

Carroll: All right, so good morning. My name is Tamar Carroll. I'm a historian at Rochester Institute of Technology. Today is September 3rd, 2022, and I am here with my research assistant Max Zinkin.

Zinken: Hi

C: We're here to speak with Jim Ehmann about his experiences with the Kodak Lambda Network. Jim, is it okay with you if we record video and audio record this interview today?

Ehmann: Yes. Okay, thank you.

C: And we're doing this research as part of an online web exhibit about the Kodak Lambda Network. Is it okay if we incorporate parts of this interview into that web exhibit?

E: Sure.

C: Okay, great. Thank you. And then the final permission would be, when we're all done with our project, we'd like to make all of the videos, interviews that we've done, available in an archive for future researchers. Would you be okay with us placing this interview in an archive with the other ones?

E: Yes.

C: Okay, thank you very much. All right. Can you just briefly tell us a little bit about yourself, your name, your age, your background?

E: Sure. My name is James Ehmann. I'm 59 years old. I spent most of my life growing up in Rochester, New York, working at Eastman Kodak Company. I had like five or six different jobs while I was there. My partner's a professional photographer, and we met 22 years ago.

C: Oh.

E: His business wasn't so good up there, but he found a really good job here, so we packed up and moved down here to Raleigh, North Carolina.

C: Yeah.

E: As far as I go, I walk, I putter around the yard, do some painting on the house, and just hang around, read books.

C: Yeah, that sounds nice.

E: We used to go out more before the COVID, but since then, we haven't re-engaged with the community too much here.

C: Yeah. Yeah, the pandemic has been really hard that way. Can you tell us about the jobs that you had at Kodak?

E: Sure. I went to school at BOCES, WEMOCO. I studied data processing, and the, what's that position called? Guidance counselor? Yeah, guidance counselor. Got me a job at Eastman Kodak at the Apparatus Division on Elm Grove Road in a data processing center, so I worked there for about five years. Then I got a job as an accounts receivable bookkeeper in the credit department downtown at the corporate office. Then I was promoted to a credit representative for government accounts. Then I was asked to come over to a job in the distribution center. It's a call center at Ridge Road doing investigative work for customer shipping and billing problems, so that's probably my longest job of nine years. Just before, they moved from 205 to 601, and then some of the people that I worked with went over to International, so I followed them over there. Right after I moved, they took the call center and sent it up to Canada, so I was in export working with Mexico and the Middle East for several years. Then some people, a small core of people that did remain in the U.S, one of them retired, and she had me pulled back to fill in a position I did before that nine-year job, which I wasn't too happy about because I was over that job, but I was lucky to be recruited by CareStream Health. It's the health division that got sold off, so I went to work for them. I was doing export work there. Then they asked me to learn importing so I could back up the broker that we had on site. That was 30 years,

C: Wow.

E: And then we moved here about nine years ago to Raleigh.

C: What was it like? How would you describe the general working climate at Kodak when you were there?

E: When I first started, I wasn't out. I kind of didn't talk about myself a lot. When I moved over to the corporate office, I felt a little more comfortable because it was not to sound like a snob, but more educated people there, more open. Then when I transferred over to the distribution center on Ridge Road, I got involved with Lambda, and that was a really cool place to work. I was out then. People knew about me. If a new gay person would start there, they'd somehow find me and get to know me and stuff like that. Ever since the Lambda network, I made a whole lot of friends through the network. At about the same time, I broke up with my first partner of 12 years. So, it was very helpful to me to have Lambda as a support to be involved in something like that. It was kind of like if I were straight in high school with all these friends, but I never had that. I mean, I had friends, but I was never really out to them, but it was just so welcoming and nice to know all these people that are out there that are like you.

C: Yeah. Was that around 1994, would you say?

E: Yeah, around that time.

Z: All right. Excuse me. With Lambda, that was the first LGBTQ activist group you were involved with?

E: Yeah.

Z: Okay. I just wanted to ask, how did you actually find out about it? Were there flyers around?

E: How did I find out? Well, David Cosell was in customer service for promotional packaging. That's how I met him. The work I did, I did research for their customers too, as far as shipping and billing problems. Then we got to know each other through the email system profs. We got together, started hanging out. He was doing real estate at the time too. He helped me find my first house by himself. Well, not my first house, my first home. I've had rental property with my first partner before, but this was on my own. My first house was on my own too, but that was a rental too. So, I guess word of mouth, basically.

Z: Did they know you were out at that? Were you out at that time or was this before that?

