

*Outright Radio*

Series 2004

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## **“Against the Odds” Transcript**

Host Intro: From PRI, Public Radio International, it's Outright Radio, I'm David Gilmore. Today on ORR, coming out against the odds...stories of gay folks who refused to cave in to peer pressure, who put their lives and careers at risk and came out anyway...

First up stories of two gay sailors...

Everyone I worked with, like I said, was kind of gruff and macho. So, I was needless to say, scared to death, (but you can't let anyone know that you're scared to death.)

I thought that I could withstand the scrutiny of challenging the policy. I really felt that it was wrong and I felt that if I didn't do something about it, who else would?

Later on stories from a gay prom...

Clip from Prom (get female voice)

16:05 Katie: Um, well this is my date.

Or

This is awesome.

Illana: Well, now I feel pretty good about this because.....

Katie: I feel completely supported. This is so awesome. (This is awesome. I was looking forward to this and now I'm even happier.)

We hope you'll join us for the next hour as we present these extraordinary stories from the heart of gay America.

Theme Music

If you think back to almost 50 years ago, the Black Civil rights movement found its most enduring symbol in the act of a single courageous woman. It was December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parks, a black woman, stepped aboard a bus and defiantly sat down in the front – seats normally reserved for whites.

You see, any civil rights movement is constructed of individual acts of courage carried out in the face of adversity. Some of those acts are small and private ones while others find a more grand theater. Each reached a point that they were no longer willing to compromise their dignity and refused to give in to oppression. Rosa said she was tired and didn't want to get up and move. In 1969, the Stonewall rioters were already a little cranky about the recent death of Judy Garland. Ongoing police intimidation in the gay bars in New York finally became the flashpoint that launched the modern gay rights movement. Rosa stayed seated. And the drag queens stood up.

Music

Now, in our first segment, “In the Navy,” we hear the stories of two members of the US Navy who, against US Naval code, refused to keep their sexuality a secret. Were these acts of defiance designed to test out the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy? Well, no and yes. In the first section, it’s more a case of “couldn’t keep a lid on it” and the second, was more of a deliberate act of defiance. Give a listen to “In the Navy”.

Remember the advertisements for the US Naval Recruiters? Well my version has some guy on an aircraft carrier directing planes on deck with a big headline that says, “The Navy- it’s not just a job – it’s an Adventure.” Now, I’m imagining the fine print at the bottom that says something like – “ Heterosexuals only. Gay men, lesbians and bisexuals need not apply. Homosexuals may face harassment, character assassination, dishonorable discharge, loss of GI benefits, verbal and physical abuse that may result in death. See your local Navy recruiter today.”

And the armed services advertise their career possibilities as a chance to excel as part of a team. Recruitment efforts cast a wide net and when they pull it in their catch, there are going to be some gays and lesbians in it – mostly young ones who aren’t sure of their sexual identity yet. So, imagine yourself pulled in by that seductive net cast by the US Navy. Suddenly, you’re in an unfamiliar landscape trying to navigate your way through a maze of strange faces and menacing forces. Imagine you’re a gay boy, and it’s your first day on board a US Navy ship.

Kenny: It’s a whole different world. It’s like a floating New York. You know, you’re walking down the hallways are like walking down the streets of a bad area.

David: This is Kenny Kimball. He was 18 when he joined the Navy and a bit unprepared for what he was about to encounter.

Kenny: I was instantly stuck into a division on the ship where it was filled with the most masculine of Army Navy people. The deck division of a ship is where they stick the convicts. Some of they guys had tattoos on their foreheads and a lot of them were given the choice either prison or the military. So here I was, I wouldn’t say delicate, but certainly, you know, I weighed about 125 pounds, almost six foot tall, kind of wiry, not very physical.

David: That sounds pretty delicate to me.

Kenny: And the work, if you would be in jail, would be like breaking rocks, you know. They had us chipping things.

David: You were the chain gang at sea.

Kenny: And doing lots of the maintenance on the ship and all that kind of stuff. Everyone I worked with, like I said, was kind of gruff and macho. So, I was needless to say, scared to death, but you can’t let anyone know that you’re scared to death.....especially when you have any effeminate qualities whatsoever. You try to develop ways for survival. You realize that you’re not going to get by by faking it as a masculine person so you need to have you’re intelligence kind of step into it.

David: You have to be clever

Kenny: You have to be clever about it.

David: Without much hope of fitting in physically, Kenny used his class clown sense of humor as a survival skill.

Kenny: And I remember the first few weeks on the ship because I was the smallest of everybody they would lower me over the side of the ship on a rope and they just used to think it was the funniest thing, you know, they would tie a rope to either side of my dungarees and onto my belt and dangle me over the side of the ship and we'd be like....to chip paint, or to change a light bulb or, you know, all these weird things.

David: To feed the fish.

Kenny: And smaller ships would come inside the ship to unload marines and things like that. It was an amphibious ship. Well, one time a shark got in there and they thought it was the funniest thing to hook a rope to me and dangle me down over the water.

David: When you knew there was a shark in there.

Kenny: Oh yeah, they wanted me to, like they had a makeshift hook and it got stuck in the wood on the side so they would lower me down to unhook this hook and they just got great delight....

David: They'd all stand around laughing while they're dangling you over a shark that was stuck in the ship.

