the first gay bar that I ever went to was Journey's Inn, here [in San Luis Obispo]. Small little hole in the wall, and occasionally, they'd do celebrations [for example] "This is the celebration of the Stonewall Riots." So, I didn't really know a lot, and there wasn't, there really wasn't a place where somebody could say, "This is, kind of, your gay history. This is why we do this." I mean, I think it almost does come from its own oral history as people talk about it. And, yeah, there's more that you can look up now. But, you know, when you're first coming out, in the timeframe that I was, it seemed like the big thing was, really, partying.

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So we partied: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. There was the tea dances, there were the drugs. I've always been pretty strait-laced, but that was also part of a learning experience. So, I think all those things came in bits, and pieces. So, I know a little. You meet some people, you know, you talk to your older lesbians and gays. And they go, "Well, this is why this--" or "I remember this--" I think it's almost like any of your regular history. Trying to recite the Gettysburg Address, it's like "Well, yeah, I remember this much from back in school" You learn a little as you keep going.

AF: That's fantastic. It's--it is--it is really interesting to hear the oral history side of it. Just like, passed down, almost, akin to like almost generational. Just older gay people talking to the younger gay people about history and about what they know, and their experiences.

LD: Yes. What they had to go through.

AF: And then, in SLO, [laughing] you've mentioned how it's very plain to see that SLO is a very white community, a very moderate community. A fairly straight community.

LD: Yes.

AF: So what--what is it like as a person who's both queer and black being in SLO? What was it like then and what was it like now? How are you--how do you deal with that on a daily basis?

LD: I would think it's almost--I'm going to say that it's almost the same. So, in terms of most of the people in San Luis, are pretty friendly. Back in the day, really, the bigger issue for me was the black thing. That there weren't very many black people. That people would actually cross to the other side of the street or if I say, like with one of my white boyfriends and I was holding their hands,

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they'd literally freak out like [feigning shock] "Ohhhh--" Like they, one, have never saw a black person which could possibly be in San Luis. And two, it's just like that whole thing.

We used to play a game up in Atascadero. My friend, Paul and I, and we'd go shopping at Vons or Safeway and we'd hold hands. And you would be amazed at the people who would stop, come back around the corner, point at you. I mean, it was--that part was the amazing thing. So, it was funny on one hand, it was scary on the other hand because you still knew that over in Paso [Robles], maybe bad things could happen. I never had an issue, and even when the bar

opened. Really, there were people who would drive by every now and then, and yell, you know, "Queers!" "Faggots!" But, in terms of walking around in town, I mean I had girlfriends that, we'd hold hands. And I do think that women have it easier than guys, because I think they expect that from women. That, you know, we are more touchy, more feely, and--but I never got harassed by anybody. I really only experienced it--and I consider myself very blessed--I only experienced a little bit of racism in terms of trying to rent an apartment here. And, I had it. And then, when I went there to go pay the money and to sign the contract, the guy was all like, "Oh no. No. It's rented." [She responds] "Like yeah, but I just talked to you an hour ago, and you said-- " [landlord responding] "No. No. No No." It's like "Okay." So, you know, little instances like that. Some of those things still happen today. People stare. They--and I've become pretty immune to it--I don't, for the most part, I don't see it. Sometimes, the people I'm with see it more so than I do.

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Like, "Did you see that person?" It's like "No. No, I didn't catch it." Cause I'm pretty comfortable in my world, and still feel like this town, even though it is a subtle racism. Subtle, you know, all of that is just below the surface. You don't always see it. I feel like in the times we're in now it's [palms gesture upwards] coming up a little bit more. But again, I have not--I've not had to experience that on a day-to-day basis. So, I am extremely blessed and extremely happy that my world's pretty good.

AF: So you started to mention that the community's reaction to Breezes.

LD: Mm-hm.

AF: I want to go back to like the founding of Breezes.

LD: Okay.

AF: How did it get started, who came to you? Like how did you--how did Breezes form?

DW: Sorry. One quick thing for you. Can you have a sip of water? That's a good thing.

LD: I figured, since you were talking.

DW: I did hear a brief mention of this Journey's Inn earlier. Obviously, there was something that preceded Breezes.

LD. Yes.

DW: So, okay, Autumn can re-direct a little bit and we can catch up to Breezes but let's go back before that, because, obviously, it wasn't the first.

AF: Alright, so tell us about Journey's Inn. You said it was a little hole in the wall.

LD: It was a little hole in the wall. And it was the first bar--the first gay bar that I ever went to. And it was located, just, actually, down the street. There was a--it was only a beer and wine bar. I did not know the people who started it, but it had been there for years. And everybody's like, "Let's go to Journey's Inn. We're going to go." And I mean it, when I mean hole in the wall, it feels like it was half the size of my house. And you know, we'd all pack in there, it had a little DJ booth. So that was the first meeting place that I knew of. And on the wall, they had bench seating, a little bar when you walked in

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the door, and a little patio where everybody could go out and smoke. So, San Luis is a small community which encompasses not only San Luis, Morro Bay, Cayucos, Paso, all the way up to Santa Maria. So, everybody would come from that area, and still, I think to this day, when we have events, really that's the local area. So, Journey's Inn was open, well, somewhere from the 80s to I think it finally closed early 90s, late 80s. It closed [pause] because of money and drugs [smiles, laughing]. I believe the owner, you know, had some difficulties, wasn't able to pay the

bills, wasn't able to pay his beer and wine suppliers. I don't know about the rents at that point in time, but I think those are the things that always impact the freer lifestyle that sometimes we have.

