

HUGHES Transcript

Interview With Mike Hughes

CCQAP

Narrator: Mike Hughes [MH]

Interviewers: Dylan Michael Canterbury Baker [DB], David Weisman [DW]

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Location: The ranch of Tony Saponate and Bart Bartosh, Monterey County, CA

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0:00:09.9 Dylan Michael Canterbury Baker [DB]: We're here today on behalf of the Central Coast Queer Archive Project, interviewing Mike Hughes. Mr. Hughes, thank you very much for allowing us to interview you.

0:00:19.3 Mike Hughes [MH]: Well, thanks for having me.

0:00:21.4 DB: So to begin with, can you tell me where you're from? And where did you grow up?

0:00:26.1 MH: Well, I was born in Detroit, and we lived in... I was born in the city, and then we moved to the suburbs, and I was there through the second grade. So that would have been 1953 to 1957, and then we moved out into the further suburbs. And I was living there until the end of junior high school...

0:00:51.8 DB: And where else afterwards?

0:00:54.6 MH: Well, after the eighth grade, I moved to England. My dad got a job working for Ford in England, and I went with them. So we lived there for three years, and I went to a British boarding school. A public school is what they call it, in fact, the building looks just like Hogwarts.

0:01:18.2 DB: Now, I wanna ask, growing up, were you aware of gay people, their culture, whether it be outside Detroit or in whichever part of, I'm assuming, England proper, you're in?

0:01:23.1 MH: Well, it goes-- when I was in England, I was sexually active, I was 13 years old, and I was finding men. But that's a whole other story. The first time that I was aware of a same-sex

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attraction really was the second grade... Our teacher showed us a video, a National Geographic video of Africa. And the American cultural blinders thought all Africans were naked natives running through the jungle, so that's what the movie was, and it included shots of men with no clothes on, and I remember just having my eyes pop out of my head to see a naked man, and I really knew from that time that I was far more interested in men than women, and I never really saw myself as being with a woman or getting married, so it was a same-sex attraction before I had a word for it. Before I knew what sex was. So that's how I grew up.

0:02:42.6 DB: Okay, and after primary school, did you go into college or what did you do?

0:02:50.3 MH: Well, after we came back from England, I went into college. I went to Tennessee, I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, which is where my parents went to school. I was pulled in as an alumni because I had no high school transcripts, so they had had... In the school that I was in, they just ranked you in your position in your class, whether they were first, second, third, and that meant nothing to the people at the University of Tennessee, but they took me because I was a legacy. Since my mom and dad both went there, and I studied there for four years and got a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology.

0:03:30.4 DB: While there did you encounter any acceptance for LGBTQ students or anything of that sort?

0:03:37.0 MH: Well, I was very sexually active in college, but I wasn't out socially. I didn't admit to anybody else that I was gay, except for people that I wanted to have sex with, obviously. My first exposure to any kind of gay culture was, oddly enough, my roommate was gay, and I was reading

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this book called *The Lord Won't Mind*, which was this great novel about two men, and it was a first of its kind because it was a story about two men who were normal and who were homosexual. So I had that book laying out on my bedside table, and he saw it and he approached me and took me to a gay bar, and I must admit, I was very, very uncomfortable, I wasn't ready to be out socially at all, and that pretty much continued through my college years. To all my friends, I was straight until right at the end when there was a girl that I was with and I admitted to her that I was gay. That's really my first step of being out socially.

0:04:53.6 DB: Now, after college, what do you do and where did you go?

0:04:57.7 MH: Well, after college, I took a year to decide whether or not I wanted to do psychology, so I got a job in Texas and moved to town just outside of Dallas--Terrell, Texas--and I worked in a state hospital there, and this was a Gothic spooky place.

0:05:17.9 MH: The building was from the turn of the century, and it was originally an asylum for people with epilepsy back when they thought epilepsy was a mental illness, and the building was just this amazing scary Gothic building, straight out of *American Horror Story*. So I was there for a year working on the children's unit, and I found that I loved it, so this convinced me that psychology was my future, so I enrolled in a college in Michigan, the University of Oakland, to do a Master's degree in clinical psychology.