Kenny: Right.

David: Oh that's funny.

Kenny: I mean, it was only a five or six footer....In a way it was okay, because then I was accepted. It didn't matter what they did to me, you know, they developed a nickname for me. They called me Skippy. I became sort of this mascot. Like one time I remember we were on a tour in Amsterdam and we were on the bus going back to the ship and one of them put me on his lap and you know they were all toasted as was I and you know, one of them is bouncing me on his lap and the other one's like, "Have Skippy come over here." And they kind of passed me from one lap to the other...and they pretty much got into a fight over my attention which was kind of fun and I felt like this sissy damsel in distress, you know, like, you ...and the way it ended was somebody else came into the picture and took me off to the side and kept me away from everybody.

David: Was this a sexual thrill for them? Or just affection?

Kenny: I think a little bit a little bit of each.

David: As a young man I was appalled by the gay stereotypes – florist, interior designer, fashion designer, afraid that a declaration of my homosexuality meant that I would spend the rest of my life making things pretty – fallacious notions that later turned out to be true...for Kenny as well, but also perhaps a clever way for him to avoid doing mundane work on board.

Kenny: In the office that I worked at there was another office attached to it and the doors on the ship were pretty much oval openings with wrought iron kind of bars so you could see back in this office and I noticed this huge table with rolls of canvas and naugahyde and fabric and there was a sewing machine on the end of the table.

You know so I asked somebody about it and they said that's the canvas shop where the parachute riggers are. Well, the ship only had one person at the time that was qualified to use the sewing machine. And I will do anything I can to make my work load easier...so it dawned on me that if I taught myself how to use this sewing machine that I would probably be used for that and not scrubbing toilets and chipping paint or that kind of stuff.....

David: Something less glamorous.

Kenny: Exactly. The bars I found were about seven or eight inches apart. And I was just thin enough where I could kind of wedge my way through the bars so I would go back there when I was having my free time and I would shimmy through the bars in the secrecy of night and teach myself how to use the sewing machine. I found out that the one guy who knew how to work it was retiring. So I kind of moved in and said, you know, “why don’t you teach me how to use it?” And he didn’t know that I had been sneaking in to use it so within an hour I was already on a project. So, I got his recommendation, he retired, and they pretty much handed me this silver platter, this sewing machine, this whole office....and it was great, because when you’re out to sea for six months you run out of curtains, you run out jeans, you run out of tool belts, things need to be fixed, and I of course promoted myself, “Oh, you need a tool belt, you call me.” And, I became instantly popular.

The captain found out how well I was doing and I redecorated his stateroom. They had one hallway that everyone could walk down and they had one that the pretty people could walk down – the admirals and everybody, where he had me make covers for every ugly piece of equipment that was in this hallway so that it would make it nicer for him to walk down. I made a cover for his boat, I recovered his chairs in his office. I became “Skippy the Little Sewing Machine Nymph”.

David: As a life long survival skill gay folks have learned how to find each other in oppressive environments. Kenny used his sewing machine to find the other queers on board and even talked about turning their dungarees into skirts for their own private drag shows. But perhaps Kenny was being a little too queer even for the navy.

Kenny: There was this one police officer on the ship that didn’t like me. He just hated that I was popular, he hated that I was defiant, he hated that I was a sissy. He hated everything about me. And He tried desperately to get me off the ship so he started harassing me and since I was so close to the captain I just went to him and said, “You know something, I know I’ve survived this witch hunt, but the truth of the matter is I have had sex with a man and I’m having these emotions and I can’t handle it and whatever”. I pretty much said to the captain that I need to get off this ship, I’m being harassed.

David: The captain, concerned about the possibility of anti-gay violence sent Kenny on an all expense paid shore leave to France for six weeks. Meanwhile Kenny managed to successfully sue the government for breach of contract and was given the choice of restarting his program or an honorable discharge.

Kenny: So, I took the discharge and somehow I managed the legal officer to get me off the ship when I was in Marseille. It’s a tradition when you leave the ship for your friends to carry you and your stuff off....to actually, oh to carry you off the ship....and I had twelve of the most masculine, gnarly looking guys, but you know what, those guys had hearts of gold. And they just, they were wonderful. It was just beautiful for me....Because the actual police officer guy that wanted me off the ship was watching this and it just burned him to see that I was still – that he couldn’t break me.

David: That you were still loved.

Kenny: Right.

David: And so they carried you off the ship....

Kenny: So they carried me and my six or seven pieces of luggage off the ship. It was a huge event.

David: And everybody knew you were being discharged because you’re gay?

Kenny: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And I actually started dating this guy in Marseille. This little French man. He was beautiful. He came to pick me up at the ship to take me to the airport to fly to Paris then from Paris over to New York and then New York to Virginia.

So, he had one of those tiny little cars...it was kind of cute. And he had parked it on the pier. Well, in the meantime, while he was coming to get me on the ship somebody had parked something in front of this car. And this guy that I was seeing must have been, I don't know - 4' 11".

David: 4 feet 11?

Kenny: Oh he was tiny, but he was cute.

David: And he was waiting on the dock.