So Journey's Inn closed, we were without anything for a few years. And I actually didn't or wasn't in on the conception of Breezes, so my--two of my very best friends, Steve and Mary Kay, they were on vacation and I guess they thought "You know, it's time for a bar. How can we do this?" So they came back and said "You know, we wanna open up a bar." And I was nowhere near the bar business; I basically was working at either an office products store or video store. But they said, "You know, when we open the bar, here's where we're going to look for the place. We're going to get investors, and, you know, at some point in time, we want you to come in and you're going to learn how to work in the kitchen. You're going to learn the door and work the bar.

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You're going to do all these things." And I'm like, "Okay. Great. I've never done this, but okay. I'm willing." So, they started the process. So, the building that we were in is on Los Osos Valley Road, and again back in the day, back in the early San Luis days, when things were small, it used to be a place called Shenandoah Inn. Now, history. Way back history. There was nothing really out there. But there was this strip mall. So they had Shenandoah, and then another little bar came in after that, and it closed and it was empty. And so somehow, they got several investors; they talked to the person who owned the building, got a good lease, and started construction on it. So, what I got to see was bits and pieces when I would go at night, as the painting went up, as they put in the railing for the dance floor, the DJ booth in the corner. It really was a nice bar, and Steve wanted it to be a bar, a restaurant, a place where everybody of all ages could come.

Because, you know, our community starts at the age of twenty-one, up to the elders, so folks that are over sixty, they don't always go out and drink anymore. So, he thought, "Well, we'll do a nice restaurant with a Caribbean theme." And so, when they opened up, we had like a ten-table area for the restaurant, beautiful bar, a dance floor. If you were to go into where it is now, it is Sushiya, which is the sushi place. And you walk in the front door, you see the bar. That is the actual bar that they--I think it was the actual bar there that they refurbished.

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And then, off to the side where they've got their dining room tables, was where our dining room was. Where they have a teppanyaki room, that would be the DJ area and the dance floor. It was a very nice bar. They put a lot of money into it, and I don't know how much, but it had carpeting, the bathrooms were nice, it was upper-scale. And one of the things I remember, from the few bars that I had gone to, like even in Santa Barbara, all of those places seemed to be in what I consider dark, dank places. You know, "we're going into the seedier district," and you know, it was a dive bar: it was smelly, it was old, it had been here for forever, and Breezes was beautiful. It was, to me, amazing. So, it was the highlight, of San Luis. The first, after Journey's Inn, the first of its kind.

Something that big, something open, and that was one of the things that really scared some folks is that, you know, we're in a strip mall. We're not hiding in the back. Where you gotta drive around the river, under the bridge, and then you gotta park your car here, and you walk two miles over here. No, you can park, and you can walk right into the bar. And so that--that had a big impact on people. People are like, "Well, what if somebody sees me? What if somebody sees my car? What if, you know, what if we get harassed by the cops?" And it was

still scary times for some folks who legitimately could lose their jobs, they could lose their families and friends.

AF: and so how long was it in operation.

LD: '92 to '98, so 6 years.

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AF: So you were involved with the bar after it had already started being built, correct?

LD: Yeah after they had built it and gotten everything up, and it opened. So Mary Kay, the other owner, I was working for her doing pool and spa cleaning, as well as working in the office products store. Once the bar got open and going, she's like, "well okay we want you to work for us." So, I needed a job, I couldn't not work and not have an income. So once the bar got going, I started working--I still did both. I did the pools and the spas and I worked in the bar. I started out working the door. I started in, also in the kitchen. Steve taught me how to cook, prep, and I love food so that was kind of a natural love for me. And I kind of worked my way up to full time with them. Just doing the bar work. I did not do any of the day work until later on in the process.

AF: So, ownership passed to you from Steve?

LD: Mhmm

AF: Can you tell us how that process went, what it was like, and tell us a little bit about Steve maybe?

Dean: Okay. So I'm going say it was that last two years of its life. So '96 to '98. Steve and Mary Kay owned it the whole entire time, and basically, Steve was HIV positive and his partner was HIV positive. So, between working in the bar, kitchen, and stress

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Lou became ill and died. That was his partner's name: Lou Catalano. He died. So that took Steve out of the business for a while. So, Mary Kay ran it. And while she was running it, she probably should not have been at the bar because she was a recovering alcoholic. I think we all have our strengths and our weaknesses, and she thought that she could do it. But it turned out to not be a good thing for her. That's a lot of--being at a bar is very social. And in your community, you want to party with somebody. You want to--"let me buy you drink, let's do this, let's do that." It took its toll. So, by the time, Steve came back. We were kind of already in a little bit of a slide. You know, people weren't coming out to eat as much as we had hoped; the bar was not as busy during the week and the community was not as supportive as we thought they would be. So, you would think that you've got this vast community that would come from all of these different places--and it would be enough to support one bar. But, as we all are different. Everybody has their "I'm not going out every night of the week, well, I don't want to go when the girls are there; I don't want to go when the boys are there; the food is too--there's too much food; there's not enough food; the food costs too much; it doesn't cost enough." So--people. You get that thing so--we--when he came back, we cut down on the things in the kitchen. Lot of tension between he and Mary Kay because things had slid. So, she left. Kind of exited stage left, and Steve was starting to run the bar, but the stress between the two of them,

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between just trying to bring things back up really kicked into make him not well. So, I don't [sighs] it wasn't very long after she was leaving, and she was leaving and things deteriorated. He was like "I need some money to buy her out." Well, I don't have much money. Here is what I can give you." And he says "you know, I'll make you an owner of the bar." And I'm like, "you know, it doesn't really matter." Steve for me--was such a good man. He--had such a giving heart.