0:05:58.5 DB: Okay, how did you eventually come out to California 'cause you've already made it half the way West...

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0:06:05.0 MH: Well, I was moving my way West, wasn't I? I got together with a man named Ken in Michigan, and we got pretty close. And he got a job in England--in England? --and he got a job in Goleta. So he was there for the last year of my Master's degree, and I thought it was over. Then I graduated, and he sent me a letter and said, Well, why don't you come out to California? Since I didn't know what my next step was after graduating, and I thought California would be a great place to start being a grown-up gay man, and so I went there and I lived with him in Goleta for a year, and then in Santa Maria for six years.

0:06:54.1 DB: Okay, what brought you more towards San Luis Obispo County, 'cause Santa Maria is on the precipice of SLO County, but it's Santa Barbara County, what brought you into SLO County?

0:07:07.5 MH: Well, by the end of my Master's degree, after I did my practicum, my clinical practicum, I became really aware that I did not like being a psychologist, and what I had liked about my work in Texas was being on the unit, taking care of the patients, and so I was in a quandary about what to do. Jobs were really scarce. I was working... When I was in Goleta, I worked in a facility for people with cerebral palsy, and I met a guy there who was like me, he had a Master's degree in Mathematics, and he was working as a nurse's assistant like I was in this place, and he was in nursing school, and the light bulb went on--ding! --I didn't like what the psychologists were doing; I liked what the nurses were doing. So I got into the Cuesta [College] RN program, got my RN, worked for a couple of years in Santa Maria, and then moved to Atascadero, which is the state hospital, and I got a job there. And that's what brought me to the North County of San Luis Obispo.

0:08:26.4 DB: After you arrived in North County, were you trying to get involved in any kind of

LGBTQ activism, did you notice any kind of scene in the county at all?

0:08:38.3 MH: Yes. I was still not out, even though I'd been living with a man for seven years, I was still not officially out in the way that I would tell people I'm gay. And working at the state hospital was great because they had an official non-discrimination policy for protecting gays and lesbians, and so that gave me the confidence to come out at work. And so coming out at work got me in touch with other gay men, and I met a friend of mine who's a good friend till today, Chris, who introduced me to a group called the AIDS Support Network, and so AIDS was a really big deal at this time, would have been about 1986, and AIDS was well known. They didn't know-- they weren't really sure what caused it, they couldn't really tell if you had it or not until you got sick, and so there's a lot of questions and I thought I would like to get involved in a group that's looking at this issue, so Chris and I went to Dana and David's House, Dana Belmonte and David Perez's house, and they were organizing this AIDS Support Network, and that was my first step into gay adjacent political activism, because the purpose of that group was to provide support to people with AIDS and also to do political advocacy for people with AIDS. That group, shockingly, got started because a guy had AIDS and he went to the emergency room General Hospital, and they wouldn't let him in.

0:10:28.3 MH: He was very sick with pneumonia, and they wouldn't let him in because he had AIDS. They gave him an oxygen tank, put him in a taxi and said, "Go to San Francisco," and that was their-- That was their discharge plan for him, and we as a group to said, this is totally unacceptable, and we need to do something about it, so that was my first foray into political activism within a gay context.

0:10:58.8 DB: Okay, and did you get involved in any other organizations while in the area?

0:11:03.8 MH: While there... While in the AIDS Support Network, the same group of people were interested in reviving a gay social organization called GALA, which stands for the Gay and Lesbian Association, and in about would've been about '89, they started to revive some of the efforts that had been made previously to bring gay people together socially, and had failed. And so that's what we did, we set ourselves up, we got incorporated as a non-profit, and the mission of that group was to provide social outlets for gay people and lesbian people, and to do whatever we could politically in terms of advocating for gay rights. And so that was my first real step into political activism around gay issues.