E: Yeah, I was out.

C: In what capacity did you participate with the Lambda Network?

E: I managed the website and I was also a treasurer for a while.
Just getting involved with the yearly events,

Z: Yeah.

E: The educational events. The management was very supportive of us, which was really cool.

Z: By us, I'm just curious, how many people at its peak were in the Lambda Network?

E: A few hundred, I think. A couple hundred, a few hundred, I don't know.

C: What are some of your favorite memories of your work with Lambda?

E: We did a trip to a conference in Detroit one time. That was a lot of fun.

C: Do you remember what that conference was?

Just about inclusion and networking.

C: Was it maybe an out and equal conference?

E: Sort of, yeah, yeah.

Z: Does that name sound familiar at all?

E: Out and equal, yeah. I have a terrible memory, so I have to think about this now.

C: That's okay. No, this is really helpful. So what were some of the things you enjoyed about the conference in Detroit?

E: Just being on a trip, the camaraderie with the group, getting to know each other. The camaraderie with the group, getting to know them better. We saw each other in meetings and stuff, but not all of us hung out together, so that was kind of cool. I think that's the only one I went on, I think, was Detroit.

C: Did you all take a bus there together, or?

E: We all drove together in cars.

C: Yeah. Nice. Did you work with any of the other groups like Galaxy at Xerox?

E: Yeah, David Frischkorn and his partner Jack. Well, Jack didn't work there, but David did. But I met him through Dave Cosell, so we did share ideas and things like that. I mean, I don't think we really met with them. Didn't have to because David and David were friends. Then there were other groups at Kodak. I don't know that we really did anything with them except invite them to our annual events.

C: Yeah. So other employee networks like the North Star Network or the Women's Network?

E: Right, and there's the Asian Network and African American and all sorts of networks.

C: Nice. So you talked about meeting a lot of friends and feeling support. Can you tell us a little bit more about what your participation in Lambda meant to you?

E: I felt like I had a purpose other than just going to work. I'm not like an in-your-face kind of guy, but I was liking that I could help out in the background. And it also encouraged me to talk about things with people I worked with because they don't really know about gay life. I mean, there's not a lot to it, but there's still a lot of people that didn't know about it at the time.

C: Yeah, I can imagine. So was that when you say you felt a sense of purpose, can you say a little bit more about what that purpose was?

E: Just advocating for us, helping out. I'm at a loss of words here. I don't know what else to say. I'm putting on a blank here. Sorry.

C: It makes a lot of sense. I mean, advocating makes a lot of sense.

Z: Don't worry.

C: And it sounds like you're educating people that didn't understand LGBTQ life at the time. It strikes me, too, that this was shortly after the peak of the AIDS epidemic. Do you have any memories of what that was like in Rochester?

E: Well, fortunately, I was in a relationship, so it was not open, so I avoided that. I avoided that, but it was scary. You know, having a president and his wife that wouldn't even acknowledge it was really not good. I guess the good thing that came out of it was a lot of famous people got it, and so it made being gay less scary or more, you know, like when Rock Hudson died and his friend there, what's her name? Elizabeth Taylor? Yeah, she was very supportive. All of these people, friends of famous people, stood up, and that was a nice feeling to have, that it's not just hateful people that, you know, just letting gay people die.

C: Yeah.

E: I only knew one person that had it. I didn't know them very well. Well, actually, maybe there's some people that, when they had started getting medications for it, I found out that there were more people I knew, but they weren't dying off like they were before.

C: Yeah.

E: So that was encouraging, but yeah, that was not a good time. It just, there was a lot of negative press,

C: Yeah.

E: So it made being out difficult.

C: And was that like when you were in high school? Was that the atmosphere in Rochester at that time?

E: I was in high school until 1981, and so I knew I was gay.

C: That was before, yeah.

E: Pardon?

C: Sorry, so that was a little bit before AIDS then.

E: Yeah, yeah. So I knew I was gay when I was in grade school, but I didn't, you know, it wasn't cool to come out, so I didn't come out. I did come out to one person, and he ended up being my bully, so that kind of sucked. So then I would go out, meet people at the clubs, and then I met my partner at one, and then pretty much stayed home all the time. So we weren't very social. We tried to be, and we made a few friends, a small group of friends, but we, they weren't very good friends, so.

C: Yeah.

E: That kind of broke up when we broke up with each other in, I think it was 1990 or 91 or something like that.

C: Yeah, and were you out to your family?