He used to do these gardens, I mean, that was when he was home. He could grow things, he could cook, he was a love, he was a teacher, he was a bad man--I loved him for his badness. [grins] Which helped me to become the person I am today. And when I say badness, he was very playful. He would play, he would do, he would go. There's a sexuality about us that is like "yeah, life is good. We're going to play around and have a good time." And that was Steve. He taught me how to be me, how to be bad, how to be nasty, to have a good time. Which is what I always wanted to be and do, and I still think I am but probably not [laughs] half as bad as in my mind that I want to be. So, I gave him the money. He paid her for her shares in the business. And I became an owner. And literally--I don't know--I don't even think it was a month after that. He said to me,

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one evening, he said "I can't do this anymore, I am not well. And you are gonna have to do this." I screamed very loud in my head because in my mind I did not know a whole heck of a lot about running a business. I knew how to pay bills, I knew how to run a household. So, he said, "it's just like that, you have good people and have them help you. And you can do this. I can't be here on a everyday basis." [Nods] "Okay then I will take the baby and I will run with it." So, I did. I had my head bartender. I had my head DJ. We did not have a large staff. I mean a couple DJs and a couple guest DJs. We had a few bartenders. And me. So, we basically--what I basically started doing was like okay--we can't have this whole back stock of alcohol in the room and not have the money to run the place, to pay the people. So, we started doing specials and, you know, we cut down on our overhead. I would go to work at ten in the morning. I'd clean the bar just like Steve used to. I'd stock the bar. I'd stock the kitchen. I'd do the ordering. I'd look at the bills. I'd go, okay, what do we need to do? We don't need any of this. I worked from sunup to

sundown. And when it was time to open up the bar, I'd be the first bartender. Then the other kids would come on staff. You know, because we were a dance club bar so by 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock, people would start coming in. It was high energy, which was fabulous. Which is what I love. [00:42:00]

I would work behind the bar. I would be the barback. I would do whatever we needed to do. That bar was stocked, it was ready. We were gonna kick butt--and we did. We had fun, and I instituted some changes just like "you can't drink when you're on shift. I have seen what this does. We, we are not going to do this. We can't go down this hill." So, we didn't drink when we worked. People could bank drinks. We would drink after work for a little bit. We would go out and eat breakfast. Get home about three o'clock or four o'clock in the morning. Go to bed, get up, and do it again. I loved that lifestyle. I miss it to this day.

AF: Was opening night like--what was opening night like when it first started up? And was there any sort of relaunching of it? Or was it just like this big, sort of--

LD: Grand opening! So, we invited people from the community. [pause] It was huge, I mean, 200 or 300 people coming and going into the bar. The restaurant was full. I think, you know, if the restaurant could have made it I think the bar would still be here. Because when you do fresh, when you're cutting, and you're doing prep--it takes more time. It takes more money. It drains more money. So, if you are not making money on that end--but in the beginning we were making money there. We were making little money on the bar. Grand opening day was really phenomenal. We painted the front big windows because they were big windows. Everybody and their brother was there because everyone had been waiting for this. So, it was a grand event. It lasted the entire weekend. Then things, you know, as you get used to having something--they kind of settled into a routine.

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We used to be open seven days a week. Then as we could see the trends, we didn't open on Monday. We'd only open Tuesday evening. Then it got down to where it was open Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. We used to be open on Sundays and then maybe just Sunday afternoon towards the end, but not the evening. So, we really tried to tailor it. We tried to engage everybody. You know, "What's the specials? What can we do? Are we competitive with the bars that are downtown?" You know. Again, when you have a microcosm of society, so you've got this smaller ball of people, you know, people will go "you charge more than they charge downtown; you're gouging us." How are we gouging you when the cover charges are the same? Where you get a drink token. So, really, I think, when people don't have a variety of places, I think, sometimes we forget what we have and we forget to appreciate what we have. You got a place to call your own, nobody's going to harass you. You know, we are very welcoming of everybody in the community. Straight, gay, whatever, you come, your money is green, you treat people with respect--you are welcome here. You don't treat people with respect--you know, hit the door. We don't want you. And really, I think, the community was very, very responsive and very open. People in the neighborhood loved coming in. The woman loved coming in because they were like: "I don't get hit on, I can come in; I can have a good time. You got good food. You got decent prices." We became a neighborhood staple. We had, I think we had a great relationship with the city, with the cops. I don't think they harassed us any more so than they harassed any of the other bars.

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One of the ladies who used to come in was one of the San Luis police officers. We kind of had an in. "Okay, is there something we need to do? Are we over--are we over some line here? When

there became a problem with drugs. we were like okay well "What do you need?" How do we make sure this stops here and the cops don't feel like they've got to come to our bar to police it. We want to keep them as far away as possible. She was a great liaison. She's since moved to Colorado. But, we didn't give them any troubles. They didn't have to come break up very many fights. We kind of policed that ourselves. But there was usual trauma, drama, he said, she said; she, she said; "you did this, and they did this, and I have a restraining order." You know, I think we went through almost the same thing that most bars go through except for maybe we knew the people a little bit more. You get to know your customers. You get to know your clientele because it's smaller, and they come to the same place. So, they are extended family. We had people coming from as far as Bakersfield. They would come over and "oh, so-and-so is here for the weekend. So, I need to stock this because this person is going to drink this weekend." It was a good time. Good things, bad things. Great. I feel like it was a great source of community. A great place for people to feel safe, have a place to just be with friends and family. I think we provided that and

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as well as I still hear from people who say, "you were there when I came out and it was safe. It was good. I had somebody to talk to, I--" You know, one of my very best friends, he and his marriage broke up because he realized he was gay, and he came to the bar, and we became great friends; we are still great friends to this day. He and his husband are my best guys, and he started working for me, so we were able to give people that lifeline. I think for the longest time people missed it when it did close, [pause] and I don't know if something will ever be able to open back up again. It would be very cool. Very cool.

