

Nanaimo Pride Society Collection

Interviewer: Rick Dagg
Interviewee: Don MacIver
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RD: Hi, welcome.

DM: Thank you.

RD: Can you please tell us your name?

DM: Don MacIver.

RD: Nice to meet you, Don. How long have you been a member of the Nanaimo and area community?

DM: I've lived in Nanaimo only about three or four years but I've lived about twenty-five years prior to that in Victoria. So long time Vancouver Island.

RD: And how do you self-identify?

DM: As a gay man.

RD: Did you ever go through the process of coming out, and if so, approximate age?

DM: I was in my mid-twenties before I even really admitted to myself that I was gay. Seems odd looking back on it because it seems like something that you should be ultimately aware of. So I was probably about twenty-six before I actually went into a gay bar and that's the moment that I declared to myself that I have come out. I was actually visiting San Francisco at the time and I went by—of course there's tons of gay bars down there—and I kept going by this one that was right near where I'm staying. Well, if ever there's one of those bars, that's it and I got up my nerve to go in. I kind of never looked back from my personal point of view since. Had no doubts, and I had fun that night. Actually, a bit too much fun in terms of drinking and everything else (both laugh). But really opened my eyes as to who I was and what I really wanted.

RD: How old did you say you were?

DM: I was probably twenty-six or twenty-seven.

RD: Okay. Well, we're glad you did.

DM: So am I. (Rick laughs)

RD: And so since coming out at twenty-six, how has your outness changed?

DM: Outness is in my experience, and I think a lot of people's experience, a never-ending process. It's one thing to make the first steps, to go into a gay bar and admit it and find some like-minded people and enjoy yourself. And then carry on your life and try to figure out how to live your life after that. (telephone rings)

RD: So Don will we continue when the noise stops?

DM: Where were we—the ever-evolving coming out process. Along the way you become selective about who you want to know and your gayness. Certain people you want to know because they suspect and you feel much better letting them know. There's other people that—for me over the years it was like, it doesn't matter to them if they know whether I'm gay or not. I'm living in this straight world anyway. There was always that feeling that you're living in the straight world. Fast forward decade by decade and you realize that you're becoming more comfortable just being a gay man without necessarily wearing a badge that says gay or queer or whatever on your forehead. Even to this day I don't go around announcing myself as gay. Whereas some more active and out people do. But I'm happy to answer anybody that wants to know about my gayness.

RD: Thank you. Do you consider yourself in the past or currently as an activist within the gay community?

DM: Well, do you know, I never thought of myself as an activist but others may have thought that. Looking back I was in on the ground work of the Aids epidemic crisis as it was evolving. Friends around me, and this was in Victoria, right at the very early stages of it were getting sick. Nothing was being done about it. There was no organization in Victoria. A bunch of us actually set the groundwork for Aids Vancouver Island. We got the initial Charter form, we got the ball rolling. I've been kind of involved with some of the Aids stuff on and off for probably ten to fifteen years subsequent to that. I guess that's a form of activism—getting involved and doing something to fill a void. The void was, there wasn't even a place for a person to call if they were concerned or wanted information. They weren't getting the help that they needed. They were being discriminated against when they got it so we were able to rattle some feathers and maybe draw on resources more capable of dealing with that. That was probably very significant for me in terms of—and that was part of the coming out process as well.

RD: Well that's a pretty huge difference you made there. Do you have a sense looking back at that, in hindsight, that that did make a big difference in the community? That it was significant.

DM: Oh, it had to make a huge difference when we were struggling, a fledgling organization that didn't seem to be getting much done but we kept at it. It kept growing. At the point in time when I kind of bowed out—I think I burned out over it all—it still kept going and to this day that particular organization is huge. But more importantly, the Aids organizations that help people have grown. We made a difference in Victoria and subsequently on Vancouver Island.

RD: Probably saved some lives.

DM: No doubt.

RD: So reflecting back and thinking about how the community was when you first became active in it, and what you've experienced now at this point in your life, do you see any significant differences?

DM: Well, there are lots of differences. One of the differences I've been reflecting on in the last few years is that back then, to me and to many people—to me, I have to speak personally about it almost selfishly about it. It was gay men that I was interested in. There were gay bars that had gay men in them. That was sort of the community as it were. Over the years of course your eyes open and you realize that there's also gay women, lesbians, and that there are trans people and there are other two-spirited people. You wonder why they weren't part of your horizon in those days. Today I think it's a far more inclusive community than it was the way I experienced it in Victoria. It was almost exclusively gay men. And the women had their thing going and they were very strong. They were great folks but we didn't seem to have a lot in common. Whereas today I think there's so much in common with people that are struggling with sexual orientation and gender identity.

