

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**  
**WEST VILLAGE**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

RICHARD WANDEL

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

June 8, 2016

### Oral History Interview with Richard Wandel, June 8, 2016

Narrator(s)	Richard Wandel
Birthdate	5/20/1946
Birthplace	Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Narrator Age	70
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	The LGBT Community Center/ 208 W. 13 <sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY
Date of Interview	6/8/16; 11 am
Duration of Interview	122 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	.Wav 98 khz, 24 bit
Archival File Names	160608-000 [2.15 GB]; 160608-001[2.07 GB]
MP3 File Name	Wandel_RichardGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3 [71.7MB]; Wandel_RichardGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3 [68.7 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	30 [#8 2016]

#### Background/ Notes:

Interview takes place at the Center Library and Archive. There are 1-2 brief interruptions.



Richard Wandel at the LGBT Center at 208 W. 13<sup>th</sup> Street on June 8, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

## Quotes from Oral History Interview with Richard Wandel

“I had been over at the monastery again, and on my way home—I lived in Brooklyn at the time, so my way home was bus to Port Authority, walked through Times Square to the Sixth Avenue subway, and then take the D into Brooklyn. And while walking through Times Square, I ran into a demonstration. It was very common in those days, especially around election time—or, I don’t think this was election time—but to quote-unquote “clean up Times Square,” which often included anybody who looks gay getting arrested. So this was a demonstration, a combination of the Gay Activists Alliance and the Gay Liberation Front. It was a picket up and down. And I joined them. And then quickly after that joined the Gay Activists Alliance. So I came out almost immediately into the gay liberation movement. I already had a sense of demonstrations, of civil rights, of anti-war, so it was natural for me to do so. But mainly, I knew I was ok. I knew there wasn’t anything sick about me. I knew that that was bullshit. You know, for whatever reason, I knew that that was bullshit.”

(Wandel p. 9)

“I moved first to Alfred, New York. Alfred, New York, I moved there because it’s a university town, about a year before, I had been on a panel about homosexuality there. There are three universities there, one of which is noted for its ceramics, its arts, in other words. And it was the first municipality in New York State to pass a gay rights bill, which it had done by that time. So I knew people there as a result of that, and so I moved there. Couldn’t really get a job, couldn’t really do anything, so I very quickly—the closest gay bar was about a half hour away in Olean, New York. Totally boarded up windows. The inside of the bar, the decoration, was literally fruits, apples, bananas, et cetera. So going to that bar, I met somebody who lived in that small city, in Pennsylvania, in Bradford. Fell conveniently in love, and moved to Bradford, Pennsylvania for about five years.

“[...] And stayed totally out of the closet. I was not going back in the closet. The people I knew there, one in particular—who later would be, not the first person I met there, but who would later become my lover, in Bradford—was in the closet in the sense that he would never say he was gay. Well, the whole goddamn town knew. Of course they did; that’s always the case. And I was very open. I was working for a non-profit at the time. Totally open about who I was, and he was not. And actually, he got more guff from people than I did, so this is not an absolutely true statement, but people to a certain extent react to your own sense of pride or lack thereof. And to a certain extent you can make yourself a victim. Now, again, that’s not absolutely true, alright? But to a certain extent, it is. You stand a better chance if you’re open in who you are, than if you’re pretending otherwise, I think.”

(Wandel pp. 25-26)

“Anyway, so a number of years later, when the Center, under the pushing of its then executive director, Richard Burns, and the Board—but it’s really Richard, I think—decided that they should have a museum and an archive here at the Center, and he asked around, for people to do that. The Center is almost totally, at this point, a volunteer organization. There’s maybe Robert; Richard; and Lou, the superintendent; are the only ones who are paid employees at this time. And apparently Vito Russo recommended me. And they asked me, and I said, “Sure, why not.” And then, we started planning it in 1989, and we opened it in 1990. And I’ve been here ever since. But not only have I been here ever since, but it changed my paying career, also, as a

result. I knew that by talking to the right people, I could learn the proper way to do this. But I also knew that community archives had sometimes justly and sometimes unjustly a poor reputation, so that in order to do this well, I should have the paper credentials as well. So I got them. I went to NYU, got my master's in history and a specialty in archival management. Which in turn changed my paying job, as a result, winding up, ultimately, for seventeen years, as the associate archivist at the New York Philharmonic. So, you know, this has always been true: the movement, in its various forms, for me, has always given me more than I've given it.”  
(Wandel p. 27)

“The Village remains a symbol of gay life, and gay rights, in terms of Stonewall. But at the same time it has become considerably less gay. In the city of New York—and ultimately I think this is a good thing. Many people say, “Oh, this is awful that this has happened,” but the city as a whole has become much more diverse within one neighborhood, alright? New York has always been very diverse in terms of different cultures and whatnot here, but it was the Polish neighborhood and the Irish neighborhood and the Jewish neighborhood. Now, increasingly, especially in Queens and Brooklyn, we're all living in the same neighborhood. Now, I live actually, not technically in Jackson Heights; I'm not rich enough, I am in the next neighborhood over. For example, you see, within my building: black; Jewish; gay; straight; various shades of Hispanic, because they're not all the same, certainly; and Korean; and et cetera; and Vietnamese; all together, in the same neighborhood. So while my neighborhood is seen predominantly as a Latin neighborhood, it's actually much more mixed than even that is. And I think that's true in the Village, too. Gays in general have spread out. So you still have—yeah, it's a site where a good deal of the bars are, as is Jackson Heights, in Queens, but in terms of living there, it's much more diverse and much more spread out than it was before. Because we'll find each other on Grindr. You know? Or whatever, or if you're my age, not Grindr, but one of the others.”  
(Wandel pp. 34-35)

“I'm prejudiced in the sense that I'm not particularly a bar-goer. [...] But, yes, I do think they're less important. Because you can be, for the most part, out at work, or out at all the usual places that heterosexuals meet each other, and fall in love. Alright? So that becomes less—it's always been true, I mean, we often talk about the gay male community as if it's only a bar community, and to a certain extent, the gay women's community, the lesbian community, as if it's only a bar community, and of course that has never been true. Never been true. It's always been, even within the Village, for example, bars, street, piers, trucks, et cetera. Alright? But beyond that, of course, it's always been people who were maybe didn't even identify as gay, but the tearoom crowd, for example, or just—it's extremely diverse, and always has been.”  
(Wandel p. 35)

“Christopher Street I think is particularly interesting in that it includes various economic classes. Or has, at least. I'm not sure exactly what's going on now, but has. Alright? So at the time of Stonewall, for example.

The Stonewall riots are a wonderful example of various parts of our communities joining together. Whether accidentally or not, joining together. Within the bar itself, it was for the most part a twenty-something, what we would now maybe call a yuppie kind of bar, with a sprinkling of women and a sprinkling of drag queens. The first person to get arrested, because she talked back, was a woman in the bar. Outside the bar—people who often would not be allowed in, but

were extremely important to the riots—are not only drag queens, but street queens. People who are literally living on the street. Young people who are homeless or near homeless. And congregating of both white and black and everything in between. So that was very important too. So you have within this one event many of our different aspects of our communities coming together. I always get annoyed when any of these people want to say, “It’s all us.” Because it wasn’t. Each of these various groups played an important part. But it’s not all one. And of course what made it go forward—not, you know, just be an isolated incident, as some riots years before in California were, for example—was the Left community, people like Craig Rodwell, ready to organize and move forward. Craig starting, of course, in the Mattachine Society. You know, so it’s all these aspects of our community which came together and said, ‘Enough is enough.’”  
(Wandel p. 36)

“In the early to mid [19]80s—no, actually, later than that, we weren’t started then, but in the early [19]90s, or early on when we started, of course the rate of people dying was still very high. People would get a diagnosis and be dead three months later. So I would, oftentimes, get a phone call that would run something like, “My brother, my lover, my son had all of these *Advocates*. Do you want them?” And of course *The Advocate* needs to be saved, but it’s not exactly rare, ok? And so then I would extend the conversation: “Did he have snapshots? Did he save letters? Did he write a journal of any kind?” Stuff like that. And often times the answer would be yes. People don’t automatically think of their stuff as having historical value because it’s new. Right? Or whatever, alright, or “Because I’m not a famous person, it’s unimportant.” And at first—of course I did that—but to a certain extent, it made me uncomfortable, until I realized that in effect what I was saying to this lover, son, brother, whatever, was that “His life was valuable. We want to preserve it.” So in a strange way, or maybe not so strange way, for that brief moment of time, anyway, I was an effective bereavement counselor. And that remains true. It may not be HIV as much, any longer, but that remains true. That’s when you say that somebody’s record of their life is valuable, and useful to other people. You are, you are indeed giving them the honor that they deserve, regardless of whether they were a totally unknown person or the President of the United States.”  
(Wandel p. 39)

## Summary of Oral History Interview with Richard Wandel

Richard Wandel is a former President of the Gay Activists' Alliance (GAA) in New York, and the founding archivist at the LGBT Center at 208 W. 13<sup>th</sup> Street. Richard was born in 1946 in Milwaukee, moved to Queens when he was a year old, then moved again to Suffolk County as a teenager. Richard's father worked as an accountant in order to feed his five children, but his true love was photography, which shapes Richard's artistic inclinations even today. Richard's mother worked as a typist, despite the fact that she only had one arm. "Her sense of independence is her greatest gift to me," he recalls early in this interview.

Richard was raised Catholic and attended Catholic high school. He recalls being the most religious person in his family during his youth and adolescence. After graduating high school in 1963, Richard matriculated into a Catholic seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. He recalls being partially motivated to join the priesthood by the idea that he might avoid matters of sexuality there—although he explains that he did not truly know himself to be gay until after leaving the seminary.

While in seminary, Richard began to participate in civil rights and anti-war demonstrations. One day, he stumbled on a gay rights demonstration in Times Square organized jointly by the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and their splinter group, GAA. Richard then quickly became very involved with GAA, which he believed was a more effective organization than the GLF. He discusses some of the differences between the two organizations in this interview, as well as the history of other gay rights activist groups such as the Mattachine Society.

Richard served as president of GAA for one year, in 1971. Among other actions, he recalls leading a march from New York City to Albany, stopping and staying in little towns along the Hudson River the entire way. After serving as President of GAA, Richard moved to Alfred, New York, where he fell in love with someone, and then to Bradford, Pennsylvania with his new partner. After five years in Bradford, Richard decided to return to New York in the late 1970s. He lived first on 99<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, then in Astoria, then on the outskirts of Jackson Heights, where he remains today. Despite his great contributions to the neighborhood's history, Richard has actually never lived in the Village; during his tenure as GAA's President, he lived in Brooklyn, but was fond of cruising Christopher Street's bar scene.

In 1989, Richard was nominated to run the nascent LGBT Center's archive. In order to accept the offer, he matriculated into New York University, where he earned his M.A. in history with a specialty in archival management. Consequently, Richard was able to take on a new day job, working for seventeen years as associate archivist at the New York Philharmonic. Richard still manages the LGBT Center's archive, though he is getting ready to retire from that position as well.