E: Yeah, well, I have five brothers and sisters, and my father had like six or seven brothers and sisters, and my mom's family was a lot smaller. She just had a brother and some cousins, but I came out to my mom, and it wasn't a good, I was so afraid. I don't know why I was afraid, because it's like, you know, they didn't like me, just leave, but I kind of didn't want that, so I was an emotional wreck when I came out to her, and so I was crying and stuff, but she didn't seem to have a problem with it, and I forgot what she said my dad said. I didn't come out to everybody. I just told her, and she just told everybody. I guess my father didn't really have a problem with it either. I can't remember what exactly he said, though, but I was never really close to my father. He was sort of a mother's boy.

C: Was your family Catholic, Jim?

E: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Z: How religious?

E: I won't say very. We went to a Catholic grade school for eight years. We were forced to go to church until we moved out.

C: Me too on that one.

E: Other than that, we didn't really do a lot of religious stuff, to be honest, except maybe eat fish on Friday and lunch.

C: Do you think that might have been why it felt hard to tell your mom that you were gay, though?

E: Yeah, probably a part of it, yeah. Well, that was society and growing up with mean kids. I did have a group of friends when I got into high school around the corner. One of them turned out to be gay, but he wasn't out at the time, so not too much religion going on there.

C: Yeah. What's your relationship with your family like now?

E: Well, I'd always been closer to my younger sister and my next older brother. It's kind of like the year difference is two years, two, two, four, four, seven. So it's kind of like the older ones were moving out when I was growing up when I was a little kid. But my oldest sister, she was really nice. She just passed away last year.

C: I'm sorry.

E: She was my favorite. But even though she was the oldest, she was really good to me. I don't know why, but she was. And then since I grew up with Amy and Tommy, we were just closer. And then my brother Bob and my sister went in the service, the Navy, and she was in Hawaii for a year. So when she moved back, she moved in the city near us, me and my partner. So we kind of hung out together, but her husband was a real jerk. So she divorced from him after a while. But she's not very loving. She's like high strung and cold, I guess. And it's just not that very close to my oldest brother either. We never communicate really, except birthdays and holidays.

Z: Were you the youngest?

E: I was the second youngest until my sister Amy was born seven years later.

C: It seems like you experienced a big change in the acceptance of gay people in Rochester from when you were growing up in the 1970s to being involved in Lambda in the 90s.

E: Yeah. That's a good thing.

Z: With Lambda, would you ever sort of talk about this stuff or was it mainly more what was going on at the time?

E: I am sorry, say that again.

Z: Lambda, would you talk about this stuff? What would you talk about, I guess, would be my question.

E: Oh, like personal stuff? Yeah. Yeah. If they were a friend, I would. Yeah. Not a lot, but I don't know. It's so far ago, I don't remember.

C: Maybe we could go back for a sec. What did it feel like as Rochester was becoming more

accepting? What was that like for you?

E: It was good. I didn't have to live in fear as much. I mean, you always have to. A little bit.

C: Like fear of being physically attacked, or?

E: Yeah. Or just verbally.

C: Yeah.

E: Just dealing with people's hate. It felt like we were moving forward in society until recently. Yeah. It was nice because growing up closeted and bullied, it was just difficult to deal with because you didn't have anybody to talk to.

Z: I have to ask, with the fears, were they ever realized? Did you ever actually get assaulted?

E: Well, I was bullied on the bus, sometimes physically, so yeah. And then the hate just spread and somebody else, some other person started bragging on me, so I finally punched them. And then one day, his older brother attacked me in the parking lot at the bank. And I was like, you know, this is bullshit. So I had to deal with that, too. But in work, working, it was never that bad because I just didn't tell anybody anything about myself. I would say that I had a roommate or something, but not a boyfriend.

Z: Did you not tell them at work because of what happened growing up?

E: Yeah. Working at the Elm Grove plant, there was a lot of factory workers, so it was like blue-collar people, people from the country that weren't as educated. So I just didn't try very hard to live my life openly.

C: Did you feel like there was more homophobia at the plant than other places at Kodak?

E: Yeah, like the corporate office, it seemed more easygoing. Oh, I know, I remember, I met a bartender from Tara. He was in the Gay Alliance, Mike Winan. And one day, he was on a local TV show, so I went up to the break room and watched him on the TV. And actually, another member from the Gay Alliance was the mother of my neighbor's kids who came out and divorced her husband. I think it was Mary Beth Komarack was her name. Yeah. So that was happening before Lambda, so there was a glimmer of hope then. So that helped a little bit.