RD: Is there anything personally you'd like to see the younger generation of queer activists focus on accomplishing for the community?

DM: Boy, that almost needs—you almost need a crystal ball to see where we're going with all of that. I think we've come so far but discrimination has not gone away by any stretch of the imagination. That's a major challenge around the world. Less so in Canada but it's still a very big issue here in Canada and North American society. We need more and more examples of leadership in terms of legislation preventing discrimination and acceptance of all levels of society. Whether it's the feminist movement or the Me Too movement or any of those kinds of

things, we have to become a more and more accepting society as we go along and get rid of these horrible prejudices, stereotypes and totally irrelevant images people have of themselves.

RD: Personally, did you ever experience discrimination, harassment because of your orientation with gender identification?

DM: I was with a different person each time, twice when there was some significant discrimination or issues against them. In one case, we were in a fledgling gay bar in Victoria when this friend of mine got sucker punched by somebody in the bar. Somebody came up from behind and knocked him senseless. I was there, I helped him recover. We chased the guy, tried to follow who it was out. We were as much annoyed with the management of that bar as anybody because they had no bouncer on. That was the standard in those days, you had to have a bouncer. That was our safe space. So that was kind of a horrific thing. The other instance was seemingly very hilarious at first. Until you realize this was serious too. This was in Victoria which has a huge military base. A friend of mine and I were at a seemingly straight bar when for some reason or another we found ourselves up on the dance floor and dancing. We'd kept noticing this table of fairly attractive people and one of these guys came up and tapped my friend on the shoulder and said, in effect said that they were under arrest for dancing with another male like that. Those weren't the words but that's what it amounted to. We laughed because neither of us was in the military. Yet one of us was assumed to be in the military and doing something that we shouldn't. We sort of diffused that and went around to the gay bar which was just a couple of blocks away. After being in there for fifteen or twenty minutes, this same guy had followed us down there and tried to get through the bouncer. It was a different gay bar than the first one. And tried to suggest that we needed to come to the door and to account for ourselves. Whereas we had no connection with the military whatsoever. We experienced that but looking back on it and especially today you realize that it really was almost a witch hunt within the military. If you'd been in the military, they probably would have been nailed and discharged or put through the rigors and everything else. That was like a direct assault on us in many ways.

RD: Do you have a sense reflecting on those incidences—has it had a long term impact on you and how you felt, interacted?

DM: It didn't traumatize me per se, no but long-term effect—I still remember both of those instants. They were inexcusable and you wouldn't want anybody else to go through them and all of that. Especially, almost more so the one with the military. Realizing that there were certain

segments of society where the outlawness of being gay was more so than for the general population. I think it was happening within the military and other institutions too.

RD: So kind of switching that around, do have some memories that you'd like to share of times you felt particularly proud in relation to the community?

DM: Well, yeah, and it's sort of related to us starting up Aids Vancouver Island. I was working in a government department at the time and hadn't really come out in terms of officially announcing myself there. It just wasn't necessary. I wasn't feeling any discrimination or anything. When we were getting involved in forming this Aids Vancouver Island, I thought I better confide in my boss what I was up to without—just to let him know what was happening. Both he and his boss who was the big vice-president boss, simply came up to me afterward and congratulated me for getting involved. That felt really good and it was sort of like they put their money where their mouth was too because the big boss was on the board of the United Way. He actually came and tapped me on the shoulder one day and said, "Hey, if you guys are looking for some funds, there's some leftover funds every year from the United Way and they're dealt with as one-time grants, why not put something together." So we scrambled, put something together and I know it had his backing obviously because he was right up there. And lo and behold we found ourselves with a \$10,000 grant or something. No strings attached just to use to get our organization off the ground. And I've got to say, I was pretty proud of that. A proud moment when you get people—and again, you're always fearful in those days—who you're talking to and confiding in. What they're going to think—positively, well, I guess they're judging me as okay. (both laugh)

RD: Do you have any people that you personally consider as heroes?