AF: You told us a little bit about the clientele. What was the staff like? Was there anyone memorable on staff--anyone that really stood out to you? Was there a lot of turnaround?

LD: Hmmm. Staff was--small staff. I mean, we had a lot of staff when we had the restaurant. Waiters and waitresses. Really, the memorable ones were the ones that came in the beginning and stayed until the end. So, my DJ, Lisa Marie Villaran. My head bartender Billy. We are still friends to this day. But we had a variety of people. We had this one bartender – his name was Kevin and we called him "Straight Kevin." He was a straight guy, but he was like "I wanna work here and you guys are nice," and everybody loved him. The boys would flirt with him. There's a whole bunch--it was just a small group. So, every year for every Christmas we did a Christmas party.

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Kind of like a staff picture of the group at that time. Two or three DJs; we had guest DJs. One of the people that, I was just thinking about it, who stands out wasn't a bartender, he wasn't a DJ, he wasn't really necessary on staff. His name was Stephen. Stephen Kay. He was the one who did the artwork for us on our windows. He did the big Hawaiian moon and everything. It was beautiful. He would redo--he would do all of our windows on the outside. Cause we had these three big picture windows, and he had such a great sense of humor. We lost him to AIDS, you know so, one of the things we did see at that point in time was--how that affected us--even though it all started in the 80s. But in the 90s so many people--so many good people just gone. And young. So, sometimes, I don't look at the pictures all the time, but before I started talking to you, I started going through the pictures. "Oh, this person is gone, and this person is gone, and I remember this person's laugh. I remember how this person came into the bar and just how young they were." You know, it does make me a little sad. But it also makes me appreciate where we

are today--the relationships that we were able to form then. The friendships that we still have because of the size of our community. I was talking via messenger to a friend who used to come out to the bar. She used to live here. She's in Sacramento now. She's like: "You know, I remember you from back then; you really helped me." So, I think, if anything, we did

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what I believe a community bar is supposed to do. We brought people together from all walks of life. In my, in my world, it should be everybody, you know, gay, straight, I don't care who you are I think we all ought to be tolerant and love one another--you don't have to like everybody, but you know what I mean, as human beings, I think we all deserve that respect. I think we gave and got that at the bar.

AF: You mentioned earlier that you had to start cutting back days, you had to shift things around. So why did the bar close and how did the community react to losing a space like that?

LD: Well, the bar really closed because we couldn't support it. So, as we cut back because we did not have the participation. This is one of those things that still never ceases to amaze me. Again, were a microcosm of the bigger community; I don't believe gay folks have the right to be prejudice. Again, that's my own thing--I feel like we are already prejudiced against, so I think sometimes what we do in our world is, we go, well, "you're different so I don't want you. Even if you're gay, even if you're bi, even if you're trans. Well I'm not coming in on such and such night." So the things that started happening was, in our effort to build up the bar – "well how do we cater to? How do we make a women's night so more women come out this night? Still, anybody is welcome, but were gonna do a special for women." So we made a night a women's night. All the men stopped coming. We made Friday men's night; the women stopped coming. So, in their maybe lack of understanding,

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you know, I really don't know, people just became unhappy. We charged a six-dollar cover on Saturday night, but we gave them a drink token for two dollars – you get a free well-drink. It's kind of hard to tell everybody's mindset, but we weren't making the money to support the business. So that space is a huge space, 3500 square feet. When Steve negotiated the first lease with the doctor who owned that part of the strip mall, we were supposed to be paying $3500 a month rent, plus triple net. So, what the triple net is, it's the maintenance fee, your property taxes, you know, all the people in the mall share that stuff. Our rent should have been $5000 a month.

From the get-go, we never made rent. Even from the opening days we never made rent. Now there were some management things that made the money have to go in other places, but we were never able to get to that. So maybe six months in, seven months in, Steve renegotiated the rent with the landlord who was a really nice man. He dropped it down to $1500 a month. If you look at the space today and you think about it: 3500 square feet, $1500 a month, we were barely able to make that in terms of buying the product to do the food, paying the staff, paying the sales tax, paying the payroll tax--doing all those things. As we shifted to try and "okay so how do we survive? How do we cut money? How do we do this?" We went from making everything fresh to using more canned items and different items.

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We went--we cut the menu. It finally got to the point where we were just doing frozen foods. More of "appi" thing for people, which is not high quality, anybody could do frozen foods. It became that we didn't do the dinners anymore--one person would run the bar and the kitchen at

the same time: “Oh, you wanna order this? Give me a minute. I’ll go back and cook it.” Seriously, a very small operation.

In the two years that I owned the bar, I was able to start saving a little bit of money--well not really saving, but at least paying the staff, getting the bills paid, and not overbuying. Using what we needed. And, the history of SLO, that mall used to have an Albertsons, and the mall owners did something that they weren’t supposed to do. Scolari’s [Food and Drug] was not supposed to go in. They sued. They won. The doctor was part of the bigger part of the mall. So Scolari’s then owned all of it. They owned the strip, and they owned the rest of the mall. So, when it came time for our lease to be renewed.

The guy was like: “Well you can’t afford to pay. This is what the rent should be. Can you afford this?”

[Palms up gesture] “No.”

He says, “Okay so, when your lease is up, you’re going to need to go.”

In time I totally understood it. Didn’t like it, but it’s business. You know, I am assuming at this point that he is probably getting seven or eight grand for that spot. Probably more. I am probably on the low side.