C: Yeah. But you didn't join the Gay Alliance at that time?

E: No, I became good friends with Mike, though, but that's about it. I didn't, I guess what helped was, I was asked to join because I knew David. So I might have joined if he didn't ask, but I'm

not sure. It's just always easier if you've got a welcoming person to invite you to something. I'm going to get some water. Just hold on a second.

C: No problem.

E: Okay, sorry.

C: No, that's okay. Did you feel that there were any repercussions from joining Kodak Lambda? Like, did you experience any backlash or?

E: Actually, no. Supervisors would call on it. No, none at all. I don't think, nothing sticks out to me, but.

C: Do you think it benefited your career trajectory at Kodak?

E: Possibly. I think it gave me more confidence to talk to people because I was involved in something that I was passionate about. So perhaps it gave me some recognition by management, that's for sure. So, eyes were on me, so.

Z: Did you, sorry, did you ever end up joining any other LGBTQ activist groups? Are you in any now?

E: When I moved here, I didn't have a job, so I volunteered at the LGBT Center of Raleigh, just being, you know, the receptionist, answering phones. They had this thing called First Fridays, where all the clubs and art markets would open up, and you could just go from place to place and have a drink or a snack and look at the art and whatnot. And the Lambda, or the LGBT Center at Raleigh, they had a fairly nice big building at the time that they rented out from a gay owner, and they would have wine and beer and snacks, and they would have an artist of the month put their work up on the walls, and you could buy the work. They supposedly had the largest LGBT library in the Southeast, I don't know if that's true, but that's what they claimed, and they had, you could rent, excuse me, you could take out books and DVDs of gay movies. So, I helped with that, and then they have this festival every year, what's it called, Out Raleigh. It's like a street fair on the main street of Raleigh, it's Fayetteville Street. So, they have booths from all these different corporations and vendors and artists, and they have like a kiddie section with blow-up slides and bounce houses and stuff like that. So, that's about all I, in the pandemic, and I just stopped doing that, so.

C: That sounds really fun. I hope they can bring that back.

E: Oh, yeah, they started it this year, but we didn't go away. We went to the Outer Banks Pride a couple years. One time we took the train to Charlotte for their Pride for the weekend. We got a VIP pass, so we had a place to, they had a tent with, you know, seats and beverages and stuff and food.

C: Nice.

E: It was nice.

C: Yeah, that sounds really nice. Some of the people we've talked to that were in Lambda talked about bringing the photo booth to the Pride picnic in Rochester.

Z: Ah, look at that.

C: Wow, tell us about that.

E: That was one of the events, and they had this booth, and they did couples pictures, or anybody's picture, for that matter, if you wanted to. It says, celebrating 10 years of something.

Z: Huh, That's awesome.

E: There was this little emblem.

C: Yeah.

E: There's a lot of work done on that. There's a graphic designer that was involved in that. His name was, what's his name? Felix Blanco. Are you talking to all the members, or?

C: As many as we can get in touch with, yeah.

E: So, Dan probably gave you my name?

C: He did.

E: Okay, so he knows everybody, so that's good.

C: Yeah.

Z: So, for someone trying to recreate that photo booth, what did it look like? Do you remember?

E: Let me see. Yeah, I think it's just a backdrop with some balloons. I don't know if they have any more of these. Let me ask my partner. Hold on a second.

C: Okay. It would be cool if we could get a scan of that photo and use it in the web exhibit, you know?

Z: I know. I hope we can. I don't know if, I don't know. I can't believe he has it still, like, framed right there. Crazy.

E: Well, memory's not serving us very well. I don't recall a booth. It doesn't look like a booth. I'm sure it was just a backdrop with some snapping pictures.

C: Yeah. Photography must have been important, you know, with Kodak's culture and...

E: Yeah. Yeah. They always had these marketing poster boards that I would always grab and put in my office to make it more livable. They were pretty characteristic of the population. I mean, the people of race, and they didn't have gay couples, but I think eventually they did.

C: Yeah. The Kodak marketing materials. I've seen some that started to feature gay couples. They were, you know, late 90s, early 2000s, I think.

E: Mm-mm. Yeah.

Z: And they made a whole sort of, like, half ad, half film a couple of years ago, like in the 2010s, that was about a gay couple.

E: Yeah. I vaguely remember something like that.

Z: It was about, like, baseball.

E: I don't... I can't wait to go look again. I don't know. Did you watch it?

C: Yeah.

Z: Yeah.

C: It's about a young man coming out to his family.