Kenny: He was waiting on the dock. And he had no luck in getting anyone around to move this car so my friends all got around the car and they literally picked it up and moved it out on to an area on the pier. And I was in tears the whole time. You know, just this display of affection and camaraderie and to me this whole thing with the military now "Don't Ask Don't Tell," it's a bunch of bull. Because they had as much respect for me, if not more, knowing that I...I was me, and that's...basically, whether it was sissy or masculine, whether were playing cards or if I was sewing up the back hem of their pants, you know, after they bent over and ripped their seam, it didn't matter to these people. They appreciated me because I allowed myself to be exactly who I was. Because of those people I have really fond memories of the military.

It was a good experience for me. And it was the first sense that I had that I could actually live a gay lifestyle and be who I am and not have to pretend to be masculine and not have to even fall into the stereotype of being a sissy.

David: Kenny Kimball lives in San Francisco as a civilian.

What I find most intriguing about the political debate over gays in the military are these personal stories where heterosexual service members find themselves working next to gay ones. Often straight service members will look the other way and make evaluations of their gay shipmates based on their personality and performance and not the law.

When judgment is passed on a gay shipmate in favor of dismissal, some service members like Kenny make the transition back to civilian life with ease, but for others the military is a way of life, a career for which they've been groomed and when faced with expulsion from the service for being gay, the stakes are so much higher. They risk losing a bigger part of their identity.

Zoe: It was very frustrating in that here I had spent, at this point in time, I think I had been in the military for twelve years, and had given it the best years of my life, so to speak, since I had been 17 and had been completely committed, and dedicated and loyal, had served on board ship had served in Washington, D.C., on active duty, had always strived to be my best – and not because anything I had done not because of any performance issues or behavior – they were that quick to boot me out just because I was telling the truth about who I was.

David: This is Zoe Dunning. She spent over two grueling years battling the navy with the hope of saving her career. At this point I need to confess my fascination with sailors. It's those crackerjack uniforms with the bell bottoms and the very thought of an entire shipload of young men sailing the planet with their hormones sloshing over the gunwales, but sitting with a female navy person like Zoe was a bit different than my sailor fantasies. It was kind of intimidating. She sits erect in her chair with a fearless gaze of a woman trained by the military.

For her, life in the navy wasn't exactly a splash of giddy memories of being bounced on the laps of hunky sailors. The demands of the military permeate her persona even in casual interviews like this one. I talked with her about her reasons for joining the navy.

Zoe: I entered the navy when I entered the US Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1981, I was 17 years old. There were a number of motivations. Both my parents had served in World War II. I distinctly remember my mother's stories of her service and how much she enjoyed and enjoyed the experience. Inspired by her parents, Zoe applied for and was accepted at the US Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland which offers up a well rounded education at the right price.

David: When did you come out?

Zoe: I came out in January of 1993 and this was less than a week before Clinton's inauguration. During his campaign he had pledged to lift the ban on homosexuals in the military and as he was getting closer to his own inauguration there was starting to be news reports that he was going to renege on that promise so I heard about a political rally that was going to take place outside of Moffat Naval/Air Station and the whole purpose of the rally was to encourage Clinton to do the right thing – to not renege to go ahead and lift the ban. And at first I was just going to attend and I was actually quite scared of even being seen in the audience. But then they sort of offhandedly asked me if I wanted to speak at it and I had immediately declined, but the question kept gnawing away at me and I was thinking about my mother's comments of if you don't do something about it, then you're agreeing with it and I knew that I wasn't agreeing with what was happening and so I needed to sort of stand up for what I believed in and somewhat impulsively agreed to speak at this rally and didn't really even tell them that the purpose was to come out, it was just going to be to speak at it. But I worked on my speech and decided to come out, because I felt like there were no blemishes on my military record and I thought that I could withstand the scrutiny of challenging the policy. I really felt that it was wrong and I felt that if I didn't do something about it, who else would?

David: Well, apparently the navy read the papers about the rally and determined that Zoe had crossed the line of professional ethics.

Zoe: The next weekend when I had to come in to do my reserve drill, I was immediately pulled aside by my commanding officer and he had informed me that they had processed some paperwork and that they were processing me for discharge and that I would be having an administrative hearing and in the meantime I was put on administrative leave which meant that I could no longer serve and I would no longer get paid. And I remember at first being furious because I hadn't really hadn't had my day in court yet, this was all based on newspaper coverage of my coming out. I felt that was rather unfair to just sort of say go home until you get to have your trial. I asked for legal assistance. The only lawyer they had on hand was the one who was processing me for discharge so she was not of much help.....and I went home, and I remember it was just about one of the loneliest moments I've ever had.....I was in uniform, it was the middle of a Saturday. I really had no where to go. I lived in Los Altos at the time which was a good 45 miles away from where I was drilling in Alameda and I just wasn't ready to go home yet so I knew that there was sort of a town hall meeting taking place at the Women's Center. It was being held by NGLTF about the gays in the military issue. And I decided to go to that, and I was still in my uniform, and I remember, it was like, I needed some sort of reassurance and support, and it was like, I went into this meeting and there was like all these people who cared about this issue.....and it was just nice to have that sort of family or home to go to in what was one of the lowest moments for me in all of this.

David: What happened was I had this two and a half year legal battle. At first I had a hearing under the old policy, and they had voted to unanimously to kick me out. But before they could enact that, Clinton announced the new policy, Don't Ask Don't Tell, and they decided to try me again under the new policy.