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So, he let us stay until the end of the year and we closed January 1, 1998. So, from that point, then I had to get rid of all the stuff. Sell the kitchen stuff. Do this, do that. And in that process, I did look around town to see: “Is there another spot? Is there some place else we could go?” Because we needed the bar. But there was no place that was affordable. You know [pause] with rent, even--was it ten years ago--the rent, what you have to pay for parking--if you have so many places for your building--you have to pay for parking – there was no way I could afford it--

I couldn't afford $1500 a month rent, how can I afford anything anywhere else in town? And the other thing that really also hastened that--it wasn't a bad thing--but right at that time was when they started the first set of California minimum raise hikes – [reconsiders] yeah, California minimum wage hikes. The minimum wage went from, I don't know, something like $6 an hour to $6.50 to $7 to $7.50, and there was no place else I could cut the money. I am already stocking the bar; I am already cleaning the bar; I am already doing all these things, and I can't afford to pay people more. I'm just barely paying the minimum wage, and so now it's going up, it's going up, it's going up. There's no place else to build that back in, if we raise the drink prices that are more than what everybody else charged then you're still going to get the community to say "I don't want to come because you charge more," so closing was the thing to do.

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We had the big party the last couple of nights. If we had half the people coming [laughs] that came out on the closing nights, on a regular basis, we might have still been in business. We might have still been able to renegotiate and say "Hey, I can't pay $5000 a month, can we do it gradually? Can I pay three? And then do something?" But we couldn't afford any of that. If I had a million dollars, I would have found a place, but I am a poor working girl.

AF: You said you got shouted at by sometimes in the community--what was the community's response at the bar? Those that did not frequent it, those that were not in the LGBT community. Was there any backlash from anyone?

LD: A few times, I mean mostly [pause] young straight boys. So the worst that happened would be cowboys driving by yelling at us. You know they'd speed through the parking lot "hey faggots!"

[feigns casual wave as a response] "hey."

We would just laugh and wave at them: "Yeah, do your thing." And then the other bad--two bad things. So, in the back part of the building we had a little patio. And this is before we fenced it in. Two times softballs were thrown through the windows, but it was after hours. So, nobody ever got beat up while we were there. If the worst thing that you could do is yell at us on your way by--you know, pretty much everybody was oblivious. It was like: [feigned familiarly] "Oh! Oh. Okay, Yeah. yeah, yeah." The door people would laugh, and we would all make fun of them, and then we'd move on.

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In the six years, that was really the worst things that happened: being yelled at and the window being broken twice. That was it. The community I think was pretty [pause] pretty accepting for the time. People liked coming there. They liked being able to come, to be, to just enjoy who they were with or just have good company. Like I said, we became part of the neighborhood. People from across the street would come. They would go to us; they would go down to Laguna Grill. They didn't have alcohol. They would come back to have drinks. I think considering the times, we were very well accepted.

AF: That's fantastic. So, we talked a little bit about how closing the bar went, how it affected some of the individuals that went there--they didn't have a space anymore. How did it affect you personally?

LD: Oh. [sigh] I was devastated. [smiles, rolls head back]] I was just *devastated*. I – I did not realize how much I loved that part of my life. Going from somebody who, like I said, had worked in a video store, had worked in an office product store, to making that switch and working in the nightlife. Completely different. Your life is different; you work all night you,

sleep half the day--and I am a very social creature. So, the people that I met and got to know, and our regulars became really extended family. Still to this day, I still talk to people, I still see them. [01:04:00]

When we have pride--my boys (best friends)--they know. Okay, we started at this end of pride and we are trying to get to that end of pride. It's going to take at least a half hour to an hour to walk that because I am going to be stopped every five steps: [Gasp] "oh my god, I haven't seen you in years; oh my god, how have you been?" That's the effect that we had--I had--and so, I was *bummed*. I tried for a year to find a spot. Anyplace. Anyplace. Out there, Santa Maria. I went all over. Didn't have any money. Didn't know how it was going to happen. The people who were investors in the bar basically lost their money. Each person invested different amounts. But I tried to find another place to get us open, and after a year, I did some temp jobs and things, and after a year, the lady who used to be our bookkeeper said, "do you know anybody who wants to do taxes, who wants to work in a tax office?"

And I was like, ''I'll see if any of the kids still need jobs."

And she said, "No, no, I mean you."

[hesitant] "Oh, I'm gonna be a day weenie? Oh. I don't know."

I never saw myself in an office. Never ever. But, I needed to eat; I needed to pay my bills. I was like: "okay, I'll give it a shot."

So, it took me a couple of years to really [sigh] get over the closing of the bar. I mean I would see our beer delivery guys at other places and I would cry. I would cry. I was really attached. I was really attached. So, you know, even how many years now? Ten years later--it's more than ten years.

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[pause] It's bittersweet. I--I would do it again. I would do it differently. And maybe we're different now, but I would not invest the amount of money that they did to make it nice. Because, it didn't seem like we--our community--appreciated it then. And maybe, like I said, people are different. I think the answer is going into a small dive bar, something that is sustainable. That the few folks that are going to come, are going to come. Whether it's the boys, whether it's the girls. I would do something like that. I wouldn't put--there would be no carpet on the floor. It would just be: "Come. We have great bar. We got a place for you to come hangout." And now I think that as I've gotten older, I think I get it. I see why the bars are where they are. I see why they struggle to stay in business. When you go to Santa Barbara and you go to the little places there and you go [makes a face]--but I get it because we are fickle people; we're fun people, but sometimes it's hard to sustain a business when your clientele goes: "yeah no, I'm not coming. No, I'm not going to do this." You can even see going in the big cities, they go through the same thing; or you see why there are more boy bars than there are girl bars because the boys will spend a little more money. You know, all those stereotypes and things that you hear and see, sometimes they're true.