Z: It's only, like, two minutes.

C: It's very moving. It has very high production value. They did a nice job with it.

E: Okay. I'll go look it up again.

C: Yeah. Yeah. We can send you a link. So did you wind up putting that photo, like, out on your desk or...?

E: Yeah, probably. Yeah. I had pictures of my life around my office. Yeah.

C: Yeah.

E: Mostly pets and partners, but...

C: Yeah.

E: There's only one partner, but... Yeah.

C: So that... I mean, was that an important part of feeling like you're able to share yourself? Because you said when you first started working at Kodak, like, you didn't talk about yourself with your co-workers at all.

E: Yeah. Yeah. It did help, you know, people to see them, and we'd start talking about it. So it helped a lot. Yeah.

C: Yeah.

E: I'm not very verbose. I'm sorry.

C: No, no, no. That's okay. Is there anything else that you think is important for us to know about Lambda?

E: Does it still exist? Do you know?

C: No, Dan was the last one. And in 2017, when he left Kodak, as it was starting to enter bankruptcy, he took the records with him and he shared them with us. And I'll put the website in the chat so you can see what we've been working on. And we are trying to organize a reunion for maybe this November.

E: Mm-hmm.

C: So I'll email you if we're able to do that.

E: Okay.

Z: If we do it, we're going to get the photo booth so you could get an update.

E: Oh, okay.

C: We would like to. We would like to. We'll see if we can make that happen. But...

E: There's a Facebook group, I think, for Lambda out there somewhere.

C: Oh, that would be good to connect with people.

E: So that's your site there?

C: Yeah. And Max and another student, Kaden, have been adding a lot of content to it. We want to add more, more clips from interviews like this one and more documents. You could think about this, but if you wouldn't mind us putting that photograph that you showed us, that would be really neat to add.

E: Okay. I can send it to you.

Z: Cool. Thank you.

C: That would be great because it's just an awesome example of what these activities were like. And I think it's a really inspiring example of how to make change in the workplace and how it can start with basic things. Like you're saying, just feeling comfortable sharing photos of your partner at work. That's important. And I think a lot of people take it for granted now that you would be able to do that, but you really saw this huge sea change in your life. So we're not talking about very many years ago where people didn't feel comfortable doing that.

E: Yeah. I guess I don't think about it. It's kind of similar to the emancipation of Black people. It's only been a couple of hundred years. Less than that, that they've had rights. But people, white people don't even think about that kind of thing.

C: Yeah. I think about it as a woman.

E; Yeah.

C: And you mentioned things are changing right now and that's hard to see rights backslide too. But yeah, I'm very inspired by Lambda and I really appreciate you sharing with us your memories. And I'll look forward to keeping you updated as this project grows.

E: How'd you find out about it?

Z: Yeah

E: How did you find out about it?

C: Oh, Emily Jones. So I'm trying to remember, there's a woman, Evelyn Bailey, who worked as a historian at the Out Alliance. And she had asked me, because I teach women's gender and sexuality history at RIT, she had asked me to get involved with the Rainbow Dialogues, which is a yearly LGBTQ history event with the Rochester Public Library. So I've been doing that for like seven years or something now. And she had mentioned Lambda to me. And then I'm on the board of the Susan B. Anthony House. And Debra Hughes is the CEO of the Susan B. Anthony House. And her partner is Emily Jones, her wife. And so I started talking to Emily about it. And Emily connected me with Dan. And both Emily and Dan gave us records and names of other people to contact. And I've always been interested in Kodak and telling the story of Kodak and

Rochester. But especially during the pandemic, I couldn't get into the archives because they were closed. And Dan was able to give us all of the digital records. So it was great to be able to work on it the past couple years, because I couldn't get in to look at other aspects of Kodak's history.

E: So do you know Thomas Warfield?

C: I do.

E: Okay. Yeah, because he teaches dance there, right?

C: He does. He teaches dance at NTID, which is part of RIT. Yeah, Thomas is a good friend and an amazing person.

E: So do you have everything you need then?

C: Yeah, I think so. And if you wouldn't mind scanning that photo and sending it to us, we'd love to include it. You can think about it, you know, and you have my email address.

Z: Yeah, and we definitely give you like a little credit, you know.

E: Yeah. I don't know about credit.

C: Thank you so much for meeting with us this morning, Jim. I really enjoyed speaking with you and hearing your story.

E: Cool. Thank you.

Z: This was fun.

E: All right. Well, have a good day. Bye.

C: Bye, Jim.