David: This new policy was an attempted compromise between Bill Clinton's desire to allow gays to serve openly and the existing anti-gay establishment of the time.

Zoe presented an unblemished service record in her hearing under Don't Ask Don't Tell, but had to face the possibility of character assassination.

Zoe: It just seemed so unjust that there was this presumption that I engaged in illicit conduct simply because I had said that I was a lesbian. And the whole purpose of the trial was for me to rebut this presumption that I engage in illicit conduct.

David: And illicit conduct for them would be engaging in sexual relations with another woman?

Zoe: Not even sexual relations.....attempt to arouse someone else, I think is how they define it. And so, I had a number of character witnesses, people from my unit, who took the stand and said that they enjoyed serving with me, that I had never done anything inappropriate- but they've been others who have done the same thing and even taken an oath of celibacy on the stand, and they've still been booted out. So, I really thought there was no way I would win it. My lawyers were completely ready to go into federal court the next day, we had all our papers ready. We thought for sure, just the like the first hearing, they would vote to kick me out. And then we would have to go to federal court to keep me in.

When they announced the verdict, I stood up, I remember I was shaking, and tears were welling up in my eyes because it was like, "Here we go again." You know, I just went through all of this trouble and for not. Because I knew they were going to vote to kick me out.....And when they said they were going to retain me and that it was unanimous, I was just shocked. It was a very bittersweet feeling, because on the one hand, it was great- I get to stay in. But on the other hand, my whole purpose for doing this was to create legal precedent to challenge the policy itself and to try to overturn the policy, and by winning, I basically lost any standing to do that, because I had not been wronged so to speak, I couldn't go to federal court and challenge it.

David: The Pentagon had used Zoe as a case in point to give the illusion that its policy of Don't Ask Don't Tell is not discriminatory, that in fact it is possible to win your case against the Pentagon. But don't try to use her strategy.

Zoe: After my hearing, the Pentagon freaked out and sent out a memorandum, that said, Look, I know we haven't given you much guidance as to what it takes to rebut the presumption, but we'll tell you this much, saying that your statement is one of status only, is not sufficient to rebut the presumption. So, in essence they changed the rules. After I won, they prevented anyone else from using my legal strategy ever again.

David: For now the navy has chosen to leave Zoe alone, to serve based on the superlative merits of her career, but she was unable to pave the way for other gays and lesbians to fight the system, at least on a legal level. On a personal level, she's gained an enormous amount of power in her ability to stand up for who she is, to excel and to be accepted – not just in the navy but in her civilian life as well.

Zoe: It's been sort of interesting since I'm in the reserves, I have this whole civilian life too. And, when I came out I was actually a graduate student at Stanford getting my MBA. And I went into consulting afterward and one thing about consulting is it's project based, so your working with different people on every project. So, it's this constant coming out process with your co-workers.

This was during the whole legal proceedings when we were preparing for trial. I was put on this project and my manager was this very devout Mormon from Portland, Oregon. I think he was only 30 years old and he had like five children already. On our first day on the project we had just been introduced to each other. We go to the client site in San Francisco, and I introduce myself to the receptionist because we're there for an appointment

with the client and the receptionist who is clearly gay says, “Oh Miss Dunning...Well, I just want to say to say thank you so much for all that you’ve done. And I just think it’s so courageous what you did. And I just think it’s wonderful. And I appreciate it so much ---Thank you, thank you, thank you.” And my manager is looking at me like what the hell is this all about?

And so he kind of gives me a strange look and we have our meeting with the client and as we’re leaving, we’re in the elevator and he’s like, “What was that all about – with that receptionist?” And I said, “Well I have a bit of notoriety here, at least in San Francisco” and proceeded to tell him the story about my battle with the navy and that it was still ongoing. And it turned out he had never ever met anyone that he knew of that was gay. And so it was a slow education process over the next couple of months of our project where we’d be forced to be in a car together driving somewhere or sitting next to each other on an airplane and we would start these conversations and debate back and forth – and, is it biological or learned? And what if one of his children came to him and said that they were gay?

And, you know, he started slowly to get educated. And the sweetest thing happened right before my second trial. It was right around Thanksgiving and I came home and there was this huge bouquet of flowers on my doorstep and the arrangement was one of a dozen red roses and in the middle of the arrangement was a single yellow rose. And I thought, “Who is this from?” And I opened up the card and on the card it said, “Some may fail to see the beauty of the yellow rose and remove it from the bunch.” And it was signed “Good luck, Ross”...who was my manager. So, here’s this guy who had sort of come all away around and just totally unexpected beautiful sentiment and I think that kind of been my experience throughout all of this – is that it’s given me the opportunity to meet people, tell them my story, educate them in some ways but just sort of touch them and get them to think about things a little bit differently. I might not be able to challenge the policy from a legal precedent standpoint right now, but I can, my goal is to change the military and all those I interact with just on a one to one basis. I just figure that my role in history is to prove that the presence of open homosexuality is not a detriment to unit cohesion and moral. I mean, that’s the sole argument that’s being used now for this policy is that the presence of an open homosexual in a military unit will ruin that unit’s cohesion and moral...and I’ve got a seven year track record that’s says I’ve been serving openly and my unit has performed superbly and it’s not an issue for me and it won’t be an issue if you overturn this policy.