In the latter part of this interview, Richard reminisces on the founding of the LGBT Center and its archive. He explains the nature of the archive and its holdings, which are distinct from other gay history collections housed at larger institutions. He discusses the great influence of Walt Whitman's poetry on his understanding of sexuality. In depth, he discusses changes in New York's gay community over time, specifically noting that it is less concentrated in the

Village than it used to be. In these reflections, Richard emphasizes the diversity of gay experiences and identities. The interview ends with Richard making a brief comment on his identity as an artist, which goes back to his father's love of photography, and which he believes will continue to develop as his retirement from the LGBT Center approaches.

#### General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Zapol:** This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It's June 8, 2016, and this is Liza Zapol. We're here at the LGBTQ Center, on West 13<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>1</sup>

**Wandel:** 208.

**Zapol:** 208 West 13<sup>th</sup> Street. And if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

**Wandel:** I'm Rich Wandel. I have a couple of different titles, I don't know which one you want. I'm a former President of the Gay Activists' Alliance. I was in the Village a lot for that reason, and for the past twenty-five years have been the archivist-historian here at the community center.

**Zapol:** Great, thank you. So we're going to veer away from the Village for a moment, and we'll come back. If I can just ask you to tell me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your background. Perhaps, you know, some roots of your activism, or maybe social justice background.

**Wandel:** Ok. I was actually born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, but I grew up in New York. Both my parents were born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens, so by the age of one or something we moved back to Queens. So my grammar school years were in Queens. Later, in my high school years, we moved out to Suffolk County, which was new developments, at that time. We moved out there—well, my high school, I graduated high school 1963. So the [19]60s are a time in the United States, of course, where the civil rights movement, especially in the South, was on the tube every day. Including water cannons against black demonstrators. Including Rosa Parks, obviously, and the bus boycott. Including Martin Luther King, Jr. All of that.

So at that time, at least within my family, and I think largely within the North, there was the veneer of equal rights. And I do mean "veneer." So at home, I would not hear a lot of prejudice from my parents. I'm not saying it wasn't there. It's an all-white neighborhood, et cetera. You know, we were uncomfortable about going to the more "black" town swimming hole, which was in Wyandanch as opposed to the new one they just built in Deer Park, which was their way of segregating. And there was some consciousness on my part that this was going on. But it wasn't particularly overt. The mythology was that the problem was all in the South.

---

<sup>1</sup> The actual name is the LGBTQ Center: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center.

And then you get to the 1968 Democratic Convention. A turning point, I think, for a lot of people—a lot of people—to see, as we referred to it at the time, the police riot in Chicago. So when I went away to college, which actually was into a seminary, starting in September [19]63, this is all that's bubbling. Also, it's a Catholic upbringing. 1963 is also in the middle of the second Vatican council, so you have the idea—as it's John XXIII second Vatican council—you have the idea that the church is changing for the better. And being the young Turks, we're pushing for it. So that's kind of the milieu on which I reached adulthood.

Once in the seminary, there was also greater connection with some other things. When I was in Hartford, Connecticut, at the monastery there, in summer time, I think it was, we did tutoring for young kids out of a largely Spanish ghetto in Hartford. And these young people were, I don't know, thirteen, twelve years old. So we were running into young people who were in the eighth grade, and didn't even know the alphabet, I mean, didn't know anything! And it had to occur to you, certainly it occurred to me, that there's no way this would be possible unless the teachers didn't give a damn. You just could not get that far in school unless the system didn't give a damn about them. So this was in large part what was happening with me, and a few years later, the famous Biafra stuff was the big *cause célèbre* for a while—so, participation in there. I began to participate in civil rights demonstrations—just a guy in the crowd, no more than that, but several civil rights demonstrations, mostly in Hartford. It was also urban renewal, mowing down minority neighborhoods, and then building nothing afterwards, so all of that was happening. [00:05:16]

I did not know myself to be gay, alright. I think in retrospect part of the reason for going to the monastery was the very false idea that that would avoid sexuality. I assure you, a monastery and meditation is no way to avoid anything. It is quite the opposite. But I didn't come out even to myself until after I left the monastery, which would have been after one year's graduate work, the time I left the monastery. Came back to New York—

**Zapol:** What lead you to go to the monastery? Did you come from a religious background, was your family religious?

**Wandel:** We went to Catholic school. The kids went to church, the parents did not. So we were consciously Catholic, but I was certainly the most religious person in the family. And again, in

retrospect: part of wanting to go to the monastery; part of it had to do with true altruistic motivations, helping people and whatnot; and part of it had to do with being an all-male grouping, a false thought that it would avoid sexuality. The fellow students, the students that we met when I was younger, were, you know, cute guys! None of this conscious, of course, but I'm sure that was all part of the mix.

**Zapol:** And you said you did not know yourself to be gay until later, I think we were about to get into that story, but had you—what was your understanding of what it meant to be gay? As, when you were growing up, or even images in media, or what your understanding was before?

**Wandel:** I don't think gayness ever came up in any way that I noticed. The first memory I have of noticing it, actually, is probably not 'till I was in high school, and the film *Advise and Consent*. *Advise and Consent*, an Otto Preminger film, is about a fight over a nomination for—I forget what the office was. But one part of it is: in an effort to get the vote the way they want, a gay, I think Senator, is blackmailed, alright? And there's a famous—he goes into a gay bar—scene, and a very stereotypical bartender, and they're just terrible, sad, desperate men, and indeed this particular Senator winds up committing suicide. You know. And I think that was the first time I noticed, in any way. But I did not associate it with myself.

I mean, I did fool around sexually once or twice with my best friend in high school, but we didn't define it that way. Didn't even occur to us—or, at least to me, I can't speak for him—to think of it in those terms.

**Zapol:** Was he your closest friend? What were your friendships like growing up as well?

**Wandel:** After we moved to Long Island, he was my closest friend. Prior to that, in grammar school, there was a small crowd that I hung out with, but I don't know that I had any best buddies or anything like that. But in high school—I was going not to the local high school, I was going to a Catholic high school, which was, I don't know, twenty or thirty miles away, so you didn't make best friends with people in school, because we were scattered. And this was somebody who lived nearby, and whose family had also recently moved out to there, and his mother and my mother were friends for generations, which is how we first met. And I got into that kind of high school crowd, even though I didn't go to that high school.

**Zapol:** So friends for generations, meaning they'd moved from Queens out to Long Island—

**Wandel:** Yes.

**Zapol:** —sort of together—

**Wandel:** Right.

**Zapol:** —among a group of people—

**Wandel:** Right. Exactly.

**Zapol:** Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, a little bit about your mother, what she was like.

**Wandel:** Yeah, my mother was—they're both gone now, so I will use the past tense. My mother would, was first generation American, her parents being from Italy. Her mother from around Naples, her father I think from around Rome. My father would have been second generation American, his grandparents coming from Germany and/or Austria. Neither of them spoke those languages, though. Not only were they American, but they were very—in the [19]50s, [19]60s, it was common for somebody to ask your nationality, by which they meant your heritage. And we were specifically instructed that when that question was asked, our answer should be, "I'm an American for McCarthy." Meaning Joseph McCarthy, of course! So that's where they were very conservative, in that way. But good parents otherwise. You know, no great difficulties there. Typical of the time, working hard to in this case put five kids' food on the table, and whatnot. [00:11:02]

**Zapol:** So you had four siblings.

**Wandel:** Right.

**Zapol:** Where were you in the—

**Wandel:** I am in the middle. But there's a large gap. There's even a year and a half difference between the first three, of which I'm the third, and then there's a five-year gap. So the presumption has always been that that five-year gap was an accident, and then they had another one to fill it in.

**Zapol:** The presumption, but they never spoke about that.

**Wandel:** No. No, no. They would never speak about that.

**Zapol:** Did your parents talk about sex at all? Or sex and sexuality at all?

**Wandel:** I don't remember them ever, no, talking about that. In either direction. They weren't like, "Don't you dare do it," either. In either direction, no. My mother especially, if she had the occasional high going on, from alcohol in her case, would be very flirty, for example, and enjoyed doing that, and would be very, and be very outgoing.

On the other hand, while we were on Long Island—so I would have been in high school, or maybe even after I was in high school—the father of my best friend sexually assaulted one of my sisters, my younger sister. Not uncommon in this society, ok? But not that I ever would have thought of such things even happening at the time, ok? What I knew only was that—I guess I would have been in high school at the time—suddenly I was forbidden to go over to my best friend's house. With no explanation why. I knew that my mother and his mother had some sort of falling out, after years and years of friendship, but that's all I knew. I didn't know that his father had any part in this at all, as a matter of fact. We met anyway, secretly. There were still patches of undeveloped land in Deer Park at the time, probably because they were disputed who owned them or whatever. And so we would meet in these patches of woods and, oh, I don't know, pretend to be Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, in a way. Ok, so we did anyway. After I went away to college, I found out much later that my best friend tried to find out where I was, what my address was, and that they didn't give it to him, and didn't tell me about it. So they interrupted that friendship without my even realizing that's that what was happening.

**Zapol:** I see. After, he couldn't get in touch with you once you'd left home.

**Wandel:** Right.

**Zapol:** And how did you find out about what happened with your sister?

**Wandel:** Many years later, my sister told me.

**Zapol:** And you said your parents worked hard. What was your mother working? What was your father working?

**Wandel:** Uh-huh. My father had a nine-to-five job. When I was born, he was, for a while, a photographer, as in a portrait studio. And that was always his great love, throughout his life. When they moved back, however, to New York, to Queens, he worked as an accountant. He couldn't make a living and support the five kids as a photographer. So he did that. Makes for some wonderful childhood pictures, because he knew what he was doing. Some beautiful portraits of my mother, who of course was his favorite model. But, so, he worked nine-to-five, in Manhattan, commuting into Manhattan every day.

My mother started, when I was still in grammar school living in Queens, working at home by typing addresses on envelopes. Or on labels. Lots of work for little pay. Eventually she improved that by being a person who knows how to read, and then transcribes the tapes from court reporters. Ok? And her motivation for doing that—that was not so much to add to the family budget as such. It was for extras, and I think in large part for her own sense of independence. It was important to her to do that. Working at home, of course, because she also had five kids that she was dealing with. [00:15:33]

She lost her arm when she was ten years old in a horrible, violent, not an accident. Her father shot her arm off, and killed two other people. He lost it, obviously. And she became fiercely independent, as a result of that. So, she used to tell the story, that she was still in school of course, and they wanted to do everything for her, and she refused. They, for example, offered her to have two sets of books, so she wouldn't have to carry them back and forth. And the way she told it was, "No, I wouldn't let anybody carry my books, unless it was a cute boy." Is the way she told the story. So she became very fiercely independent, which undoubtedly was her salvation. So that she may have had one arm, but she was not crippled. The only thing I know that she couldn't do was take a hot roast out of the oven. She could put it in, when it was cold; she couldn't take it out. And she's making a living typing. [laughs] Alright? So, yeah.