0:12:05.7 DB: Okay, and what were the kind of events y'all were doing?

0:12:10.7 MH: Well, our first event was a picnic, we had a picnic down in Biddle Park, and that was pretty successful. We got a nice cross-section of people in different ages and different backgrounds, so that was a lot of fun. We had a mailing list from the previous incarnation of GALA, so that's how we were able to reach out to people, and there was also another group at the time called the Dolphin group, and through them, we were also able to access kind of a younger gay crowd. So, I was in my 30s at the time, younger would've been our age, and our first dance was held in 1989, actually it was the Gay 90s dance, and it was held as a New Year's Eve celebration, and it was a really massive hit... It got a ton of people to come, all different walks of life, all different age groups, and we danced and had a great time, and from there, we built GALA into what it is today.

0:13:25.2 DB: Okay, I also wanted to ask what kind of political activism or lobbying were you all doing in the city and county?

0:13:36.2 MH: Well, one memorable action comes to mind. We approached the City of San Luis Obispo through their Civil Rights sub-committee, I can't remember the exact name of that committee, it was a non-discrimination group, as a sub-committee of the city council, and we approached them with kind of a demand saying San Luis Obispo needs to have an official provision banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in the county, and so Dana was very active and we met with all of the different city council members stating our case and why it would be a good idea, and how San Luis Obispo would benefit as well as how gay people would benefit from such official non-discrimination protections, and it became quite an event. We went into it expecting to have a 3 to 2 vote, there were three liberal and two conservatives, and we were expecting three to two in our favor and were led to believe from each of those three votes that that was what would happen, and then on the day of the vote, it was such a big event that they couldn't hold it at city hall, they had to use another venue, I think it was the Vets building, to handle this big crowd of people that came to give their opinion on whether or not there should be non-discrimination law in San Luis Obispo. In fact, they bussed people in--the people against the ordinance, bussed people in to make it seem like there was this overwhelming majority of people against it. I guess they still do that today, and so when the vote happened, we were shocked that it was three to two against, that the Mayor at the time changed her position because she thought San Luis Obispo wasn't ready for such a drastic social change, but that was really our first major push to create equality for gays and lesbians on the Central Coast.

0:15:58.4 DB: Okay, and one other question I have for you regarding Pride in the Plaza. How did Pride in the Plaza originate? San Luis Obispo's original pride parade?

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0:16:09.9 MH: Well, I was on the board of GALA from its latest iteration, and I had left the board by that time. The President of GALA was Doug Heumann and Vince--I forget his last name now... No, Doug and Vince were co-presidents and they pretty much invented the idea of Pride in the Plaza, and it was, I think, of a very revolutionary kind of idea because other places were having Pride events in June all over California, but typically, they were these private events corralled inside of a fence, and you had to pay admission to get in and then you could enjoy the Pride festivities. What we did in GALA was to have it in the plaza outside of the mission, which is the sidewalk in front of the mission is a main thoroughfare. Through downtown San Luis, so we had this enormous Pride event where people were walking in and out, everybody was walking in and out, and it really changed the character of the event, it made it seem like a community because people with their families were walking through and seeing gay people doing normal things, and having normal fun. It was a hugely normalizing event in the county, and, I think, was really responsible for changing a lot of people's minds about whether or not gay people deserved equal rights.

0:17:58.7 David Weisman [DW]: A quick question about that. What if any opposition arose to that? We know there's always-- We see today--what's the--the Westboro Baptist Church people come out to object it things. Did you encounter anything like that during this period?

0:18:16.2 MH: Yes. One of the things that we did to promote the event--if in San Luis Obispo along-- is it Higuera pr Monterey? --one of the main thoroughfares through downtown--people, events can publicize themselves with banners going across the street, so we made a banner that was put across the street announcing the event and it was torn down and desecrated. The pushback wasn't above ground. The pushback was hatefully underground.