David: Zoe Dunning lives in San Francisco. She is now a commander in the US Naval Reserves.

While the US military is slow to change, in high schools across the nation more and more students are demanding that their sexual orientation be acknowledged and accepted. When we come back, walking the line between separate-but-equal and all out pride – a visit to the gay prom.

It’s really, really sad that we have to have that much security at a prom where kids are going to.

We’ll be back with more stories of coming out against the odds...when Outright Radio continues...from PRI Public Radio International

Break

You’re listening to Outright Radio, from PRI, Public Radio International, I’m David Gilmore. You can contact us at [Comments@OutrightRadio.org](mailto:Comments@OutrightRadio.org) or call us toll-free at 866-OUTRADIO. That’s 866-688-7234.

Now back to our theme of coming out against the odds. One of the events that defines who we are, or who we are not, is the high school prom. This time of preening for inspection is classically nerve-wracking. Gotta choose the right restaurant, the right outfit...what will the parents think of the date? What will the date’s parents think of me? What are my peers thinking? Not being one to try to fit in, I skipped MY prom. Knowing

that I probably couldn't play a very convincing straight guy, I chose Gay Option #1: Avoidance. Option #2 for a gay kid would be to bring someone of the opposite sex. Gay Option #2: Invisibility.

Gay Option 3? Bring a date of the same sex. Taking a same-sex date to the traditional prom is definitely coming out against the odds. Bringing a same-sex date to a gay prom? Well, it's not avoidance and it's not invisibility. For queer kids it's an opportunity to attend a dance with their peers without having to lie. The awkwardness, the nervousness, the anticipation: it's all there without the charade of heterosexuality. However, what if your prom had vocal, hostile demonstrators outside?

Tom Truss is our chaperone as we visit a prom where boys dance with boys and girls dance together by choice, and where, under the glitter ball and crepe paper, these kids don't have to hide...

### [PROM QUEENS:]

Tom: I grew up in the late 60s, the fourth and last child of an east coast suburban family. By looking at our family photo albums one would think that our camera got lost a week after I was born and then magically reappeared when I hit high school. My older three sisters' cute little faces litter our photo albums while there's only one of me as a new baby. Then you turn the page and POOF there I am, in tenth grade, standing in the backyard sporting a crème yellow tux, arm and arm with Elizabeth somebody or other. She's in 12th grade and we're headed to the senior prom. The fact that she was a wild child with big breasts and wore a low cut dress helped put my fag reputation on hold. Thanks, Elizabeth – and I'm sorry for using you as a hetero shield. The next photo of me, I'm in 11th grade, grinning ear to ear, standing beside Myra Caulfield. It's prom time again – only in this picture I'm wearing a baby blue tux and all the wildness of Elizabeth has been bumped up by Myra herself. She's big, black and loud. The next photo, of course, is my senior prom and, had I kept up my pattern of going with wilder and wilder dates, I would not have been standing next to Renee. But there I am, in white tails, with my arm around a character from *Little House on the Prairie*. Sorry, Renee, I chickened out – you were the wrong gender – again.

Samson: I'm really excited to go to prom today because I never went with somebody I'd been going out with, you know, and that's going to be really different for me and I think for me, more meaningful too.

Tom: This is Samson. He's first generation Chinese-American. He's a junior at UC-Davis. He and his boyfriend Juan met at a gay youth social club. They've been dating for about a year.

Samson: Actually my first impression of Juan - he was really loud, but he was really cute too.

Juan: And I thought he was slow when I first met him. I said, "Oh my god, he's so slow – what am I going to do with him?"

Tom: That's Juan.

Juan: I thought he was cute as well.

Tom: He works at a clothing store in San Francisco, but lives across the Bay here in Hayward. Juan is from Nicaragua and was raised in Hayward by his grandmother. He graduated early this year from high school.

Juan: There is a prom going on at my high school. Actually it was about two weekends ago.

Tom: And did you think about going to that?

Juan: Never. It's like really homophobic and stuff like that. I wouldn't have felt as comfortable as I feel now.

Tom: It's June. Prom time in America. But here in Hayward they're bending that straight dominated right of passage to truly honor the pursuit of happiness for all.

Samson: Actually I'm looking forward to slow dancing because I've never slow danced with Juan before because we always go to clubs or whatever and they're playing fast songs.....That would be really different for me. And then before that there's been opposition before the prom starts.

Juan: Oh yah. Oh yah. If I pass the doors I will go to hell. I work in San Francisco and the same people that are out in front of the door of my place are there at the gay proms. And there's people there almost everyday, with cards and poster boards, you know, "You're going to hell, fornicators." And those same people are there at the prom. I saw them last year. But I'm sure they're going to be there.

Tom: If you could say something to them at the prom, either of you, what would you say?

Juan: You're just wasting my time because you're not going to change me. You know, I'm not doing anything wrong, you know. I'm really am not. I'm just living my life.

Samson: Usually I'm not the person to stand up or confront people. It's really hard for me to do. But if I would say something I think I would just kind of let them know that, you know, that it's really unfair and that there is inequality in their actions.

Juan: You know, that's why we have gay prom – so that people that are closeted at high school and that want to go with their boyfriend but have to go with their best friend to their straight high school prom can go to gay prom.