**Zapol:** So she's figured out a way with a keyboard, with one—

**Wandel:** Yeah, just do one hand.

**Zapol:** —hand.

**Wandel:** One hand typist.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh. It's interesting, do you feel like her sense of ableism affected you? Was that ever explained to you?

**Wandel:** Oh yeah. I think her sense of independence is her greatest gift to me. Later, both my going to the monastery, which they weren't too pleased about, and certainly later on, coming out, they weren't pleased about at all. So there's a certain irony in, I think, what enabled me to do things that I thought were right for me, regardless, in many ways comes from her and her attitude, although it then caused her pain, as a result. You know.

**Zapol:** So let's talk then about where we are. You were talking about you went to school, to the seminary. And what was it, you know, you talked about, yes, the environment, that might have attracted you, but there must have been something else, as well, that you felt called to that environment. So, what was that?

**Wandel:** Well, I mean, I was and still am—well, let me put it to you this way: I think religion is something which is right for some people and not for others. Religion, and certainly spirituality, but even religion, which is an organized form of it, for some people can be a very freeing, and can assist their spiritual growth. For other people, fundamentalists of any stripe, it's a positive blockage to that. But my sense of spirituality, and religion, has always tended more to studying the mystics, who always get in trouble with whatever the institution is, alright? So to give you an example, in entering the novitiate, one changes one's name. To a religious name. And I chose Thomas Joseph. Thomas for Aquinas, and Joseph for a saint by the name of Joseph Cupertino. Thomas Aquinas is thought, of course, as the great theologian and intellect. But he's also a mystic. He's a poet, and a visionary, and actually came close to being accused of heresy at the Sorbonne. Joseph Cupertino is noted as being not very intelligent, but a priest who was also a mystic. As a matter of fact, the story is that he would levitate, and as a result the Catholic Church decided that he's the patron of aviators, because that's the way the church thinks. So I was also drawn more to that aspect of it. Of course, growing up Catholic, and, you know, I accepted all the theology and everything, and later on—actually, by going, by studying theology, it becomes much, much, much more flowing than if you're the person in the pew. [00:20:05]

For example, just this one example: I learned that Thomas' argument against abortion was, "We cannot know when the soul enters the body. Therefore we must err on the side of

caution.” Ok, that’s still obviously anti-abortion, but it’s a lot different from the person in the pew hearing that is definitely a baby you’re killing. Alright? Or you learn in terms of birth control, at one time, in the Middle Ages, it was believed that the entire new life was in the male’s seed, and the woman only supplied the place for it to grow. Well from that point of view, jerking off is the same as abortion. [laughs] Alright? So it becomes both more understandable how they got there, but also therefore much more easily said, “Well, yeah, but we know different now.” So my initial estrangement, if you will, from the Catholic Church, was really in terms of what we would call feminism. And those kinds of issues. Then of course, after coming out, add that to the mix.

So ultimately, I had come out, been out for several years. I lived for about five or six years in a small city in Pennsylvania—Bradford, Pennsylvania—and was part of the local amateur theater group. One of our members who was gay, but never said so, but everybody knew, right? Committed suicide. He was a Catholic, and I went to the funeral. And at this stage of the game, prior to this, I was still calling myself Catholic, but I wasn’t so much going to Mass every Sunday, or anything like that. And this priest up there was talking about him as if he knew him, and he didn’t. I couldn’t help but thinking, “But you’re the one that taught him that he should commit suicide,” and so that was—I’ve not been back, I’ve not considered myself a Catholic since then. And I’ve not been to Catholic Church unless it’s a wedding or a funeral to go to.

**Zapol:** Well, “you’re the one that taught him he should commit suicide,” I mean, was that particularly his relationship to that church, or was it really—

**Wandel:** I was very well aware of how much the church was telling us to hate ourselves. Right. I mean, they did not directly say, “You should commit suicide.” As far as I know, although that’s not impossible—well, no, they wouldn’t approve of suicide either, so, no. But, yeah.

**Zapol:** And so by then you’re well aware—Where did you learn that from?

**Wandel:** Huh! In the monastery, I had, in studying theology, learned those things I just said about how it’s a lot more foggy than is often said. I had learned about civil rights, starting with the black civil rights movement. I was also in opposition to the Vietnam War, which is going on at that time. So all these things are coming together.

And I leave the monastery, return first to my parents in Long Island and then into the city, and I run into—well, on a visit back to the monastery—the last monastery I was in was in Union City, New Jersey, right across the river. So I had been over there for holy week. And in the process, wound up sleeping with somebody who I knew, but not very well. Alright? And went into a tailspin for a period of a month or so as a result of that. Then, I had been over at the monastery again, and on my way home—I lived in Brooklyn at the time, so my way home was bus to Port Authority, walked through Times Square to the Sixth Avenue subway, and then take the D into Brooklyn. And while walking through Times Square, I ran into a demonstration. It was very common in those days, especially around election time—or, I don't think this was election time—but to quote-unquote “clean up Times Square,” which often included anybody who looks gay getting arrested. So this was a demonstration, a combination of the Gay Activists Alliance and the Gay Liberation Front. It was a picket up and down. And I joined them. And then quickly after that joined the Gay Activists Alliance. So I came out almost immediately into the gay liberation movement. I already had a sense of demonstrations, of civil rights, of anti-war, so it was natural for me to do so. But mainly, I knew I was ok. I knew there wasn't anything sick about me. I knew that that was bullshit. You know, for whatever reason, I knew that that was bullshit. [00:25:23]

You know, I remember even in high school, Catholic high school, the senior religion class is supposedly a marriage class. It's a sex class, alright? And among other things, I remember being taught, of course, masturbation is a sin. So somebody asked, “Well, what about a wet dream?” And the Brother who was teaching the class appropriately said, “Well, there's no intention there, it's not a sin.” Then another person in the class, undoubtedly intending to be a wise ass, says, “Well what if you wake up in the middle of it?” And the Brother's answer to that question: “Well, if you at that point take pleasure in it, it's a sin. But if you kind of scrunch your eyes and say ‘Oh no!’ then it's not.” It was a clear statement that the sin was in the pleasure. And that didn't make sense to me, alright? So it was there. I didn't then think about that for a long period of time. It was kind of like I noticed it, and then moved on. But, yeah! It just didn't at all make sense. So I was prepared, by the very church that was trying to put me down, I was being prepared to reject some of what they were saying about the rights of women, including choice and birth control, and also sexuality in general.

**Zapol:** I mean, Vatican II had changing relationships to women, right? I'm also wondering, you said, first, your questioning the church was around a burgeoning feminism. If you were at the monastery, where were those ideas coming from?

**Wandel:** Well, it wasn't the kind of monastery where you never have anything from the outside. No, we were students out in the world, and theoretically, the order I was in would spend six months of the year in the monastery praying together and six months of the year out preaching and whatnot. That was the theory; it was more out preaching than in the monastery, because of the nature of things, but that was the theory. Of course, as a student, we were not out preaching, but we were, on our day off, going down into town or whatever. You know.

**Zapol:** So the ideas—

**Wandel:** Are all over, right; we're reading newspapers, we're seeing television, they're all over.

**Zapol:** Can you think of the first story, perhaps, about the first real feminist that you met?

**Wandel:** Mm! Well ironically, in some ways, I suppose it was my younger sister. My younger sister, who's six and a half years younger than I am. My youngest sister goes away to college. She begins by studying I think archeology or anthropology, one of those things, I forget exactly what college in the Midwest or West, and is a co-founder of the local campus feminist organization. She's changed radically since then, in the opposite direction; she is currently a crazy fundamentalist Christian, alright? [laughs] But, at any rate—so there was that. But I don't know if that's what was did it. I think I was probably already at least halfway there, if not more so, by that time. It just, it's the only thing that makes sense! It's the only thing that's ever made sense. You know.

**Zapol:** Talk to me more about your first encounters with the GAA and GLF. So, you have this action, this demonstration that's happening. Can you describe that in more detail, what's happening: who did you meet, how did you make friends?

**Wandel:** Yeah. I should say that in my mind different demonstrations kind of get mixed together, so be wary of that. Ok? The most important one to me, the changing one for me, was in that first summer, it was another demonstration in Times Square. It was a combination GLF and GAA. And after going back and forth through the Times Square area, somebody, whoever,

decided that we should go down to the local precinct that was making these arrests, which is, I don't know, it's still on the West Side, it's I guess maybe in the 20s or something like that. [00:30:08]

So we parade around there for a while. And then we move down, as a group, signs and all, and chanting and all of that, to the West Village. And as we arrive at Sixth Avenue and 8<sup>th</sup> Street—at the time, of course, you still have that women's house of detention, where the garden now is, and especially the GLF people decided to do a demonstration relative to the house of detention. Gay Activists Alliance was strictly a one-issue organization. As an organization, we would not talk about anything other than specifically gay rights, so we folded the banner, but we stayed and joined in as individuals. Right? So we kind of, as if we were Joshua at Jericho, go around the Women's House of Detention for a while. Some of the women were throwing lighted pieces of paper out the window, just as a way of saying "hi," and a back and forth with them. Also at the time, I believe this is in June, 8<sup>th</sup> Street between Sixth and probably Fifth—which is like two blocks at that point, rather than one, or maybe even three, rather than one—was closed off as a pedestrian mall until midnight. So we're out in the street then! Dancing, having a good time, still with our signs, still conscious of it as a gay demonstration, but basically having a good time.

Come midnight, it's time for the police to open up the street. And we ain't going anywhere, alright, so we remain. And it turned into this confrontation between the crowd and the police. And I noticed two things—well, at least two things. I noticed that, on the one hand, there were a few people from the back of the crowd who would throw things at the police over the crowd. And I also noticed that the police would arbitrarily pick anybody in the front, especially if they were small, and beat the shit out of them! Alright? So I had this very strange, "fearful to stay, not wanting to go" kind of thing. Ultimately I was wearing sandals and the strap broke so I decided it was time to get on the subway. But that was a deciding moment for me. You know how it is, the most-often told story is not necessarily accurate. So, in my most often way, and I'm not sure this is accurate with it, I saw blood on the streets there that day. And I had been to GAA meetings before, but this solidified the idea that this was what I was going to do.

I was never a member of GLF. GLF and GAA were somewhat antagonistic to each other at the time, and for a few people, much much later. But the reality is—not that I would ever have

an opinion [laughs]—the reality is that GLF, as the first post-Stonewall organization, managed to do very little, actually, in terms of demonstrations or anything like that. They had many internal fights. They saw themselves as an umbrella group, and therefore, in a sense, the internal differences were not that obvious, because they were in a cell kind of structure, so you just made another cell. But in fact there was a separate women's cell, and a separate youth cell, and whatnot. The founders of GAA, in 1969, specifically left GLF over two issues: the lack of structure, because they were just yelling at each other; and also GLF was multi-issue. But so much so that in the view of the GAA founders, they were losing sight of gay liberation. A good example of this is the People's Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, which was run by the Black Panther Party. GLF men and GLF women both went to that convention. And were treated like shit! The GLF men stayed anyway. The GLF women walked out; they weren't going to take this crap, alright? I think GLF is extremely important in the movement. They started everything post-Stonewall, they made it more militant in their thoughts, though not particularly in their actions, because they couldn't get that together, alright? And therefore is an extremely important organization. [00:35:16]

And of course they gave birth not only to GAA but to Radical Lesbians, to Gay Youth, any number of other organizations that continued on and did good stuff. GAA, on the other hand, once it was founded in December of 1969—and it was founded to be structured, it was democratically run, there was a weekly meeting where virtually everything had to be voted on by the floor as a whole. The officers, including committee chairs, only had power in the case of a temporal emergency. Emergency defined as, "It has to be decided now," right? Everything else had to go through the floor. And they did stuff. Many demonstrations, many, a great deal of pressure brought in the, in a great many places.