DM: I've got a couple in mind. One is Harvey Milk. I almost felt like I had a personal connection with him because I had been to San Francisco of all things and seen where his camera shop was. I also quirkily used to listen to San Francisco radio at night. We could get it up here. And those talk shows, and I was literally listening the night that he and the mayor were shot. And listened to the reaction the next day. The community just sort of out of the blue getting up and marching on city hall. The other figure that I always admired was Pierre Trudeau for his famous stance on the state has no business in the bedrooms of our citizens. That was really the start of, early start, the changes in the attitude and the laws and norms and everything else in this society. To have the head of your country stand up for gay rights in his _____ (??)

RD: Yes. Do you have a sense, a belief that there's other groups, movements that have influenced the advancement of our community's struggle for acceptance and equality?

DM: Do I have the sense that they—

RD: Have there been other groups you think that have impacted our—

DM: Yes, sorry, a lot of it boils down to rights and human rights so you have to look at the Black movement. You have to look at what's gone on with respect to our residential schools situation for Indigenous People. You have to look to the Women's Movement, and Me Too recently. Issues that have come up and realize that we're all—I think there's a term, intersectionality—where we all intersect in terms of where we've been and where we're going. I think those organizations go through the same struggles and have the same successes and setbacks as we do.

RD: So one groups' struggles lifts all groups up. Good. So again, you came out when you were twenty-six basically which is, you know, a decade or so ago, more. (both laugh)

DM: (both talking) Last century.

RD: Could you share a bit about what Pride celebrations were like when you first became active in the community? Any differences between the way they were then and what you experience now?

DM: Well, I mean Pride celebrations per se didn't start where I live until long after they had started other places. Living in Victoria and boy, I can't even pinpoint the first year that Victoria had a Pride celebration. I know Nanaimo's was twenty-one years ago with that little march. So they were novel. People were considered bold to be marching in the streets. Some people wanted to march, some people didn't. Today they're huge and open and inclusive. You not only never hesitate to get politicians involved in Pride celebrations but they all want to be. Some for the wrong reason but mostly for the right reason. They want to support a community that is vibrant. I think what's interesting about where we're at right now is that even, particularly in Nanaimo, is that the city looks at it as a fabulous festival to add to their list of fabulous festivals. That's sort of a feather in the cap of people that were involved in the Pride celebration. So it's evolved from a few people marching down the street boldly to huge celebrations during Pride month or during the summer months and year round even.

RD: So you talked earlier on about your process of coming out. Do you have a sense that coming out back when you were twenty-six is different than for folks that are going through that now?

DM: I think in a sense it has to be a little bit easier now than it was then because there was virtually no public information available to someone who was struggling with these things. The only thing I knew about gay stuff was gay magazines and that kind of thing. Discussions in the papers and the issues that were happening were all just reported. Now there are so many more resources available starting with the schools with the gay-straight alliances and in the universities even. I think universities probably got them before the schools did. You have to go right down to school age kids because those are the ones affected by it. So it's got to be easier in many ways but in other ways, there's still this discrimination, this expectation in society that we're straight society—and we can't forget that it's hard for each individual to make that decision. How they're going to deal with it. So, good and bad.

RD: Do you notice any differences in how open, accepting younger community members are now than when you first started becoming active in the community?

DM: Much more open and accepting for sure. Again, I think that we have so many more role models, public role models like Ellen DeGeneres and Anderson Cooper just to pick two like that. And there were none like that in the earlier days. Gay politicians, I think Victoria city council has three gay politicians on their council. There's tons of gay federal and provincial MPs, MPPs. One of the biggest differences between now and then, I think, for people coming out or for the community in general, is that we have the laws and the mores and everything else of society much more on our side than we did in those days. It was very much you were to keep it hidden, that you were gay back then. I'm sure there was a small community. So, it's much easier to do when you have—it all boils down to rights. When you have rights on your side. So that would make the next generation—they'll have their own challenges but they won't have the challenges of the law being on their side.

RD: Do you have any advice that you'd offer to the younger community members for activism and or life in general?

DM: Just don't ever take anything for granted. Those rights and changes that we've all acquired as we see around the world can be taken away from you. So, keep on fighting, keep on standing up for what is right and standing behind people that are doing things more active than you. Never let your guard down.

RD: Good answer. Anything else you'd like to share with us?

DM: Gosh, I don't think so at this point.

RD: Thank you very much, Don.

DM: Thank you.