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0:18:56.3 DW: Just to be curious, hatefully underground, that sounds like there may have been some people working in government channels underneath to try and get your permit pulled or something along those lines, and I'm just curious if that's what that underground means?

0:19:10.7 MH: When I say underground, I mean it's not organized, it's people who are bigoted or homophobic or for whatever reason, they do their behavior, they just desecrated things, pull things down. I didn't get any sense of any kind of organized political push back at the time. Honestly, I don't think the larger community was all that aware of what was gonna happen.

0:19:41.6 DM: I wanted to ask too, Do you feel that kind of plays a role in kinda why SLO just does not have a lot of LGBTQ things, places, etc. Because despite professing to be a very liberal city, you don't see a lot of that in reality.

0:19:56.9 MH: Well, this is just my opinion, I won't hold it out as fact, but the history of being gay on the Central Coast meant you went to San Francisco or Los Angeles, you didn't be gay locally because it was considered too conservative. I know that there's the perception that San Luis Obispo is a very liberal area, because of the college largely, but the fact is we're in a pretty conservative area, and there was not a lot of welcoming for gay people to be out and... So if you were gay on the Central Coast, you either got together in private little parties in people's homes, or you went to the big city to be gay.

0:20:50.3 DB: To finish out, I wanted to ask if you could come about with the story of how you ended up meeting Mark.

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0:20:57.9 MH: Oh, well, hopefully, he can tell you some of his perceptions. So I met Mark in 1990, the summer of 1990, there's this organization called The Great Outdoors, which is a national organization of primarily gay men, but gays and lesbians, who get together to camp and hike and do social things together. So there was a local chapter of great outdoors and they sponsored a volleyball game, and that's where I very first met Mark was-- we were both on the same team in this volleyball game, and then not too much later, I led a workshop for the AIDS Support Network, it was a safe sex workshop. And guess who came? Mark! And so he was there, and he caught my attention and I asked him out on a date, and we went to see a terrible movie and kind of didn't continue after that for a while, and then I went to the Renaissance Fair, which has been this giant event in the summer, where people get together in the park dressed up in Tudor drag and pretend to be kings and queens, and so on. And so I was there and having a lot of fun, I was with a friend who had AIDS, as a matter of fact, and guess who walked by without a shirt? It was Mark, and he looked really good without his shirt, and that caught my attention. And so the guy I was with and his lover invited me over for dinner and I asked if Mark could come too. And so the four of us got together and subsequently that night there was hot tub involved, and I'll leave the rest of your imagination.

0:22:54.2 DB: Alright, well I think we have was--

0:22:57.6 DW: I have a couple questions. So when you talk about this period in San Luis, so let's see, the ordinance thing would have been around 1990-ish, something like that. Among other things we've heard from other participants, do you have any recollections of since you were involved with AIDS Support Network, when the AIDS Quilt was brought to this town and how that came about?

0:23:21.6 MH: I was with ASN at the time, and it was a major, wonderful event. I didn't have any

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sense of pushback around that, but that's just because... I guess I don't go in those circles. It was a hugely unifying event. So if you don't know what it is, this giant quilt made up of panels, of 4 x 6 feet panels, memorializing people that have died of AIDS, and these panels were sewed into giant squares, and the giant squares then could be assembled into this massive, massive quilt and we were able to bring that quilt to San Luis Obispo, we had an unveiling ceremony where it was actually choreographed by the people that owned the quilt-- how you would take the corners and turn the exact 90 degrees and then open the corners together. It was very solemn, very moving, and it had a huge impact on the gay community and the larger community, because all of a sudden people were having empathy for gays, and that replaced a lot of the hate and the fear and the disgust. And that was one thing that it did. I think it created empathy for the gay community in a very tangible way, you saw these loving memorials tangibly placed in a giant display, it really had a huge emotional impact, but it also did, and I think the AIDS crisis writ larger had the effect of bringing gay men and lesbians together, to work together. In fact, the lesbians really came alive and gave a huge amount of support to the gay male community who was struggling with the epidemic of AIDS.

