

Interview With Mike Hughes and Mark Plants

CCQAP

Narrator: Mike Hughes [MH] and Mark Plants [MP]

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

Interview Date: October 16, 2021

Location: The ranch of Tony Saponate and Bart Bartosh, San Ardo, CA

Length: Approximately 16 minutes. Interview starts at 0:00:10.2.

Transcript prepared by: Steven Ruszczycky

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0:00:10.2 Dylan Michael Canterbury Baker [DB]: So we are here today on behalf of the Central Coast Queer Archive Project. We are interviewing Mark Plants and Mike Hughes. Thank you, gentlemen, thank you very much for allowing us to interview you. Now, at the end of y'all's interviews, you alluded to how you met at the Renaissance Faire, and now after... How did y'all's relationship really blossom into the wonderful relationship that it is now?

0:00:41.0 Mark Plants [MP]: Bad timing. Both he and I had bought houses like in the three months before we met, and I had a house in Paso Robles and he had a condo in Atascadero, so until we bought the house that we own now, in 1998, we had this commuting relationship, and so we were... Basically, we only saw each other during the weekends. Remember that?

0:01:14.3 Mike Hughes [MH]: Yeah, it was... And it worked for us because I had come out of a relationship and it was a really sore process for me, coming out of that relationship, and I was not sure I wanted to do it again. And so it suited me just fine that I had my own space and Mark had his own space and we could choose when we wanted to be together.

0:01:37.9 DB: Okay, and something I wanted to address, to Mark, it is to my understanding, you're fairly involved, the Episcopal church. Could you talk about that?

0:01:47.8 MP: Yeah, that's true. You know, I went through the phase that all PKs, "Preacher's Kids," go through. I'm gonna move away from the church now and I'm not gonna do this, but I find that my own spirituality needs a little structure around it, and it needs to be something a little different from what I do every day. And so I'm completely sympathetic to, you know, people who say, I can go out in the woods and I can find God there, okay, fine. And that's your reality, but...

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And I chose the Episcopal Church because it seemed at the time, so I moved to SLO County in '86, it seemed at the time that they were ahead of most of the other denominations in getting--in including gays and lesbians. I know that when I first became involved, there was this big production about, if we have same-sex marriages or commitment ceremonies or whatever you wanna call them, you know, what does the liturgy look like for that, and Episcopalians are big on liturgy, so I did join the Episcopal church when I moved here, and I've never regretted it.

0:03:15.8 DB: I also wanted to ask, can you tell us a wee bit about Integrity?

0:03:20.5 MP: Yes, so Integrity is a group of gay and lesbians that are associated with the Episcopal Church. We've had many an Integrity retreat right here at this ranch, and after same-sex marriage became the law of the land, so to speak, and the Episcopal Church, even the conservative Episcopal Diocese in this country, couldn't say that they're not going to perform same-sex marriages. And now I have lost my train of thought. They were looking at: What is this liturgy going to look like? And I was really impressed that they were taking that step, that early.

0:04:16.1 DB: Well, you also brought this up 'cause you briefly have same-sex marriage legalized in this state then revoked, and how did that affect you all and what kind of feeling did that leave you all with?

0:04:31.8 MP: You wanna take this one?

0:04:33.5 MH: Well, how did same sex marriage apply to us and what was our attitude towards it? We were kind of not that interested in getting married. Mark had his own reasons. My reason was

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that I wanted our relationship to be something that we created, something that was new, and I didn't wanna be put in a box and to say that by getting married I am admitting that the institution of marriage is the right way, and I didn't feel any need to copy what the heterosexuals were not doing very well anyway. So I was not that interested. And there was a brief period of time when it became legal to get married in California, and we talked about it and we thought, nah, we're not gonna do it, and then Prop 8 came along, which was California's attempt to change the constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman. And so that was after people were getting married, and we imagined that there would be a huge lawsuit if people who got married were then had their marriage annulled because Prop 8 passed. And it was, as it got closer and closer to the election, it looked like Prop 8 was gonna pass. So, Mark and I decided, well, let's do it, and then we can be part of the class action that fights to have it overturned.

0:06:17.4 MP: You can imagine what a romantic proposal that was...

0:06:22.3 MH: Well, we had already exchanged rings! In our eyes, we were already coupled and how we define that, what word we put on it was pretty much arbitrary.

0:06:37.7 MP: But I did have wristbands made up with the GPS coordinates of the place where we're married.

0:06:44.4 MH: And I have to say, while I thought it was no big deal, while I thought it was just a formality and a legal contract, after we got married, it really had a profound effect on me. It really deepened my sense of attachment to him in ways that I was really surprised would happen, so I'm glad I did it, and it's something that I enjoy doing introducing Mark as my husband, especially to

people I know, who that makes uncomfortable.

0:07:20.9 MP: And we had been earlier-- so we were actually married on Halloween, and earlier, we had been to a wedding of a lesbian couple that we knew down in Long Beach, and we came back from that and we said, hmm, maybe this is something we should do, so it wasn't quite all just the practical stuff and being part of a class action suit because we had had a model to follow.