Some GLF guys would think, later on, of GAA as being less radical than they. But that's not really true! We were the ones who are successfully doing something. And the one-issue idea, which is the primary reason for saying we were less radical, was because at that time and place, it's the only thing that would work. It brought everybody together, certainly within the membership. Not the leadership, but within the membership of GAA, there certainly some outstanding racists and less than a handful of outstanding misogynists—it's the only correct word for them! But the idea of them being one-issue allowed us all to come together. And work

together. And for those people who stayed for a while, including myself, it of course was a great education. We had a community center called the Firehouse, a headquarters more than a community center. Walking into that door didn't automatically have you drop all the prejudices, many of which would be unconscious, you were raised with. Of course not! Doesn't work that way. But for those who stayed, you began more and more to see the connections, whether you're talking about sexism or racism or whatever. It was predominantly a young, white, middle-class organization. But it was also a training ground. Young, white male organization. But it was also a training ground for many others, and indeed spun off things like Lesbian Feminist Liberation and others.

**Zapol:** So talk to me about your joining as a member, and then deciding to become a leader within the GAA.

**Wandel:** Hold that thought—

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Wandel:** —turn it off a moment.

[Brief Interruption}

**Zapol:** So, I am interested in how you came into leadership at the GAA, but before we do that, I would also like to bring in the Village a little bit. Perhaps you came to the Village before you moved to New York. Maybe any memories you have about the Village, particular, any gay bars or restaurants in the Village. And maybe what your understanding is, or was, and has become, of the history of the gay Village.

**Wandel:** Sure.

**Zapol:** Uh huh.

**Wandel:** Sure. I think probably my first awareness of the Village was while I was still in that last year in the monastery in Union City, New Jersey, a relatively older person, a former Lutheran priest, who had converted and was considering joining us, was living at the monastery, but since he was not yet of us it means he had his own money and his own car. We would go into the Village, oh, maybe anywhere from once to four times a month. To go to a restaurant. And we

would go usually to Fiorello's, which is what, is that 4<sup>th</sup> Street? I don't remember. 4<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup>, something like that. I didn't think of it in those terms at the time, but it's a gay restaurant. We would get half-smashed, actually, and hang out in the Village. Now again my consciousness was, no gay consciousness at the time, but obviously on the subconscious level this is exactly what is happening. So that's my first knowledge of it. Small, lovely restaurant. Fiorello, the owner, she seemed to know everybody. She was, you know, the epitome of a good restaurateur, saying hello, moving around the tables. And I think even from time to time making comments about gay men being her people, or something to that effect. So that was my first. Having left the monastery, once I moved into the city, GAA, at the time that I first joined it, was meeting at Holy Apostles Church, Ninth Avenue and, is that 28<sup>th</sup>? Something like that. Right across from the Chelsea Health Clinic, as a matter of fact, which is also a matter of common more. [laughs] [00:40:47]

And so I was living, by then, in Brooklyn, in Flatbush, but coming into the Village regularly for GAA. One of the things we did was, we had a very real consciousness of, well, the feminist movement used the phrase, "The personal is political." And we would very much, in our minds being, as a political act, do things like hold hands together, or kiss each other goodbye at the subway. Also common, there was always some people around who would be in what we would call genderfuck: a guy with a beard and a dress, for example. No attempt to pass. But to just, to mix up gender. And so that would be commonly to be seen around, around Greenwich Village that way, and also very much GLF or GAA people doing it specifically as a political act. To do so. I would go to some of the Christopher Street bars. I preferred the street, so I would go in to get another beer as opposed to hang out in the bar, and then I would cruise Christopher Street. So the bars on Christopher Street were of course: Stonewall was closed, by then; but you certainly had Boots and Saddles; and you had Village Sticks; and Danny's, a block away, on Hudson; you had One Potato; and down at the end, the More Leather Bar, of course around West Street. I wasn't particularly a leather bar person, but there was Badlands, and there was further up Ramrod, scene of a shooting a number of years later. And that was the scene. For me it was cruising the street, although I was much better at cruising GAA meetings than I was even at street cruising. But I would go to Christopher Street from time to time.

GAA began to look for a place for a headquarters for a community center. I was already involved at that point to the point of being among those looking at places. One of the places we looked at was Stonewall, alright, both sides of which were empty still at that time, and a mess. And one of the things we found—it was interesting—we found, on the floor, letterhead, and the letterhead included a Board running down the side of the letterhead. And on that Board of Directors was the local assemblyman. Anthony Passanante. Which was kind of interesting, to see that. The implications of course, being that he was also syndicate connected. Alright? I wouldn't say it was a total surprise, but that was an interesting revelation. We did not take over Stonewall, it would be inadequate for what we were looking for.

Speaking of Mr. Passanante. He was an assemblyman, he very early on introduced a bill in the New York State Assembly, a gay rights bill. And the lesson there, of course, was that it was going nowhere, and he had no intention of making it go anywhere. It was that thing which—he's certainly not the only politician in the world to do this—where you place in the bill and it's already agreed that you don't really want it to go anywhere, you just do it so you can say that you did it. And that certainly was true, in that case.

Also in the Village at the time, of course, you have the congresswoman Bella Abzug. Bella Abzug, very, wonderfully brash woman, with of course her signature hats. But it's indicative of the time. So here's, clearly, a friend—and I think truly so, alright, not the Passanante kind of friend, but a true friend—but she loved to call us 'her little fagelas.' Alright? It's not as bad as "faggot," alright, but in the Yiddish community, it's the form of referring to a gay person as being somewhat insignificant. I mean the literal translation, I think, is "the little bird." So it's a time, in other words, when here's truly a friend who still has those kind of ideas. I would say paternalistic, except she's maternalistic, I guess, would be a better term here. Which is kind of interesting also. [00:45:55]

Then we found a place in Soho: the Firehouse, 99 Wooster Place, and as the name implies, an old firehouse. And we were there, I don't know if you see that area as within your purview or not.

**Zapol:** Parts of it are considered the South Village, below Houston. But, so you found that space. What was it like around there at that time?

**Wandel:** Industrial, right? There may have been a few galleries over on West Broadway but it hadn't really happened as of yet.

**Zapol:** Was the understanding that being there would also be close to where other people, where people were living, where the people who were—

**Wandel:** It was close to the Village.

**Zapol:** —your membership.

**Wandel:** In the sense it's close to the Village. Our membership actually came from all five boroughs. And indeed, one of the problems of the early post-Stonewall movement was to show the world of politicians in particular that gay people were not only in the Village. So indeed, GAA did manage some demonstrations, not many, outside of Manhattan. And certainly all over Manhattan, but also outside.

**Zapol:** So, you spoke about Passanante's legislation. I understand that that was a big part of the actions at the GAA, was pushing for legislation but also doing it in performative ways.

**Wandel:** It was a hook. It was a hook. There was no illusion among, even the membership, no less the leadership, of GAA, that civil rights legislation would change a great deal. The major push being City Council. We did a certain amount in Albany, but the major push being City Council. There was no illusion that that would in and of itself be effective any more than civil rights, relative to race, is effective, in and of itself. But it begins the process. It gives you a hook to go after people. If you're going to go after the political world to say that changes need to be done, you have to be able to answer the question, "What is it we want?" Alright? And legislation is that world, so you put it in those terms. It also allows you to get in the news. It has always been seen, and it remains true today, that the path to our—in those days we would have said "liberation," rather than "rights"—is coming out.

And indeed, I'll give you two examples. I have a sister-in-law who has in her later years joined what is apparently a very right-wing local church where she lives. So, on Facebook I'm talking about, from time to time you will see the usual right-wing stuff, anti-immigrant or pro-military, et cetera. The one thing you don't see from her is anti-gay. Because she knows me, and also, in this case, her brother. Ok? The other case being my middle sister, my Catholic sister,

who is anti-Obamacare and in many ways, especially through her husband, can be very racist, et cetera, et cetera. But—she’s not active, but she supports gay rights. Because she knows me. Coming out has always, and remains today, to be the key, actually, in terms of rights.

Now, many of us, including me, have gone far beyond that. When we look at the current election, it’s not just a matter of who supports LGBT rights. Although that is, I would say, a sine qua non, alright, is not only about that in the Democratic party. (00:50:05) Both candidates clearly do, alright? So other things become important too, the wider things about economic justice, or et cetera et cetera, became important also. Alright. In a sense, we’ve gone back to what GLF said, except that the time that GLF was saying it, it was a cover for not really pushing their own rights, alright, and it was a distraction. That’s no longer true. It would be wrong today to be a totally one-issue organization. Well I think it was right at the time, circa 1970.

**Zapol:** A cover for not pushing their own rights?

**Wandel:** Well, they were really much more active in supporting the Black Panthers than they were in their own rights. They put up with an enormous amount of shit at that People’s Constitutional Convention. The men did; the women walked out. The men did! And I think that—we all still suffer to vary degrees with internalized homophobia. Certainly that much more in 1970. And, to many of the people in GLF, acceptance by the Left was much more important. That’s where they were coming out of! They were coming out of the Left, and much more important was that acceptance, which was pretty much not existent, with an exception here and there like a statement by Huey Newton. But for the most part it was totally non-existent.

**Zapol:** Talk to me more about the actual demonstrations, or performative actions that happened. I’m interested also in learning about your growing into leadership at the GAA.

**Wandel:** “Performative actions,” I never heard that phrase. That’s cool, that’s good. We called them “zaps.”

**Zapol:** Zap. Where did that come from?

**Wandel:** Probably Marty Robinson. Who was one of our—to me, there were three particularly important people: Jim Owles, Arthur Evans, and Marty Robinson, in GAA. Jim Owles, who was the first President of the organization, had a sense of stability and poise, although he was actually

very conservative. Alright? He left the Air Force over issues of the Vietnam War, but he was still largely—he was a great fan of Ayn Rand, for example, alright? What more can you say?

The second person being Arthur Evans. Now Arthur was an avowed socialist. The opposite, in that sense, of Jim. And really a great philosophical person. He is largely responsible for the GAA preamble, which doesn't sound so much today. But in the context of the time, it didn't say "We demand rights." It said, "We as homosexuals have these rights, period. Case closed!" Alright? So it's very important in that way, as a philosophical base for what GAA was doing.