0:25:27.5 DW: If I could follow up on that AIDS question, I've been on the GALA of board, I've been the secretary of the board most recently. I know what you went through keeping the minutes. When we meet the young guys who come in today, the big thing is, "Oh yeah, I live at home in Fresno, and they accidentally set my PrEP Kit to my mom's address, and she's wondering what's going on." In other words, AIDS is not the scary thing to them, they're all on PrEP... So for those who might come to this video and maybe don't remember-- when you had an instant you described, someone turned away at a hospital here in San Luis, maybe you could share with us a little what the broader feeling was at that era, was it fear? Was it, what's the word I'm looking for, when you don't understand what's going on--incomprehension--just a sense of what a-- Here, even in a small town

like San Luis, that meant for that year of the 1980s that you needed an AIDS Support Network.

0:26:33.7 MH: Well, I think I can best answer that question by saying that there was a lot of fear... It was huge. Well, I guess you can imagine how you felt when Covid first started hitting and there was that kind of fear and uncertainty and paranoia and desperation and panic, not knowing what to do and not knowing how to manage it, and personally, I remember... Sorry, I remember when I was working at the state hospital, I hadn't been there very long, and this really crazy friend of mine, Sally, asked me if I would donate my sperm to father a child with her, and it put me in a huge quandary because I couldn't do that without knowing if I was HIV positive, and at the time, I was unwilling to get tested because there was no treatment, and I thought, why would I want to have this hanging over my head and not having any options for doing anything about it? So, within the gay community, there was a lot of turmoil about whether or not to continue sexual activity, stop sexual activity, do things in a safe way or not do things in the safe way, what did that mean for people who are working very hard to create a gay identity? So through all of that into turmoil, and at the time, I was doing a lot of AIDS education through the ASN.

0:28:13.7 MH: As I would talk to various groups and do basic AIDS 101 for what we knew at the time, and I remember thinking at the time, for every one hundred hours of my doing AIDS education, one article in the News of the World, or whatever the rag tabloid is, of vampires spreading AIDS completely obliterated that hundred hours of training that I did. So, the default was panic, and the default amongst the larger community, the default was blame, blame gay people for doing this to themselves, "see you're bad and dirty and this is what you get."

0:29:03.7 DW: Was GALA at that time very politically involved or as a 501c3, and this is a

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discussion we've had on the board, they were limited in what they could or couldn't do in those areas. What was their sense of... Was it social institution or was it more of a political activism institution at the time?

0:29:24.5 MH: Well, the current iteration of GALA was intended to be equal parts creating social opportunities for gay people to come together, but also to provide political activism and advocacy, and it soon became 99% social activities and 1% political activism that-- I remember having feeling like it was very hard to get people to stand up for themselves. And it was still hard to get people to come out of the closet. That reminds me, probably our most important advocacy activity was around National Coming Out Day. At the end of the March on Washington in '93, the organizers said this was such a fabulous event, we would like this to continue this energy and momentum to continue after the march, and so they created this notion of Coming Out Day, and the slogan was, "Take Your Next Step." So wherever you are, you are to take your next step, it might be to admit it to one person or any other version of that, admit it to your family, admit it at work, come out in any larger context, wherever you are, take your next step. That was the slogan for Coming Out Day, and that had a huge impact, that really pushed what I think was the most important political activity at the time, and that was to come out, 'cause it's really hard to hate people that you know. If you've got a favorite nephew and they're gay, it's really hard to hold "He's my favorite nephew, and I love him to death, and he's gay, so I hate him." You can't hold those two together, so that was probably the most active we got politically, but we lamented at the time, and many people lamented at the time, that GALA was, "Oh they're just a party organization." So we struggled with that identity from the very beginning.

0:31:43.2 DW: One last thought about San Luis, we've heard from a few other people that although

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there may not have been an open social scene, there were certain places in certain locations, in certain landmarks that were known to be LGBTQ-friendly in the entertainment or recreational world. Does any of that trigger, or you think you remember the places you could go that were okay in the 90s or the 80s?