0:07:51.6 DB: For those who are unacquainted, can you share with everyone what happened with Prop 8?

0:08:02.0 MP: It passed.

0:08:03.8 MH: Well, yeah. Prop 8 did in fact pass, California became one of the states that had codified what marriage was defined as to exclude same-sex couples, and this was in the context of a lot of turmoil nationally, where some states, were approving it and other states were passing laws that prohibited it, and all started-- that whole domino of change started when Hawai'i, their Supreme Court, ruled that it's unconstitutional to bar same-sex couples from the institution of marriage, and of course, that put the United States as a whole into a panic mode, and the Defense of Marriage Act was born and a lot of activism throughout the nation, both for it and against it, came about.

0:09:06.8 DB: Well also, like you said, it seems to start a bit of a paradox. I mean, the US stretches all the way from Guam to the Virgin Islands. It's a big country with 56 administrative regions-- did people in California also look at Hawai'i as a potential template to try following or was it more a state-by-state kind of push for more gay rights, recognition of marriage?

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0:09:36.2 MP: I think it was more state-by-state. Massachusetts was an early adopter, for example, so I don't know if Hawai'i was something that California was trying to model themselves after. I think one of the really first kind of explosions in the gay marriage saga was that somebody looked at the law as written in Hawai'i and found out that it didn't say that it had to be a man and a woman to get married. And so that was quickly remedied, if that's the right word for it, and so... Hawai'i has actually been both a bad example and a good example to my mind... But they ended up in the right place.

0:10:35.3 MH: I think Massachusetts was more the template for activism in California to make it happen, but Californians tend to be pretty self-absorbed, and don't really look to anyone else to be role models.

0:10:49.3 DB: I also wanted to ask, 'cause we're talking about 2008 now and beyond. Were you all trying to be involved in any kind of activism outside gay marriage or local state or national things?

0:11:06.2 MP: By then, speaking just for myself, by then I had sort of stepped aside from any real political involvement. I was passing out yard signs for No On 8, a few things like that, but I think after Mike and I actually set up a household together in '98, and then I started on my Master's degree in '99, I think. And so it kind of took me out of circulation a little bit, how about you?

0:11:47.4 MH: Well, likewise I started to kind of get more involved with home matters and less involved with politics around the turn of the century. At the time, I was editing the GALA newsletter, and that was my primary involvement, but I gotta say kind of selfishly, once we got gay

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marriage, I kind of felt "job done" and went into a retirement mode more or less, with the small exception of over the--I think about five years ago--I was approached to be involved with the transgender advocacy group. It's a sub-group of GALA, and I went on their board and served with them for two years, largely because what I thought I recognized was people who are transgender now, right now, are where we were back in the '80s, where it's just now becoming a national conversation, just now people are asserting their rights, just now people are recognizing that transgender people are discriminated against in really terrible ways today, and I saw some really, what I thought were, clear parallels between how the gay movement--gay rights movement--was in the '80s and now the transgender rights movement is today, and I see the same energy and I was interested in helping support that.

0:13:24.4 DB: While being involved there, what were you doing?

0:13:27.9 MH: Well, I was the secretary of their group, I did the paper work mostly to help stabilize the organization and keep it going.

0:13:44.9 DB: Okay, so the next question I actually have for you is one of the final ones. What advice do each of you have for young LGBTQ people?

0:13:57.7 David Weisman [DW]: If it helps, think of it as this tape is unearthed in a vault, like that time capsule they picked up from the Paso Robles high school last week, looking ahead a generation or two, what would you like them to have kept in mind?

0:14:12.9 MP: I guess one thing that I would say that is born out of my own experience is you will

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come to terms with your own sexuality at your own pace and in your own places. When I first met Mike, one of the things that really endeared him to me was he never pushed me to be more out than I already was, and although he did say, "Well, when people see you with me, see me with you, they're gonna know." You know, all of them. And I look back, and I mean, there were some missed opportunities in my youth and even early adulthood, but you know, looking back on it, it happened on the schedule that it was supposed to happen, and so that... I think that would be one piece of advice that I would give the other would be, be aware of your history and be aware of, you know, how BAPA, Dolphin Group, all these organizations that were formed specifically for gay people and specifically did not have gay in their names, because there were real consequences for that, and you know, be aware of Lawrence v. Texas [2003] and US v. Windsor [2013], some of the Supreme Court cases that secured our rights for us. So those would be my pieces of advice.

0:15:56.8 MH: Advice? I don't know what advice I would give somebody else. I guess I would say to the youth today, your identity is yours entirely, don't let somebody outside you define who you are, whether that's in terms of your sexual orientation, in terms of your gender identity, in terms of your religious affiliation, and if they-- don't succumb to the pressure from the outside to be what somebody else thinks you should be.

0:16:33.5 DB: Wonderful, I think we'll end it there. Gentlemen, thank you so much for allowing us to interview y'all.

0:16:37.4 MP: Thank you.

0:16:38.4 MH: Thanks for the opportunity to gab.