And Marty Robinson was all anger. All anger. A quote from Marty Robinson is something like, "The cure for guilt is anger." I don't know if I would agree 100 percent, but he's got a damn good point, certainly in the context of the time. To me they were the three very important people.

I was appointed committee chair, first of the orientation committee. In GAA, to become a full member one of the things you had to do was study a little bit about Robert's Rules of Order. The idea being we worked by Robert's Rules of Order, but the understanding—which probably came more from Arthur than anybody else—the understanding that Robert's Rules, if everybody knows them, is very much a democracy. If only a few people know them, it's very much a tyranny. So the trick there, if you want it to be, is that everybody must know them. So you had to learn them, to a certain extent, in order to be a full member of GAA. So I was the chair of that committee briefly, and then ultimately became a chair of the national gay movement committee, including traveling through the Midwest organizing. We had no money. The organization rented a car, that's all they had the money for. The rest of us—there were three of us: myself; to use the terminology of the time, my lover; and a third person, ripping off diners all along the way to eat. In order to meet people, in a city that didn't already have something, you had a bar guide and you went to the bars and did your best to get picked up, really sexual politics in a very literal sense of the word; you wanted to get picked up by somebody who also seemed to be the type who might start something. Hippie type, in other words. Which was fine for me, because that was my type anyway. [laughs] But that's a whole other story, through the Midwest. [00:55:15]

So I went into the leadership that way. And then when election time came up, and Jim was running for a third term I guess, there was a lot of opposition to him. People called him a dictator and all of that, none of which was true. It was just time for a change, people were tired of him, ok? A number of people ran against him, including Marty Robinson, including Arthur Evans, including the treasurer, whose name I can't remember, and myself. Arthur Evans had publicly made the statement that the only reason he was running was because he didn't think that I could beat Jim. Otherwise he would support me. So the election happens, and you need a majority. If nobody gets a majority, there's a runoff election between the top two. The top two was Arthur Evans and myself. So he had already stated that he was only doing this because he didn't think that I could beat Jim, and so I won that election. My leadership style was very much to try to get other people to do things. I was not—still am—not a person to say, “This! You do this, you do that, you do the other thing.” So much so that Toby Marotta's book—which came out, what, in mid to late [19]70s?—sees me as a do-nothing President.<sup>2</sup> But my response—it was a committee system. Different issues were in different committees. Some of them permanent committees, some of them ad hoc committees, say, for a particular demonstration or whatever. And if somebody would come to me and say, “What should we do about—” in effect I would say, “Tell me when the committee is meeting on that issue and I will come and join the discussion.” As opposed to saying what should be done.

This made me popular among many of the women, but not necessarily all of the men. So I was President for a year, and then decided not to run again. Largely because Bruce Voeller—I mean, I was tired, thinking about leaving New York, and Bruce assured me that he totally believed in the democracy that GAA was. He apparently did not. He stayed there a while, and when he couldn't change it he formed the National Gay Task Force instead, which is a Board-dominated, also a legitimate kind of organization, but not what, in my opinion, GAA should be.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh.

**Wandel:** You know.

**Zapol:** We will pause for a second.

---

<sup>2</sup> Toby Marotta's The Politics of Homosexuality was published in 1981.

So, one date which you may remember is what year were you the President at GAA?

**Wandel:** Oh, I always get this confused!

**Zapol:** Ok, ok, we'll check it. We'll check it.

**Wandel:** Check it, double check it, but I think it would be [19]71.

**Zapol:** Ok.

**Wandel:** The election being in December of 1970.

**Zapol:** Ok, ok.

And I think, my records say that you joined the GAA in 1970.

**Wandel:** That's about right.

**Zapol:** Is that about right?

**Wandel:** Yeah, sure.

**Zapol:** So it may have been—

**Wandel:** The spring of 1970.

**Zapol:** Ok. And then, can you tell me any stories about any particular zaps that you remember? If there were any in the Village—

**Wandel:** Sure!

**Zapol:** —in particular—

**Wandel:** Obviously I have my favorites.

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Wandel:** And all of the usual cautions given to oral historians about favorites undoubtedly apply. [Zapol laughs] A lot of the zaps were outside of the Village. Really not that many in the Village itself. That was our territory; the whole idea was going outside of the Village. There was a GLF-

sponsored demonstration at *The Village Voice*. *The Village Voice* we thought of at the time as being very liberal, but they would not use the word “gay,” for example. They would not accept GLF’s ads for dancers, initially, so there was—that was a GLF-sponsored demonstration, of course *The Village Voice* being on Christopher Street at the time. So there was that. And the informal, you know, holding hands kind of thing, and whatnot, certainly was going on.

There was the Snake Pit. The Snake Pit was a bar—which, again, double check the dates—I think in 1970. The occurrence was before I was very much involved, although the aftermath I was involved. The Snake Pit was a bar which was raided by the police. This was a year or more after Stonewall. And in the process, an undocumented—I think undocumented, but at any rate—an immigrant, who was fearful because he was an immigrant, jumped out a window, and impaled himself in the process on a spiked fence. Diego Vinales. And he was then taken to Saint Vincent’s—no longer existent—taken to Saint Vincent’s, and there were demonstrations of support, in front of Saint Vincent’s. There was also a lawsuit, which GAA was definitely involved in getting him to do, in suing the police department, which of course went on for several years. As these things do. So there was that, in the Village, that was an important moment, as well as of course the Sixth Avenue and 8<sup>th</sup> Street one that I told you about already.  
[01:01:01]

I don’t know how far down you’re going, but Spring Street had a collective of GAA members. Bruce Voeller, Jim Owles, Arnie Kantrowitz lived in a collective for a while. And on I think West Broadway, circa 1970, [19]71, they started a restaurant called the Ballroom. These same people. There was also—very, very briefly, because financially it did not work—a club in Sheridan Square called When We Win. It was GAA members, not as GAA obviously, but GAA members who opened that, with the idea of being, not only openly gay in the way that bars of course were, but being gay and proud when we win, you know. And it was in the basement of, I guess where Chase Bank is, approximately, at least, where that is now. And it probably lasted less than a year, although I don’t know for sure. And it was—

**[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE ‘Wandel\_RichardGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3’;**

**BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE ‘Wandel\_RichardGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3’]**

**Wandel:** —you know, a club. Acts. I don't mean a disco, I mean acts would come in. I'm sure Gotham was there, Gotham being a three-member comedy team, whose records we have here. And that sort of thing was there too. So that's also the Village.

Of course, prior to GAA, the Mattachine Society and the West Side Discussion Group are very much active in the Village area.

**Zapol:** How did you get a sense of that history? Or has that been something that you've learned since?

**Wandel:** A little bit of both. I mean, certainly we were—one of the hallmarks, I think, of my presidency was that we weren't going to fight with other organizations. So I was on very good terms with—GLF was pretty much gone by then—but with the Mattachine Society, which was still barely existing, but existing, and specifically at that time, President Don Goodwin. So much so that when we literally walked to Albany, myself included, Don Goodwin, the President of Mattachine at the time, was one of the support staff with a car. Along the way.

**Zapol:** What was that march, or the walk to Albany?

**Wandel:** Again, I think we're probably talking [19]71. I'm President. Whatever it is, it's the year I'm President. I'm President of GAA. Was it the first or the second march on Albany? I don't know. One or the other. Probably the first, but it might have been the second. And in conjunction, because by now there's a statewide coalition, NYSCO, New York State Coalition of Gay Organizations, which had met several times in various places. Collectively organizing a march on Albany.

And again, the idea here was not that this was really going to change the legislature. It is a community-building event, much more. You know, you need the hook to put it on. In this case, a demand to repeal the sodomy laws. But it's really about building community, because you don't expect it to have any immediate effect upon the legislature. But in conjunction with that, about ten of us from GAA walked to Albany, straight up the Hudson, of course, straight up Broadway. Stopping at all the towns along the way. Two of our people who weren't walking, but our support staff, were making sure they hit every small newspaper, or radio station, et cetera, along the way. We stopped at a variety of places overnight. It's really indicative, of course, of

the time. Our first night, it's pouring rain. We've made arrangements to crash in a Quaker meetinghouse in Scarsdale, but you have to be—that's not exactly on the route. It's a little bit off the route. And so we're standing in front of, is it Mercy College? The Catholic women's college in Westchester?

**Zapol:** Perhaps, I'm not sure.

**Wandel:** And it's pouring rain, and we have to ferry. We don't have enough cars for one trip, right, it's going to be a ferrying back and forth. And we notice that something's going on, that there are people. It's open. So we ask permission to just step in out of the rain, while this ferrying process was going on. We were denied permission to do so. So what we did, we noticed the men's room, and we all just walked into the men's room. In other words, and did it anyway. So that was a bad, you know, a prejudiced example.

But we also stayed at Graymore, which is a Catholic monastery, and we were welcomed by the monks, who have their own interesting history, originally Episcopalian, later Roman Catholic monastery. A place, actually, that many years later did not deny, when one of their brethren died of AIDS. They were open about it. So we stayed there on another occasion. When we were up around Poughkeepsie we were looking for a place; we had people still working on where we were going to stay. It was not all put together ahead of time. I remember, in those days, one of the things going on at the moment were a group called Jesus Freaks, young people into Jesus. There was a group of them up near there, and we asked permission to stay in their barn. They said they'd pray about it. The last we knew, they still were. On that occasion, we wound up instead in a Methodist church hall or whatever, sleeping on the floor. On another occasion we stayed at Kate Millet's house, outside of Poughkeepsie. We stayed at Bard College, was another place that welcomed us. It was an interesting trip. It was an interesting trip in a variety of ways. [00:05:05]

As we went on this trip, it became clear, there's a lot of stress, physical as well as emotional stress, in doing something like this. And various of us—I mean, we were all there for the purposes of gay lib, but it also became clear that many, maybe even all of us, also had our personal motivations, conscious or otherwise. In my case possibly showing that I could lead this. In another case, somebody who had been in a motorcycle accident a few years ago, so being able

to do the walk was important to him. Et cetera. So different people. And it was very stressful. And therefore very emotional. As we did this. And then we ended—we got up to Albany a night early, purposefully, and so we stayed not in Albany, in Troy, so that we could make the grand entrance during the rally, of course. These things have to be properly choreographed. And they were. So we came up through the crowd, and all of that, and I, as president of GAA then wound up going up to the microphone. But, yeah. All the small towns along New York.

**Zapol:** So then, you say, after that, you thought about leaving New York. You weren't sure, you didn't want to continue in leadership. So then what happened?

**Wandel:** Well, after I was President of GAA, I spent a year, maybe a little less, actually, as President of Mattachine. It really was its last days and not doing much.

**Zapol:** What was the membership like of the Mattachine at that time?

**Wandel:** Almost nonexistent. They kept the office open, certainly, and there was some peer counseling, and their library was still there. But I wasn't the last President of the New York Mattachine. There was probably one other after me. But it was certainly on its last days.