0:32:09.4 MH: Well, it might come as a shock to you, but gay men sometimes cruise for partnering. And so there was all of those places that have always been there, and they still are, and in fact, one of the big changes in the history of GALA was up until a certain point, people would call and say, "Where can I meet gay people? I'm on the Central Coast and where can I meet gay people?" And they were telling people about some of the cruising areas, and that created a huge upset amongst some of the lesbians who very clearly stated we did not want GALA to be a gay dating group. So there was that.

0:32:56.6 DW: I'm just thinking, some of our other interviews, do the place names like a place called Breezes or Journey's Inn ring a bell with you?

0:33:04.4 MH: Oh, I see what you're asking. Yeah, back in the early 80s, back in the early 80s, there was a gay bar called Journey's Inn, down on Broad Street, and that was a pretty going concern. They had a dance floor and a bar and it was a great place, and it was very popular, and I'm not sure what caused its demise, but it did finally fold, and then there was a bar right next door in that same area where people used to go to the Journey Inn and went over to that bar and they didn't mind and so there was kind of an underground gay meeting place there at that bar, and then many years later, some guys got together and, a man and a woman got together and started a bar called Breezes over on Madonna Road, and that was intended to be a new way of having a gay bar, in that, it wasn't this

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back door, slided open, "Okay, you can come in because you're gay" type of place. It was much more open. It had a restaurant, it had a bar, it was right in the middle of a shopping plaza, it was wide open to anybody that walked by or wanted to see it, and it became quite a nice meeting place for a while, and then the support waned off, over the years, and unfortunately, they folded. So, now there's no gay bars and in my opinion, that's not a bad thing. One of the problems that has plagued the gay male community from the beginning is the emphasis on meeting where there's alcohol, where the only place you can meet people who are gay is at bars, and what do you do at bars? You drink, and what happens when you drink too much? You become alcoholic, and so there has traditionally been a higher proportion of alcoholism in the gay male community. So I'm not unhappy that we're un-hooking from this idea that the only place you can meet gay man is at the bar.

0:35:29.9 DB: So, one last thing I wanted to ask you before we finish the individual interview is, what do you think the other factors harming the gay community specifically, because as you said, alcoholism is a big problem, internalized homophobia, meth, a lot of different stuff, or...

0:35:51.8 MH: Could you say that in a different way? I'm not sure what you're asking.

0:35:55.7 DB: What do you think are the biggest difficulties facing the gay community and getting... Like how you said you like, that this area's gotten off an alcohol-based meeting place, how do you think this could change-- and this gay culture could go less connected to partying or you wanna just cut this crap out--

0:36:27.0 DW: I think I get where Dylan is going with this: You leave behind one scourge, but

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there's often another. Is there anything besides the fact that alcohol and alcoholism have been a scourge of the LGBT communities, are there other things coming down as well, as kind of a long those lines?

0:36:43.3 MH: Honestly, call Pollyanna, but I've got a very rosy outlook. I personally, I think we're entering a post-gay period where gay is, at least in this country, and then large segments of the society where gay is... You've got brown hair on your 5'10" and you're gay, it's just another dimension of who you are as a person and has no more energy on it than that. I think that with our recent presidential leadership whose message was, I'm gonna give you permission to be your worst selves, and the people that for a long time were suppressing their homophobia and they're dislike of the homosexual way of being were suppressed and they were not vocal and Trump basically gave them permission, "now, ahead and say that stuff, you don't have to worry about other people calling you homophobic," and so there's a basic distrust of people that are different from you, no matter what group you consider, and that will always be there for gay people, but in many ways, now that there's marriage equality, I sort of feel like my work is done politically.

0:38:18.1 DB: Okay, well, I think we can end it on that note and pick back up talking to both you and Mark in the couple interview. Thank you so much for allowing us to interview and we'll see you back soon, for a couple interview.

0:38:28.8 MH: Thank you.