Tom: At some point while hanging out with Juan and Samson I had a flashback to my senior year in high school. It's late February in 1979 and unbeknownst to us the reign of Reaganism is fast approaching. So here I am sitting in my best friend's car sitting parked in front of my parent's house. It felt like we were trapped in the vortex of how to end a first date, do we kiss, how much do we say? Endless awkwardness. Only this was my best friend Donald. Since third grade we'd done everything together. We made a fake radio show called WWDDT, we looked through our first Playboy together, went to the same camp, sat next to each other in choir and madrigals. It was endless. And now, for some reason, things were changing. I remember the car being huge. He seemed so far away on the other side of the bucket seats. We were discussing who we might ask to the prom, but unable to speak my truth, I just sat there- frozen- not saying that I desperately wanted to go to the prom with him, not Carol or Ann or Renee. I rationalized my cowardice by saying that I wasn't out and neither was Donald and I didn't want to end up like Root Rot. He was the only out queer kid in our school. I don't even remember his real name – just that he was tormented every single day from fifth grade on and was called Root Rot – a disease- he was nicknamed a disease just because he was different. I wasn't ready to take that on. So, I went to the prom with Renee.

Juan: Always at gay prom there's tons and tons of volunteers. Last year when it was over there was one volunteer chaperoning you to your car with a walkie talkie, and a whistle, and pepper spray and everything just in case.....It's really, really sad that we have to have that much security at a prom where kids are going to. We should be as safe as when straight people have their proms. Because I know that at the straight people's prom there's only two cops which is a regulation thing, and high school chaperones, which is seven of them.....so, why do they have so little security while we have to have a whole freaking hero police force there?

Tom: The prom was held at Hayward's Convention Center. I found myself standing under a huge marquee that listed upcoming events – Gay Prom, June 13, and directly under that - Bible Study, June 21 and 22. That sign set the stage for what was being played out around the corner. I heard it first. It was an odd collection of

sounds. There was a steady beat of dance music and people singing plus a layer of shouts and screams. It was the prom. I rounded a corner and saw amphitheater like steps that led down to a courtyard that was filled with people. At the opposite side of the courtyard was the convention center. All the noise was being generated by the crowd in the courtyard. The singing came from two lines of about 40 people who were facing each other. Off on the corners of the courtyard, behind velvet ropes, were the people who were screaming. They brandished signs like “Turn or Burn” and “Jesus is the way out.” Some were in suits and some wore masks and rubber gloves. It became clear right away that the two lines were more than just a welcoming committee. They were a human barricade. Their singing drowned out the verbal assaults and their physical presence shielded the kids from the protestors.

Phil: But they’re yelling profanity and a lot of “God hates you and you’re going to burn in hell.”

Tom: That’s Phil. He’s the head of Lyric, they’re the organization that creates this prom. He gave us a little history lesson.

Phil: One year we had a Hollywood theme and so as much with gala events we had a red carpet stretched all the way out and the folks just lined up on either side and formed a human gauntlet to walk through of friendly folks who cheered and laughed and sang the Hokey Pokey. So this year they organized it into songbooks which was probably a welcome change from hours of the Hokey Pokey.

Mikail: This is a collection filched from the Unitarian Universalists hymn book.

Tom: The two walls of supporters consisted mostly of clergy, middle-aged dykes and teachers. I nicknamed them the Tunnel of Love. Mikail was one of the many powerful volunteers who made up the tunnel.

Mikail: Oh there doing it again with the children’s songs. I put this together so we wouldn’t sign the Hokey Pokey again this year, but I’m not sure it’s going to work.

Tom: Well, you’re almost there with “If you’re happy and you know it.”

Mikail: (laughing) yah, I know.

Tom: So, read some of the titles that are in the book, will you?

Mikail: Okay, we have.....this is my favorite song in the entire hymn book – *Just As Long As I Have Breath*. (She begins to sing).

Tom: All of the applause and cheers you’re hearing are from the Tunnel of Love people. They stop singing and just cheer whenever any of these decked out kids walk down the aisle of the Tunnel of Love. It feels like a wedding and fashion show combined.....And why are you here?

Mikail: Why am I here? Well, I owe the Gay Prom a debt of gratitude. About four years ago I heard it announced at church that the Gay Prom needed chaperones and I was going to bow out because I was recovering from fundamentalism at the time and then changed my mind because I hadn’t been doing enough scary stuff lately. So, I came to the planning meetings and all these nice queer people were talking about where to get 5 gallons of 7-Up syrup and all of the foam core they wanted to do the decorations....perfectly ordinary topics like that and I’d go home just wrung out and hung out to dry inside- just surrounded by all these not straight people – and wondering what the hell was wrong with me, because I knew better. And, so I ran across this little aphorism that homophobes are actually afraid of themselves. And I poked at it for awhile and it turned out to be right.

Mikail: I just like being around bright teenagers who are not mainstream. And these kids certainly are not. I like the combination of silliness and feistiness that I see in them. The protestors who come, the zealots, I'm still recently enough recovered from that attitude, although I never had it quite that badly, to just really feel an absolute compulsion and hunger to fight it wherever I see it without actually drawing blood.

Tom: So I'm talking with Lucia who was one of the people standing over on the right hand side, singing and she had her back to...Who did you have your back to Lucia?