**Zapol:** And can you speak briefly about the history of the Mattachine Society?

**Wandel:** Mattachine Society began with Harry Hay and others, in California. Harry himself was an avowed Communist, was both before and after involved in various kinds of civil rights movements, especially in his case I think Native American civil rights. He was kind of kicked out of his own organization because he was called before the McCarthy committee, so he was kind of forced out of there. It also started up then in other places, taking that name and maybe talking to each other to a certain extent, but not a single organization. Notably in Washington with Frank Kameny.

Washington Mattachine was pretty much always a one-man organization, or maybe two or three people involved in it, but nevertheless, in the mid [19]60s and onwards managed to do demonstrations at the White House, and at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and in conjunction with New York Mattachine and Dick Leitch here at the Draft Board on Whitehall Street in New York. They even managed, on a couple occasions, to form national coalitions: North American

Conference of Homophile Organizations, something like that. And ECCHO, East Coast Conference, or something like that, of Homophile Organizations.

After Stonewall, they began going down. I mean, Mattachine Society New York—Dick Leitch and Randy Weekner also, were the rabble-rousers. Alright? They're coming out of an organization that held conferences; West Side Discussion Group is a spinoff of the Mattachine Society. Peer Counseling, information, how to find a lawyer if you've been arrested, work of that nature. Dick Leitch and Randy and a couple of others were the "we've got to do more" pushers for this, including challenging the New York State Alcohol Beverage Control about serving gays, and, which they did at Julius' in [19]64, I think. But when Stonewall came, it was kind of the beginning of the end for them, because something new was needed, alright? And I spoke to Dick a couple of weeks ago, actually; he was here, he's still around. In many ways, you know—as you have to do when you're starting something new like that—you wrongly put down the ones who came before you, as doing nothing, and all of that, which is certainly, certainly not true. So they kind of faded out as first GLF and then GAA came to the fore. [00:10:22]

**Zapol:** Yes. So you spent a year in leadership there.

**Wandel:** Right. And then I got out of town. I moved first to Alfred, New York. Alfred, New York, I moved there because it's a university town, about a year before, I had been on a panel about homosexuality there. There are three universities there, one of which is noted for its ceramics, its arts, in other words. And it was the first municipality in New York State to pass a gay rights bill, which it had done by that time. So I knew people there as a result of that, and so I moved there. Couldn't really get a job, couldn't really do anything, so I very quickly—the closest gay bar was about a half hour away in Olean, New York. Totally boarded up windows. The inside of the bar, the decoration, was literally fruits, apples, bananas, et cetera. So going to that bar, I met somebody who lived in that small city, in Pennsylvania, in Bradford. Fell conveniently in love, and moved to Bradford, Pennsylvania for about five years.

**Zapol:** I see, I see.

**Wandel:** And stayed totally out of the closet. I was not going back in the closet. The people I knew there, one in particular—who later would be, not the first person I met there, but who would later become my lover, in Bradford—was in the closet in the sense that he would never

say he was gay. Well, the whole goddamn town knew. Of course they did; that's always the case. And I was very open. I was working for a non-profit at the time. Totally open about who I was, and he was not. And actually, he got more guff from people than I did, so this is not an absolutely true statement, but people to a certain extent react to your own sense of pride or lack thereof. And to a certain extent you can make yourself a victim. Now, again, that's not absolutely true, alright? But to a certain extent, it is. You stand a better chance if you're open in who you are, than if you're pretending otherwise, I think.

**Zapol:** Mm, mm. So talk to me about, I guess—it sounds like we're in the late [19]70s now? Likely?

**Wandel:** Yeah. Yeah yeah.

**Zapol:** How did you come back to New York, and how did you find yourself here? At the [LGBT] Center, maybe a little bit about the Center's history?

**Wandel:** I came back to New York after about five years in Bradford. Because it was time, but the immediate cause was actually a murder, of one friend by another. One person in the theater group by another person. A young woman by a young man, in the theater group. The last straw. The last straw after going through that murder investigation, where of course we were all suspects, that kind of dealing with the police. So I came back to New York. First to 99<sup>th</sup> Street, here in Manhattan, for a while, and then from there to—is Astoria next? I believe Astoria was next, and ultimately to Jackson Heights.

So I come back into town, and I get a job, whatever, you know. Not doing all that much of anything, and then I got asked to help in an exhibit being done at City Hall, under the Koch administration. And four of us were doing that, ok? Sure. So I did do that. As a result of that, a few years later—

**Zapol:** What was the exhibit?

**Wandel:** It was called—

**Zapol:** Or about?

**Wandel:** “Prejudice and Pride”? Right, gay exhibit, right. Gay exhibit. It was a trip in itself. We did a timeline of gay rights in New York City, and for whatever reason it happened that being naïve, I suppose, Cuomo’s picture was up there, but Koch’s wasn’t. He of course had a preview of the exhibit. Went through the roof! Went through the roof. [laughs] It’s funny. [laughs]  
[00:15:04]

**Zapol:** Was that picture replaced?

**Wandel:** It was taken down, [Zapol laughs] it was taken down. You bet your sweet bippy it was. Politicians have quite large egos! Anyway, so a number of years later, when the Center, under the pushing of its then executive director, Richard Burns, and the Board—but it’s really Richard, I think—decided that they should have a museum and an archive here at the Center, and he asked around, for people to do that. The Center is almost totally, at this point, a volunteer organization. There’s maybe Robert; Richard; and Lou, the superintendent; are the only ones who are paid employees at this time. And apparently Vito Russo recommended me. And they asked me, and I said, “Sure, why not.” And then, we started planning it in 1989, and we opened it in 1990. And I’ve been here ever since. But not only have I been here ever since, but it changed my paying career, also, as a result. I knew that by talking to the right people, I could learn the proper way to do this. But I also knew that community archives had sometimes justly and sometimes unjustly a poor reputation, so that in order to do this well, I should have the paper credentials as well. So I got them. I went to NYU, got my master’s in history and a specialty in archival management. Which in turn changed my paying job, as a result, winding up, ultimately, for seventeen years, as the associate archivist at the New York Philharmonic. So, you know, this has always been true: the movement, in its various forms, for me, has always given me more than I’ve given it.

**Zapol:** Hm.

**Wandel:** And that is certainly true.

**Zapol:** Just going to pause for one second.

Tell me about those early days of establishing the Center. Where was it? I understand it was in a couple different locations.

**Wandel:** The archive. The archive was in a couple different locations within the Center. The Center, when it first opened—the Center opened in 1983, so now it's 1989, 1990. There's kind of a shed next to the main building, and in the shed at that time was this kind of loft, and underneath the loft, in a very small room, when we put tables in the center of the room, the tables and the shelving, underneath the wall, as you kind of had to go sideways to get around it, ok, that's how small it was. And we started there. Similarly, the library, which has always been a separate but also volunteer program, was essentially in an oversized closet. In the same area of the building. And we were there until the first major renovation. First of all, at that time, renovation, like everything else, was a volunteer committee. There was something known as the weekend renovation committee. Now, they were not capable of doing plumbing or electrical work, but painting, and riding up with new sheetrock or whatever. They did quite well, and would come in on weekends every weekend and work on this crumbling building, ok?

The first renovation, which is what, about ten years or so ago—again, I'm terrible at dates, we'd have to look this up—there was some noticeable things that you could see, but more importantly, it was really about infrastructure, things that you would not see, and getting the building to the point where it would be up to code, and be able to have an actual certificate of occupancy. Which we didn't have until then.

The building, which is a nineteenth century building—actually, it's built at five different times, pieces added to it. On each side, the north and the east and west sides of the building, were these two towers. Alright? So in between these two towers was open space, alright? So on the east side what they did was they took that open space and made it a corridor in an elevator. It's how they managed to get an elevator into the building. So now the whole building is serviced by an elevator, except for the towers on the west side, which you're still not able to do. So that was indeed a major renovation that they did. And then of course the more recent one, which is just finishing up, actually. Major renovations. Mostly stuff you can see. [00:20:15]

**Zapol:** Talk to me about what the early archive was. What were the holdings, and—

**Wandel:** The first—

**Zapol:** —why? [laughs]

**Wandel:** The first things we were ever given were actually a gift from the New York Public Library, under the direction of Mimi Bowling, who was head of the manuscript division at that time. They had a whole bunch of gay periodicals, which they converted to microfilm, and then gave us. In the meantime, all of our early collections are coming in because people know me, essentially. I'd been around in the movement in New York, people know me, and they give us stuff. That has not been true for a while now; people who I've never heard of are regularly giving us stuff. We do not buy collections. They are all donations.

Sometimes there are fascinating collections from people you never heard of before. As I like to say to people, when I was in high school, we read the diary of Mary Boykin Chesnut, who's a Southern lady at the time of the Civil War. And I always like to point out that she's famous because she wrote a diary; the diary is not important because she's famous. Alright? And so that's also certainly true. We accept any LGBT collections, famous or not. Now, at the same time, we do have some very notable people in our collections. Michael Callen, for example, of the AIDS Self-Empowerment Movement. Recently Jackie Curtis, one of the Warhol actresses, and others.

We also have a couple of ongoing organizations. We have a lot of organizations that never had their own office and no longer exist. And you collect from this past President and that past secretary, et cetera. But we also in addition, obviously, to the Center's records—which in itself is very important—we also have, in an ongoing way, the records of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah; of Heritage of Pride, which just changed their name, I have to find out what that is; and of Folsom Street East, which has also brought their records over, with the idea being there that they will periodically add the more recent records. And we have researchers from all over the world. On all sorts of topics. Topics that you would immediately think of, and topics that would never occur to you, until they come here. And thanks to the web, and of course all of our manuscripts—the catalogue of our manuscripts collection is on the Center's website, and searchable, therefore. Well that means, sometimes you get within a collection, if you get a person's personal papers, you don't say this part is gay and this part isn't, we're going to get rid of it. You collect the whole person. So, for example, one recently catalogued collection is the Kermit, I forget which one, but at any rate also had his father's papers. So we have these regimental photographs from World War I. Now, the beauty of the net, of course, is that nobody

would think to look for such a thing here. But if you search for it on the web, you're going to find out that it is here. And that's one of the wonderful things about the web, you know.

**Zapol:** Uh-huh. So, you know, maybe just taking a little step back. What do you think is the importance of having an archive at the Center? Why an archive?

**Wandel:** Ah. Community-based archives are in a number of ways very, very different from large institutions, alright? I try to avoid bashing large institutions, but it's not always totally possible, alright?