AF: Since the bar closed, and people move on eventually, where did those new spaces turn--or not necessarily new designated spaces--but places that people would go to—

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just where did the community shift to after Breezes closed?

LD: Back to house parties. People started having a little more parties. GALA stepped it up at that point in time. So, [pause] like I said, GALA was in its infancy. They would hold dances. Now they've become very legitimate. They've got their building; they've got their space; and the other bars in town sort of picked up the bar clientele. So, again, they would hold a gay

night. People would sort of come, sort of not go because there is still that, "I don't know if I want to be seen out in public. I don't know what's going to happen." There is still always a measure of caution. Mo/Tav [Mother's Tavern] started trying to do some gay nights and I don't think they got a whole lot of attraction. Novo [pause] started doing some nights. So, it really kind of fractured the community back to the little hidey holes where we are. People in Paso stayed over on that side of the grade. If GALA held an event and they held it out at--it used to be "Portugee" hall, it used to be out on [Highway] 227. It's still out there--and that's maybe [makes air quotes with fingers] not what its real name is, but that's what they called it. [pause] Or dances at the Guild [San Luis Obispo Guild Hall]. You wouldn't see everybody every night like you could Thursday, Friday, Saturday. You'd see them, once a month. There's a couple of other small DJs that hold dances. There's a lady by the name of DJ Moreen. She holds dances once or twice a month at the Moose Lodge in Pismo. Not very many people go. She does have a loyal following. She used to be one of my DJs, and she had her own business, but we all kind of just said, okay. [01:10:00]

Kind of a coming of an age, here's what we're going--okay we'll start doing this now. We'll do some things at home; we'll go out; we'll go travel; we'll meet up at a regular bar, but it's not Breezes. It's not the gay bar. People would ask me for years, when are you opening up another bar? When are you opening up another bar? Which was one of the reasons I kind of stopped going to Pride because it's like, "I don't have an answer for you because I didn't open up the first one." As much as the time has changed, it's not easy opening up a bar--no bar, straight bar, gay bar. The amount of money, the regulations, the things that they have to go through. You really almost have to inherit a bar in order to kind of get one and, you know, San Luis wants everything downtown. My druthers would be, if we opened a bar, it would have been somewhere out near

the airport, but even that's now becoming more commercial, more homes, more places that aren't going to want loud dance music because I would want a dance club. That's the idea that I like [laughter].

AF: What advice would you have for someone who is trying to open a bar or gay bar in San Luis Obispo nowadays?

LD: Well, I guess my advice would be it needs to be an open bar. It needs to be all inclusive of everybody because really that's where your money is going to come. If it's strictly a gay bar, I don't believe that you would make it. You need income, that's what opening a bar is about. It's about providing a space, but it's also about providing a service. It's about making money

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because why else do you go in the business: you want to make a living. So, I guess my advice would be do your homework. Don't assume that this greater community, from Santa Maria to Paso, that it's going to be a way to sustain your business. You really need to see, okay, who am I depending on? How much of this is my business going to be dependent on? Where am I going to be? What is the rent going to be? I don't think it's any different than opening up any other business. You want to make sure that you've got a clientele, that you can make some money, so that you can stay in business for that clientele. And if it's for a specific clientele, then you make sure that--so yeah, they're your number one--but that you've got everybody else, to make sure that you can take care of that number one. You're going to need a lot of money. I look at where I work now, and I didn't know until it ended up in the paper, but we pay $8000 a month rent, which is sort of cheap for San Luis, but the place that we got--when you look at the other spots, depending on where you're at, I can only imagine what the rents are. Luna Red, I know from

back in the day, it used to be a Mexican food restaurant--it's been many things in its life--but the rent there was like $10,000 or $12,000 a month. One of the businesses went out of business because he was selling drugs; and I thought, well I get it. I get why you're selling drugs because how can you afford the rent otherwise. It's not a legitimate business. I'm not saying that, but I'm just saying, I totally get it. So, if that's what you want to do, do it, but

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definitely do your due diligence; definitely look to see where you are going to be able to be at. Will you have the clientele to support it? Will our people come? You know, [pause] and maybe it's changed because the climate has changed, because we now do pride and people go out and people aren't afraid for their livelihood, their jobs--they're not afraid; so maybe that will influence too, "Oh yeah, I'm going to the bar," no big deal. And maybe because the kids are different, the twenty-ones, twenty-twos, because that's your life blood, depending on the type of business that you have. Some of the older folks--I don't go out every weekend. I would like to, but [laughter] I went out this weekend--[pause] but I get that, I get that now because I'm not twenty one, twenty two, where it's like "woohoo! let's go party every day." No, it's a school night: "I'm going to bed, [feigns looking at wrist watch] it's eight o' clock, I'm going to bed," so I get that. There's all these different things now that--[pause] as you come of age, different parts of your life--I would just say, if that's what you love, then do it, but just do some due diligence to make sure that you can stay in business and [pause] make sure it's something that you want to do.

AF: You said that you, at least for a period of time, don't always go to pride every year or tend to stay away from pride; so in that vein, in that sort of celebratory vain, I think you

mentioned something in our first conversation about Mardi Gras, about some sort of community around Mardi Gras. Am I getting that right or--?