Lucia: To the anti-gay demonstrators of the gay prom here today....and they're yelling many nasty things, very hurtful things to the kids and to us. And, it's really important for us to have a presence here to allow the kids to come through a protective line and not have to deal with the antagonism and the hostility. They just have to get over it because we're not going anywhere.

John: I'm one of the clergy in the South Hayward parish.

Tom: This is John. Who along with the other clergy were wearing full vestments. He was also a member of the Tunnel of Love....What do you think of what these people are saying on the sides. Some of the signs, "Jesus is the way out," "Turn or you're going to burn in hell," things like that. How do you reconcile that being a person of faith as well as these people who claim to be a person of faith as well?

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John: They got their claim. I came here for the young people that are coming to this prom because they deserve to have a good time and they deserve to see support from the faith community. That's why I came. I didn't come to talk to these people. I have a hard time maintaining my anger at the stuff that I'm hearing there but I'm surrounded by a lot of love with the people here that are here for the same reason that I am – because we really care for the young people that are coming tonight....and it offends me that they have to hear the kind of poison the people are professing over there. It's not the same religion so as far as reconciling with it, I don't have a problem.

Tom: Having made it through the Tunnel of Love we're now at the door talking with the kids as they buy their tickets.

Unknown: I got a really warm vibe from all the people that were clapping for us. But it is kind of nerve wracking I guess to see the people on the sides. It's kind of distracting. It's sad that they have to have that much hatred to come down here and to, you know, disapprove of what we do and they should just live life the way they want to.

Tom: What would you like to say to them?

Unknown: Let us be the way we want to be, it's our choice. It's our life....it's not really a choice, it's what we were born with, let us be.....even if it was a choice, just let it go. Let people do what the hell they want to do.

Tom: Have you guys been to this prom before?

Unknown: Yup. This is my fourth year.

Unknown: Second year.

Unknown: It's my first.

Tom: First year. So we have a virgin amongst the thieves.

(Laughter)

Tom: So do you have any idea what's going to happen?

Unknown: Not really but I'm looking forward to whatever happens.

Tom: Did you know there were going to be protestors and pro people out there?

Unknown: Yah. A few years ago I probably would have been among them but.....

Tom: And what happened?

Unknown: I wasn't going to let myself die.....nearly committing suicide can like really make you see things. So, I just decided I wasn't going to live my life not knowing what I'm doing. So I just decided to go. I just decided to be myself.

Tom: So who are you?

Katie: My name is Katie.

Tom: Hi Katie. And how old are you?

Katie: I'm 17.

Tom: And did you get invited to this prom or are you here on your own?

Katie: Um, well this is my date.

Tom: What's your name?

Illana: Illana.

Tom: Illana. And how long have you known each other?

Katie: Six months...six months.

Tom: And where did you all meet?

Together: High school.

Tom: These two girls are like all the kids coming to the prom. They're so vibrant it's unreal. They're like two pieces of ripe fruit glowing from the inside out.

Tom: And what's it like being here?

Katie: This is awesome.

Illana: Well, now I feel pretty good about this because.....

Katie: I feel completely supported. This is so awesome. This is awesome. I was looking forward to this and now I'm even happier.

Tom: And do you know about the prom that's going on in your high school? Are you, neither of you are seniors...right? Or you're a senior.

Katie: Well, I went to my junior prom this year and I took a girl.

Tom: You took a girl to your junior prom? How did that go?

Illana: Actually people are pretty okay with it.

Katie: Yah. Our school has gotten better. I was president of our GSA and everybody knew so nobody had a problem.....

(Crowd Noise)

Katie: I think these protestors need to get a life.

Illana: Well, I went with, um, a guy. But I went in a group of people and I danced with Katie most of the time so, it was okay.

Tom: After about an hour, the sun had started to set and our lovebirds Juan and Samson had not yet shown up. We hoped that they were having a quiet, romantic candlelit moment at a shi-shi restaurant. The protestors at this point were slowly dispersing. It was odd, like this was the end of a softball game or something. They sort of just faded away. I don't know if they exhausted their hate, or if they got tired of hating, or maybe they needed to go home and refuel for the next event to spread more hate. Anyway, without much fanfare they were gone...and left behind were all the supporters, smiling, laughing and glowing in the setting sun....Okay, I admit it, I'm biased. I loved the volunteers who made up the Tunnel of Love. Their commitment to provide a safe journey these kids was not only honorable but totally infectious. Like the volunteers, it was important for me to help these kids have a great time. In fact, that was more important than getting a good interview.

Once inside the doors, we were surrounded by an entirely different squadron of volunteers. This set flanked the entrance way. They were stationed at doors, tables and manned booths and they continued the tradition of applauding each newcomer. Outside the applause had dual purposes. It was to honor the kids as well as drown out the protestors. Inside, the applause was motivated by respect and admiration. And for many of these kids it was the first time they had ever received that type of response for choosing to be out.

Tom: Most of the volunteers we talked to found their way to the prom through a support association at work. In Jan's case it was League – the gay and lesbian association for AT&T employees. She happens to be straight. I asked her what her prom was like.