I'll give you an example. The New York Public Library Manuscript Division also has a very fine LGBT collection. They had an exhibit there, at the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall, in 1994. It was the largest exhibit that the library had ever done, certainly to date and maybe still, I'm not sure. It was the largest collection they ever did; it was very public. Or was it? They decided that this exhibit should be from Stonewall, or maybe even earlier, to the present time, which would have been 1994. The curators, of which there were three, were excellent people. Nothing to knock them for at all. But the exhibit itself had almost nothing about youth. Barely a mention. It's a dangerous topic. Alright? ACT UP, of course, was very much alive at that time, and in a PR, if you will, or in a fight, with the Cardinal of New York. The Cardinal's on the board of the Public Library. So there was a mention of ACT UP, but certainly not about its contest with the Cardinal, and very, very little, alright? In addition to that, on that first night—it came down very quickly afterwards, but on the opening night, there was a sign out in front of the exhibit to the effect of, "Warning, this may not be appropriate for all people." Ok? Again, it's not the curators' fault. It's coming from above. Clearly, it's coming from above. Protests made that sign come down by the second night. But that shows you what you're dealing with in the larger institution. [00:26:12]

Compared to here, alright? One of our collections, Leonard Fink, of photographs, is among other things wonderful documentation of the piers and the sexuality on the piers in the 1970s. We have done exhibits of his work. Alright? We also did an exhibit a short while ago of an artist who's actually very, very—it's not photographs, so that makes it a little bit easier, but it's very, very sexual and explicit, and very bisexual. We can do that. As do other community-based archives, such as Lesbian Herstory in New York, and others in various places. So there's a

very, very real difference between the large institutions, and—because in the modern world, almost every university has a lesbian and gay, you know, thing.

I mean, another thing in the—

**Zapol:** Collection? Or—

**Wandel:** Collection, yeah.

Another thing in the New York Public was the title, alright? Now it was called “Stonewall,” I guess, “Stonewall 25” or something like that. My point here being that nowhere on their big publicity, especially the big banner they put out front, nowhere did they put the subtitle that it’s lesbian and gay. Alright? And that happens a lot, also.

In addition to that, different people—it is right and good that there’s a lot of different archives. With different specialties, or it appeals to different people. There’s no way of really accurately knowing what should and should not be saved with any kind of definitive, “This is for real.” In the archival community, from time to time, you get articles written in the professional magazines about some scheme to know exactly what to save and what not to save. Et cetera. They never work. And it’s good that they never work. It is good that different archivists will have different opinions, and therefore save different stuff. That’s a good thing, actually.

And we tend to be a little subversive, from time to time. A number of years ago, Jonathan Ned Katz, the community-based historian, received a letter from somebody in the Midwest—is it Minnesota? Again, I may have the details wrong—of having discovered, specifically lesbian-related papers from—again, I forget her name—but it was the person who served as first lady in the Cleveland White House when he was not married. Ok, it’s his sister, or sister-in-law, whatever it is. Apparently this woman, after her White House years, was married first to a bishop, male, and then later on had in Italy I think a long-based relationship with a woman. Now, her papers are at this university archive. And one day the archivist was back there, or somebody was researching her, and the finding aide, the catalogue, said—I’m going to make up the numbers, of course, but—the catalogue said that there are four boxes! And they went back to the shelf, and there were five. And the fifth box was these love letters, alright, between these two women.

Now, I can just see an archivist at that time possible having orders to destroy it. And saying, “No, we’ll leave it out of the catalogue. Somebody will eventually find it.” You know? And that has happened all the time. Less so now. For years, Austen House, on Staten Island, denied the sexuality of the couple that lived there. And that’s no longer true now, and now they’re saying, “Oh yeah, we can get tourists on this.” I’m a little cynical, forgive me. [00:30:09]

So, we’re a little subversive, for the most part. As we should be.

**Zapol:** I read somewhere, or heard somewhere, that you said you were a big [Walt] Whitman fan, and I’m interested in—

**Wandel:** Yes!

**Zapol:** —some of the longer history. Both, well, I’m interested in your connection to Whitman—

**Wandel:** Sure.

**Zapol:** —and also just some of the longer range history of gay history in the Village. In particular, the bar where he would hang out. Which—the name is escaping me right now. [Pfaff’s beer cellar]

**Wandel:** Whitman was a revelation to me, alright? I ran into Whitman thanks to Jonathan Ned Katz. Jonathan is embarrassed when I tell this story, because he’s too humble or whatever. Alright? But when I was in GAA, before I was in leadership of any kind, he had this play, which was, I think maybe five vignettes of different people. Including one which was the story about Walt Whitman meeting Peter—I always forget whether it’s Doyle or Boyle. Ok? The streetcar conductor who then he was with for many years. And especially the part of it which says that when Walt moved to New Jersey, and Peter remained in Washington, Peter wrote, I guess in a letter, something to the effect of “Sometimes I take Walt’s coat that he left behind and wrap it around me just for the smell of him.” Or something like that. So that was a revelation to me. I went out, and I bought a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. For those that don’t know, that’s his—Whitman’s poetry is always in *Leaves of Grass*, which he revised over the years, so there are multiple editions, but it’s his one book of his poetry. So I bought it, and the intro to this book—I still have it at home, this edition, Modern edition—were heads over heels about why he wasn’t

really gay. Well, you have to not read the poems to think that! I mean, “I delight in the midnight orgies of young men.”

There’s another poem that’s wonderful. Just a short poem, two men lying on the beach, and just one rolling over and putting his arm around another. Plus, very importantly, throughout his poems, the phrase “the woman equal with the man” is there repeatedly, alright? So it’s not just specifically gay; it is the whole thing. Or “The Wound Dresser.” Walt Whitman was a volunteer in hospitals in the Civil War, writing letters for people, administering to the dying. And he writes about this in “The Wound Dresser.” Recently put to music by John Adams, by the way, which is also magnificent. So yeah, so Whitman has always been important to me.

And from him, to other people. People like [Edward] Carpenter, in England. Who’s an avowed socialist and openly gay in the nineteenth century. Whitman is also instructive in that he seems to be so open in his poetry. So much so that [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, upon reading it, prior to publication, said, “Walt, you don’t dare do this.” Alright? But he does it anyway, and nobody seems to notice. People like Emerson, the literary crowd who are used to other gay people—Henry James is the same time period, for example—are gonna know exactly what those—“Oh, he’s back into the closet.” Alright? He receives a letter from John Addington Symonds in England, saying, “Oh, obviously, we’re together on this,” and he says, “No! No, no, no, no, no.” So what happened? And what happened, I think, was the sporting life. After the war—and when I say after the war I usually mean the Civil War [laughter]. After the war, in New York and elsewhere, you had this thing called the sporting life. The sporting life was about sex, about prostitution, about sex outside of marriage, and there were even two or three newspapers catering to these people. And it’s a time period when Walt is cruising certain streets in lower Manhattan. I don’t know about the bar that he went to.

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Wandel:** I know it’s here, but I don’t know much about it.

**Zapol:** Yeah, I will fill that in.

**Wandel:** Yeah, so the level of recognition of our existence has risen. And you see some of that today, also. Certainly the recent level of recognition of trans men and women has increased the

amount of attacks, and even killings. Alright? But also, I was talking to some high school students, a month or two ago here. We like to talk about how it's easier for them, and that's somewhat true, but in some ways it can be more difficult. Because if I had a close friendship, when I was in high school, it would just go over everybody's head, they wouldn't notice; that's not true now. You can get in trouble, be bullied, be ridiculed, for a close friendship, same-sex friendship, actually even if it's not a sexual friendship, because the level of visibility has gone up. And I think that's probably what happened somewhat in terms of Walt going back into the closet. [00:36:02]

**Zapol:** Hm. So I think we're coming to the end of this interview, but I wanted to note a little bit, some of the changes you've seen. We've talked about this building, and physical changes, but also in this neighborhood. In terms of who is living here, whose history is represented here, what it symbolizes.

**Wandel:** The Village remains a symbol of gay life, and gay rights, in terms of Stonewall. But at the same time it has become considerably less gay. In the city of New York—and ultimately I think this is a good thing. Many people say, “Oh, this is awful that this has happened,” but the city as a whole has become much more diverse within one neighborhood, alright? New York has always been very diverse in terms of different cultures and whatnot here, but it was the Polish neighborhood and the Irish neighborhood and the Jewish neighborhood. Now, increasingly, especially in Queens and Brooklyn, we're all living in the same neighborhood. Now, I live actually, not technically in Jackson Heights; I'm not rich enough, I am in the next neighborhood over. For example, you see, within my building: black; Jewish; gay; straight; various shades of Hispanic, because they're not all the same, certainly; and Korean; and et cetera; and Vietnamese; all together, in the same neighborhood. So while my neighborhood is seen predominantly as a Latin neighborhood, it's actually much more mixed than even that is. And I think that's true in the Village, too. Gays in general have spread out. So you still have—yeah, it's a site where a good deal of the bars are, as is Jackson Heights, in Queens, but in terms of living there, it's much more diverse and much more spread out than it was before. Because we'll find each other on Grindr. You know? Or whatever, or if you're my age, not Grindr, but one of the others.

**Zapol:** It's interesting, because in this story, bars or places where you know you will meet other gay men, has been throughout this story. So, yeah, I'm interested, then, in if those, if you feel like those sites then are less important because people can meet lots of other ways.

**Wandel:** I'm prejudiced in the sense that I'm not particularly a bar-goer. Ok? But, yes, I do think they're less important. Because you can be, for the most part, out at work, or out at all the usual places that heterosexuals meet each other, and fall in love. Alright? So that becomes less—it's always been true, I mean, we often talk about the gay male community as if it's only a bar community, and to a certain extent, the gay women's community, the lesbian community, as if it's only a bar community, and of course that has never been true. Never been true. It's always been, even within the Village, for example, bars, street, piers, trucks, et cetera. Alright? But beyond that, of course, it's always been people who were maybe didn't even identify as gay, but the tearoom crowd, for example, or just—it's extremely diverse, and always has been.

**Zapol:** Right, and obviously you mentioned meeting people within organizations that you've met, and here we are at the Center, where I'm sure many people meet. So, yeah, thank you for clarifying that. [00:40:02]

Yeah, and then I just think it's changed, you're saying, in that it's not homogenized, or just the Village is just known for one population, or many populations. Can you talk also about maybe economic changes or shifts in this area as well?

**Wandel:** Again, I don't live in the Village, and I've never lived in the Village, so I know less about that, but certainly housing in New York in general is an absurdity. And has become more difficult. And is contributed to by things like the lack of commercial rent control, and perhaps even more so contributed by the rush now for people to buy apartments for investments and don't even live there, or have anybody, or even rent them out; they're just empty. Obviously this has got to have an impact on housing. So all of that.

I mean, the people I know who live in the Village have lived here for decades. I don't, whether they could do so if they were just arriving now, I doubt it. I really doubt it.

**Zapol:** Just to go back to what we were talking about before, you said people met also at the piers and the trucks and on the street. You had mentioned Christopher Street before, you'd

mentioned the piers in passing, but if you can just talk a little bit more about those other sites and their significance.

**Wandel:** Christopher Street I think is particularly interesting in that it includes various economic classes. Or has, at least. I'm not sure exactly what's going on now, but has. Alright? So at the time of Stonewall, for example.

The Stonewall riots are a wonderful example of various parts of our communities joining together. Whether accidentally or not, joining together. Within the bar itself, it was for the most part a twenty-something, what we would now maybe call a yuppie kind of bar, with a sprinkling of women and a sprinkling of drag queens. The first person to get arrested, because she talked back, was a woman in the bar. Outside the bar—people who often would not be allowed in, but were extremely important to the riots—are not only drag queens, but street queens. People who are literally living on the street. Young people who are homeless or near homeless. And congregating of both white and black and everything in between. So that was very important too. So you have within this one event many of our different aspects of our communities coming together. I always get annoyed when any of these people want to say, "It's all us." Because it wasn't. Each of these various groups played an important part. But it's not all one. And of course what made it go forward—not, you know, just be an isolated incident, as some riots years before in California were, for example—was the Left community, people like Craig Rodwell, ready to organize and move forward. Craig starting, of course, in the Mattachine Society. You know, so it's all these aspects of our community which came together and said, "Enough is enough."