[01:16:00]

LD: Well, there is a big Mardi Gras community, but I still think it's more of a straight community that celebrates Mardi Gras. It used to be [pause] there used to be more that they would do--but again with, as with everything, sometimes one event or one bad apple - -so I think Mardi Gras has really kind of mellowed. You know, kind of mellowed out. I don't think there is as many events. People don't go out and drink as much because nobody wants to go to jail; and I don't think our community [pause] well, well maybe they do --. I think this year's Mardi Gras, two of my friends who own The Blade Runner, were the Mardi Gras marshals, so I don't know though how big a gay influence was at Mardi Gras. It used to be a great time to party and celebrate, but I really feel like people have kind of grown up a little. You've seen the reactions to how having people party on the roof and the roof collapsed, and those kind of things, or when we had Poly Royal; you know: action, reaction; so I think people have kind of said, "oh, okay. We're going to do something a little different. I don't want to go to jail. I don't want to be arrested for drunk driving." I think we've become a little more responsible--some of us have--and some of us, we have to get through our youth. So that's one of the events that, if I were to go out, I would go out and go out to the club to go dancing, but anymore, New Year's, Mardi Gras is like "okay, what are we doing? Oh, we're going to hang out at the house. Sounds good." I don't have people that can keep up with me. That's the problem. I'm the party girl. I want to go out and

[01:18:00]

go dancing and nobody else wants to go out and go dancing. So, I have become a little more of a home body.

AF: What do you see as the future of the SLO LGBTQ community? Do you think of an area that it's headed? Do you think of—this is kind of building off of since Breezes closed--did the community really change a lot around that and where did that--where is that leading?

LD: I definitely think that the community changed around that, and again, I think it still has to do with age and [pause] circumstance. I think with GALA taking up the ball in terms of having a center, a legitimate place, where people can talk if they've got questions. There are support groups. I think GALA really stepped up, and I'm really actually very proud of them and what they've become. Like I said, In the beginning, they were more of a grassroots party group: "we're going to get together; we're going to have a party; we're going to do this." I mean and now they've become, over the years, quite the great organization. I think the LGBTQ community has a focus point where they can go if you need something or you need some direction, and maybe a bar is not necessarily what we need at this point in time. I think if people want to party, they can go out of town or they can go to the local regular bars because the community has become a little more accepting. When I do go out to Mo/Tav, or I do go out to Novo, and they are either holding those events or just on a regular night--you see the boys dancing together; you see the girls dancing together.

[01:20:00]

I don't feel like there's that fear that someone is going to beat me up. Does it still happen? I believe yeah. Yes, it does, but I think our community is still pretty well diversified. You have the younger kids that are here going to school. You have the middle-aged group that--we're working, we're doing. You have the older group that, "hey I'm retiring; I'm traveling; I'm doing." I think

we are still the same microcosm of the regular community, but, on one hand, in this area--a lot safer, a lot more able to enjoy the freedoms and be who we want to be without [pause] bad consequences, so I think we're on a good path. Where we go from here, it's going to be hard to tell, but I think the people who have taken up the cause, who are becoming the leaders of today--some of them have some vision. We now have a little money behind the cause. I feel like we are in a good spot, and I think there's always going to be work.

AF: Speaking to work, you're active in the Access Support Network now as the president of the board of directors. Could you tell us about how you got involved with ASN, and what that organization and its work mean to you?

LD: Wow, so that's still a volunteer organization, and I have been with that group for thirty-two years [pause] almost since its inception, and [pause] that organization is still very near and dear to my heart. The people

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who are the staff people – the people who are on the board are [pause] phenomenal. We've had people come and go--all those worlds are kind of [pause] interconnected, so with the bar, with ASN, with GALA, that whole world is interconnected because everybody assumes--for ASN, which use to be the AIDS support network--that it's only for gay people, but it never has been. We have always reached out to anybody who needed the services. [pause] The people who are the volunteers, the people who are the daily staff members, have all been affected by HIV, by Hep C. It's really very personal and I think I really wasn't a part of it--well, no I guess I lied, I was a part of it in the bar days, but just more as a volunteer. I was not on the board per say. I kind of got tricked onto the board. I was going to the meetings and Steve Weiss was a part of ASN, and Jamie Ford was a part, and the women that I was dating at that point in time--I met her

at one of the candlelight memorials and she said, “you should come, you should come volunteer.” I’m like, “well, okay. I’ll come check it out.” I was still a baby. I didn’t know anything, [pause] so, I got involved, started going to the meetings, started volunteering. [01:24:00]

More people were dying than you were able to help, but the goal is to have people live a life of dignity; so, we take people to the doctors, we [pause] do all these different things. In the beginning, it was all volunteer, it was all--we had the meetings at the banks. What I kind of call “the bloodless coup”; there was a changing of the guard, and we are getting our first grant, so Jaime, we’re like: “well, you’re going to be the health coordinator for this. We’re going to get this grant. This is what you’re going to do. You’re going to reach out. You’re going to help people.”

So they’re like, “we need”--Jamie and Steve--“we need somebody to be able to run the meetings. You should--we need somebody of color on the board.”

I’m like, “nuh-huh. well what do I have to do?”

He said, “you can be the vice president. Steve’s the president; you can be the vice president. You’d come to the meetings. You’d chair the meeting.” We use to have public meetings, so we’d meet at the church, and we’d talk about what we we’re going to do and the things—.

I’m like: “Okay, okay, I can do that.”