Jan: My prom, I hate to say, I didn't get asked to my prom, so my brother paid his friend fifty bucks to take me because I had already bought a dress. So I went and had a really good time though, but I always thought that was really nice of my brother to do that.... I think I joined League because a good friend of mine was getting harassed at work. And I got tired of it so I said, "Right here in this pamphlet it says friends and families of League, so I'm joining and I want to be treasurer." And they said, "Okay." I really never had a problem when Karina came out to me and told me. She said, "You still want to be my friend?" And I said, "Yah. I was your friend like two months before you told me, right? So I think it will be fine." And she said, "Oh my god, I've never had a straight female friends before." So, it was pretty good....

Tom: Basically, it was your typical prom. There were about 300 kids running around, most in their socks, leaving behind their tight new shoes under fancy tables with white table cloths. There were twinkly lights, tons

of balloons and trays with fruit and cheese. Gaggles of gals were dashing in and out of the bathroom with an occasional boy joining them.

They also were gearing up for the traditional crowning of the prom king and queen, but instead of a popularity contest, the panel of judges interviewed each of the royalty hopefuls about their contributions to the queer community. We caught the tail end of April Todd's interview:

April: I've been out in high school for three years. It's been pretty tough. If there's one thing I wanted you know about me is that I'm a very strong individual. And I think that's important, at least to be represented in this community as being strong. I'm the president of the GSA, Gay-Straight Alliance at my high school, co-president, I was vice-president last year. Had a great time, battled a whole lot of ignorance. We live in a very close minded community in the Bay Area – with a whole bunch of right wing affiliations.....I have a lot of kids coming up to me on an individual basis who wish to out themselves to me and I feel like I can be kind of counselor as well as friend as well as protector to these kids. I've grown close to a lot of them. I work with the administrators and the staff really closely at school to make sure that people of all sexualities, sexual orientations are safe. I've also been interviewed by a couple of papers in the Bay Area just to kind of get my name out there so the kids know that if they need to talk to somebody that they're more than welcome to come to me, because I feel that's really important, and I wish to be a safe haven to other students at school. And that's me!

Judge: Thank you.

April: All right.

Tom: The only difference I saw at the prom was the community room. It was filled with games like ones you find at bad carnivals. But these ring tosses and jelly bean counting contests passed out condoms and dental dams as prizes. And over in the corner was a safe sex Jeopardy booth.

Tom: Would you all like to play a round of HIV Jeopardy?

Vanessa: I don't know. Ladies and Gentlemen, drum roll please. I want Getting It for \$400.

Tom: Vanessa was wearing a 50s prom dress, a buzz cut, a huge smile and sported a pierced nose. Her friend Lexy is in all black.

Lexy: I heard about this from Vanessa. Basically, she said if I didn't come, she'd kill me.

Vanessa: I go to the Pacific Center a lot and I work at the newsletter and they got me to write the article on the gay prom. The coming up article telling all about when it was and everything and so I decided I should actually go since I wrote the whole article. So, but I've heard about it years before because I listen to Hibernia Beach Live.

Tom: Did you see the protestors when you came in?

Lexy: Yes. But they were completely blown away by the people clapping for us as we came in so we were pretty much able to ignore them

Tom: How's your prom going?

Kevin: It's beautiful. I love it.

Tom: And are you here with a date?

Kevin: He's right here. My boyfriend.

Tom: Oh, they just kissed. Do that again. I want to hear it over public radio.

(Kissing sound)

Tom: So what are your names?

Kevin: I'm Kevin.

Alex: Alex.

Tom: And is this your first prom together, you guys?

Kevin: No

Alex: Yes....Together.

Kevin: Oh, together. Oh yah, wait.....

(Laughter)

Tom: I see a divorce happening right here.

(Laughter)

Kevin: As a couple yes.

Alex: This is my third.

Kevin: This is like my second. This is my second.

Tom: And this is your first time here as a couple?

Alex: yah.

Tom: Like Kevin said the prom was just beginning. We were hoping to witness Samson and Juan get a slow dance, but we decided to leave instead. There was a hands-off feel in the air. The volunteers had created a happily ever after moment and nobody wanted to intrude for fear of breaking this spell. So we left around 11 while Samson and Juan were waiting to have their picture taken. I was proud and slightly giddy wishing I had my camera to record their moment.

I thought of those few prom photos of me and flashed on my parents saying, "We just want things to be better for you kids." Like many gay people, I'm not a parent, but that doesn't mean I don't have that innate desire to make things better for the next generation. I believe this event was born from that desire – to make things better. Hundreds of volunteers assembled to do that and in the process, whether conscious or not, they got a chance to rewrite their own history. For me, the basic fact that these kids had the courage to simply show up with whom they wanted to and claim their sexuality somehow helped erase my inability to ask Donald to the prom.

And witnessing the parade of queer prom goers walk pass the protestors without taking on all their hate demonstrated the grace and strength of these young people. The evening was now out of anyone's hands and

was being powered by a sense of triumphal joy. A part of that was because these kids got the right of passage that everyone deserves – one of encouragement, acceptance and promise. It makes me wonder how this generation of queers will take up where we have left off.

Unknown: Now we have the big fat crowning. For queen....April Todd.

DG: The lights fade up. Prom Queens and In the Navy were produced by Tom Truss, Scott Jones and myself with assistance from Joan Schuman.

That's all for today's show. ORR is produced in collaboration with KXCI in Tucson, Arizona. Michael Johnson edited this show, and John Brennan was the executive producer. Our theme music is by Clark Suprynawicz.

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This is David Gilmore - thanks for joining us.

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