**Zapol:** So Stonewall is a part of Christopher Street. Or an extension of Christopher Street.

**Wandel:** Right. Stonewall and Christopher Park. Right.

**Zapol:** And as you're talking about this, of course, you weren't at Stonewall—

**Wandel:** No.

**Zapol:** —you came to New York after that, but it makes me think about—

**Wandel:** Sometimes I think I'm the only person of my age in New York who does not claim to have been at Stonewall. [Zapol laughs] But no, I was not.

**Zapol:** Well, you're concerned with getting the facts right there. I'm sure that you get a lot of requests for images and stories about Stonewall, so, what is the most active request that you get here?

**Wandel:** People are always asking for pictures of the riot. Or of Stonewall itself. They were virtually nonexistent for a very long time. If you asked, I mean, Fred McDarrah of *The Village Voice* of course has pretty much posed ones, alright? At the point that there was a lull in the riot, or whatever. Or the picture of Stonewall after it's boarded up, after the riot. When *The Daily News* was asked, "Do you have any pictures?" they just frankly said, "No." You know, the same, the *Times*, anybody. [00:45:14]

The Stonewall riots were not seen as a big deal at first. Alright? *The Advocate* gave it an inch, alright, and then a few weeks after that, gave it a longer article by Dick Leitch. The straight press covered it almost not at all. The Left press, notably *The Rat*, which was, as we called it in those days, an underground newspaper, did. And then of course the *Voice* did, in a very insulting kind of headline, cover it. But for the most part, it was a non-event until the organizing afterwards then allowed it to build up and show the importance that it was. You know, and remains, actually. And remains important worldwide, as a matter of fact.

**Zapol:** So just to follow through with that question, what is your most active archive? What are your most active requests?

**Wandel:** They really are all over the map. Certainly, our researchers include people working on their thesis, people working on their second book, a lot of video documentarians who are most often looking for photographs or footage. So all of that. That really is extremely wide. And oftentimes includes not just the ones you would automatically know, "Oh, Heritage of Pride records, I should look at those," but this guy you never heard of, but he's writing about his time and place. You know? And the topics covered are all over the map. Everything from the riots themselves, of course, to—next week I'm expecting somebody from *The Financial Times* in London who's doing an article on sponsorship in the parade. You know. On another occasion, a number of years ago, I had an art student from Pratt who was doing his—I don't think thesis is the right word, but whatever they call it at that level—who was doing a comparison between Civil War photography of Matthew Brady and the early photographic coverage of the post-

Stonewall movement in New York. So, everything! It's just all over the map. Because our papers include personal records, as well as organizational records, and what's called artificial collections; somebody was on every mailing list in the world, and then they gave it to us. You know, and things like our bar guides, which go back to the [19]60s, which shows you where everything was. Alright, so if you want to know where the bars were in the late [19]60s and onwards, come look at the guides and you'll know exactly where they were.

**Zapol:** So, you mentioned —

**Wandel:** Some of them with commentaries on what kinds of bars they were.

**Zapol:** You mentioned a bar guide when you were touring the Midwest, so were bar guides a particular—yeah, tell me what you mean when you say that.

**Wandel:** Bar guides, and other, I mean, the gay, the lesbian gay community has always been quite amazing at how we get to know each other, alright? Really quite amazing. An obvious example, of course, is bar guides, which will list—some of them are for specific cities, some of them are for the US, something like *Spartacus* is international. Where not only bars, but oftentimes cruising place, and of course in the modern world, community centers or whatever else there are. But even beyond that, especially for specialty fetish, or maybe also most cases where it's a specialty but maybe that's too strong of a word for it, how they found each other! To use some old language, which is probably not good language anymore, but in the [19]70s, for example, we referred to chubby chasers. Or leathermen, of course, or—well, if you're going to another town, how do you know who you're going to meet there, alright? You talk to each other! Somebody knows somebody in Chicago or whatever. I mean, they're not going to know somebody maybe in Podunk, or at least, not necessarily, but, but you know, you'll find people that way. In smaller towns, there was a standard rule: if all else fails, go talk to the organist at the local church. Alright? And these things worked, they were effective.

Starting in the 1920s, you have publications of how to find people. You get on a mailing list, like Henry Gerber in Chicago, started an organization, which was primarily about membership, and which gets sent to other members, and he also had a bit of a library. It didn't last long, because it was crushed, literally, by the Chicago police. So you had these kind of male personal ads, in magazines. Some of them in terms of gay in general; others in terms of

specialties, especially like trans people or leather or other such things. We've always been good at finding each other. [00:50:27]

**Zapol:** So, one other aspect of archive that I'm thinking of is also, is a memorial. And one thing that we haven't talked about in this interview is about HIV and the AIDS crisis. I'm interested in how an archive can serve as a memorial, and in what ways this archive may do that.

**Wandel:** In the early to mid [19]80s—no, actually, later than that, we weren't started then, but in the early [19]90s, or early on when we started, of course the rate of people dying was still very high. People would get a diagnosis and be dead three months later. So I would, oftentimes, get a phone call that would run something like, "My brother, my lover, my son had all of these *Advocates*. Do you want them?" And of course *The Advocate* needs to be saved, but it's not exactly rare, ok? And so then I would extend the conversation: "Did he have snapshots? Did he save letters? Did he write a journal of any kind?" Stuff like that. And often times the answer would be yes. People don't automatically think of their stuff as having historical value because it's new. Right? Or whatever, alright, or "Because I'm not a famous person, it's unimportant." And at first—of course I did that—but to a certain extent, it made me uncomfortable, until I realized that in effect what I was saying to this lover, son, brother, whatever, was that "His life was valuable. We want to preserve it." So in a strange way, or maybe not so strange way, for that brief moment of time, anyway, I was an effective bereavement counselor. And that remains true. It may not be HIV as much, any longer, but that remains true. That's when you say that somebody's record of their life is valuable, and useful to other people. You are, you are indeed giving them the honor that they deserve, regardless of whether they were a totally unknown person or the President of the United States.

**Zapol:** Yeah. It's an interesting thing to say, "This life has value through the objects, the things they made, the things they wrote, the things that they have left." And so—

**Wandel:** And you never know what you're going to find! I am now beginning to process the papers of Frank Hallam. Frank Hallam was a volunteer here for many years, but took an awful lot of photographs. And before they arrived I knew we were talking about really neat stuff; he photographed Folsom Street East every year for example. Well I'm looking at some old scrapbooks, alright? And I turned the page—he was in the army as a pharmacist during World

War II. First in the Philippines, and then in Tokyo. I turn the page, and there's all these pictures of a Japanese soldier, and what were clearly Japanese family pictures. And Frank has written, as an explanation, that these—because Frank was in a hospital, so he got them from some other soldier, alright? Because he's in a hospital. And it says that these were pictures that a soldier took off the body of a dead—and he uses the word “Jap”—of a dead Jap. And then, when he was about to go home, the soldier, he got rid of them and he tore them up. Some of them are, like, pasted back together, as a matter of fact, but Frank rescued them! They've very poignant, because obviously it shows us that all soldiers are alike. You know, it's not us and them, they're all—I mean, there are family pictures, there are pictures that are probably his parents, maybe brothers, maybe child, as well as pictures of him with his buddy, you know, whatever. And Frank clearly recognized this, or else he wouldn't have saved them. Alright? [00:55:08]

Or in another case, in that same album, a picture torn in half and put back together of an American soldier and a Japanese woman. With the explanation that this soldier kept those until he was going home, and then he did his best to destroy them. You know, so, you never know what you're going to find. And again, that's not specifically LGBT, but it is the human condition. And because of the net, will be findable even though nobody would think to look here for them.

**Zapol:** Thank you for bringing up a specific example of how an archive really does catch so much of our experience, and that through these traces of our lived experience, it can address so much of our shared experience.

So, I want to thank you for your time today. I want to ask you before we end if there's anything we haven't asked you about that you wanted to talk about today. Anything that you thought you wanted to bring up.

**Wandel:** I'm recently—I'm seventy years old, alright? So just recently I began going to a gay senior center. The one in Queens. I mean, I've been to Sage here in Manhattan, too, but essentially, my crowd is closer to home. In Queens. And I've seen some other senior centers, here and there, and they all look so old, much older than the gay and lesbian one does. It's a group of men and women who are mentally active, who are, in general, educated, interested in the arts, and very much alive. I don't know exactly why that's true about an LGBT center, but it

is. It is! And that's meaningful to me. It's also meaningful to be talking, informally, with a group of fellow LGBT people who are going into whatever the next phase is: "We don't know what it'll be, let's see!" On the one hand, I'm not a great segregationist; I've never lived in the gay ghetto. Whether the Village or Jackson Heights or whatever. On the other hand, clearly one is more comfortable in a group of LGBT people than in a wider group. There's less sense of "I have to keep my mouth shut about this," or "I ain't gonna push this," or—in my case, not to the extent of hiding who I am, or, at least not as gay, but in a sense to the extent of hiding who I am in a broader sense of what I think and feel, whether it's politically or artistically. I should point out the two glass pieces, they're mine. Those are my creations.

**Zapol:** Oh, stained glass pieces that you created. Uh huh. So you say artistically to say that you're also an artist, that this is a part of your identity, yes.

So, do you want to speak briefly about your background as an artist and your interest in art?

**Wandel:** It started in photography, my father being a photographer. My first darkroom experience was before I can remember how old I was, but I still have this very clear idea of standing on a stool, seeing what was apparently this white sheet of paper being put into a tray of what was apparently water, and the picture magically appearing. I was hooked from that time on. More recently I've gone into glass and to drawing, rather than to photography, but it's always been there. And now that I'm retired, you know, from my job of making a living, and will soon be retired from this job at the Center, it's rising in its importance and in the time that I have that I'm devoting to it. Yeah.

**Zapol:** So [in] these spaces, the different senior centers, you feel also more comfortable as an artist.

**Wandel:** Yeah yeah yeah.

**Zapol:** —at Sage in particular. Yeah, it's interesting, again, we've talked a bit about different spaces. Spaces where we're comfortable. Where you're comfortable. So it sounds like, as you move into this new phase, I'll be curious to hear more about what spaces you help create, too.

**Wandel:** Well—

**Zapol:** So, thank you for today.

**Wandel:** Thank you; it's been fun.

**Zapol:** It has been!

**Wandel:** Yeah. Been fun.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

## Additional Photographs



Richard Wandel at the LGBT Center at 208 W. 13<sup>th</sup> Street on June 8, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.



Richard Wandel at the LGBT Center at 208 W. 13<sup>th</sup> Street on June 8, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.