Well [brief pause] that was not what happened! [laughs] I not only had to chair the meetings--so Jamie was our first paid position; we got our first paid executive director--and I ended up learning how to run part of that part of the organization from being in the office, and I’ve always had my own regular job, to us moving to our first building, which

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my little studio was in the back; the offices for ASN was in the front; and they'd be like, "can you sign checks? Can you come to the office? A client needs this. We need to go buy vouchers." So with as many people as I saw passing through the bar, as many people as I saw through the agency; people were dying. We went to a lot of memorials--it was a rough time, but where we are today as to where we were then, our heart is still about helping the clients, and we have come further than I would have ever imagined. Again, I was not at the inception of this agency, but it stemmed from two people's friends. Guy was told he was really sick and they took him to general hospital. They turned him away and said ,"here's a bottle of oxygen; you need to take him to San Francisco where he can get help." He died on the way to San Francisco. That's what started our group. Today, we are in Monterey County. We took over a failing agency there and we are still running ours, so our heart is there. The executive directors have all been from people who have been with the agency, the executive director now has been there for, I don't know, twelve years, more. I mean, he started as the director of finance. I've been through three or four executive directors and I keep telling them; I want to retire. They won't let me retire, yet

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[pause] because I know the history. I know from when we first got our first building. Got our first grant. The people that I've seen that have come and gone --. When we use to bring the AIDS quilt here, which was such a powerful, powerful event, or making a panel for somebody. What's really nice is we don't have to do that as much anymore, but I am also not in the trenches. I'm not with the daily staff. My role now is more about, how do we have the money? How do we do this? How do we--do we have a reserve so that when the government shuts down, we can still provide all the client services? We still have people who have been with us since the beginning.

[pause] ASN is what I think a nonprofit should be. I think it should always be about the client, and the people that we have, that we hire, still model that [pause] ideology. Even the board, the board members we have now, it's a small board, but pretty much the core have been there for over ten years. You don't find that in many agencies. Everybody has been affected to such a degree that it's like, "okay, yeah, I'm here." Like I say, I talk about retiring. I'm sure it'll be another three of four years before I retire. I want to make sure that I leave it in the hands of somebody that has the same philosophy, but also has the [pause] the sense in terms of--I consider myself just an everyday person—I

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need that next person that knows the nonprofit world; That knows how to go out and get the money; that knows how to liaison with all these people; that's not my executive director, but the person on the board that goes, "oh here's what we need to do. Here's how we need to do this." There's nobody to do that just yet, so I do the best that I can do, but I'm there, and it's been [pause] an eye-opening experience and a lot of life lessons that sometimes I think I forget, but there are a few that I haven't. It is to be good to people and make sure that people know how you feel about them because you don't know how fast they're going to go depending on whatever's going on in their life, so it still continues to teach me lessons and [pause] I'm glad. [pause] So, I don't know if that answered your question, if I went off track; sometimes there's just so many things.

AF: No that was fantastic. You really gave, you really gave us insight into just what ASN really means to you, and why you do the work you do. That brings us to the end of our prepared questions. If there were any stories, anything that you wanted to say, but couldn't quite find a place to put it in a question please let us know.

LD: No, I think you gave me the opportunity to say a lot of stuff. I was a little nervous at first, but this has been the opportunity to really honor and remember the people in all walks of my life, which have always been interconnected. Like I said between the bar, between ASN, we really are one family and one group.

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I started looking at pictures this morning, and it's just like, [pause] so many people, so many good people, and people that are still around, people have gone. It's why I stay. It's why I'm here. It's why I do the things that I do. I am [pause] so very pleased that I got to have the bar as a part of my life. It helped me to grow and to be the person that I want to be, but it also was a coming of age. The same thing with ASN. Until you get outside of yourself and meet other people and do other things, you have no idea. You really have no idea. So, this has been a good experience and I'm sure there are other things and stories that would come up, but I appreciate the fact that you guys found me. [laughs] That still always amazes me. When you called and said, "are you the Lisa Dean --" well you know there's only one, [laughs] yeah that's me. What are you looking at my mugshot? What are you looking at? So no, I am appreciative of your work, and I am really very appreciative of the fact that this part of the history is not going to get lost. You know, how you come forward; other people that you talk to; the pictures, it's a very important part of San Luis' history and part of the gay community's history. I think this is a neat project. [pause] I'm not the only one now with the history. I'm not the only one, I mean I got the pictures; I've got the things,

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but there's so many other stories. So hopefully as you reach out to other folks, you get to hear that side. This is what the bar did for me. This is what having GALA did for me. This is how I was able to survive in San Luis Obispo. So, I'm thankful; I'm very thankful.

DW: One last question that we sometimes ask which is, assuming this video was put in a time capsule of some sort--which in a way it is--have you words or a message for the future younger generations that might come across this? So, speaking back even to your younger self, in a strange way, but projecting that forward to the next era youth, have you any thoughts on that?

LD: Yeah, I think I would say, with our kids who are struggling today, and struggling to be who they are, [pause] be strong. Find somebody that will help you be who you are because life is worth it. Life is too short, and I don't know what it's going to be like in the future, but there are some worthwhile things for living for. There are some good people out there, and I can't imagine the struggles that others have to go through. I think we all go through struggles, so find something to help you get through because as you get through and you're able to live your life, and you're able to go, "this is cool; I'm doing this." I think a lot of the kids nowadays--just what we're seeing from the people who have been survivors of the shootings. They're an outspoken bunch, and I think they're going to take us places. So, the message is

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hang in there and know that there are people out there that do care and once you find them, find yourself and live your life. That would be my parting message.

AF: Thank you so, so much for contributing to this project. You're our inaugural interview and I definitely know that you won't be our last.

LD: Cool, I'm excited.

AF: This has been fantastic, thank you so much.

LD: You're welcome. You're very welcome. I thank you for reaching out and finding me and asking the question and starting the ball rolling. I think it's going to be very cool and I look forward to seeing where it goes? What happens? Who you find? What stories are out there? So, I'm excited for you, and I'm excited for this project.

DW: Wonderful, just hold for a moment.

LD: Alright.

["END OF INTERVIEW"]

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