

Roger Asterino

My name is Roger Asterino. And I was a community development analyst in the Department of Neighborhood housing and conservation for the city of Cincinnati. It was born about 100 miles north in west central Ohio, a small town. Probably it was a county seat, and about 10,000 people. And that's where I grew up. I eventually left there to pursue studies at Ohio State University when I was 18. And gradually, after graduating from there, with the stet, and Vista, America, I made my way to graduate school and at the University of Cincinnati, and shortly thereafter became employed with the city of Cincinnati. I learned very early, and it came out in the court case when I was in the district, federal district court, because they were asking the same question, when did you recognize that you're gay? And I had to go back and say, well, it was probably when I was six years old, I knew I was different. And let's see. So I think probably, the best way to describe it was you learned from your, the kids that you ran around with in school, and, you know, the neighbor kids, that it wasn't quite acceptable to be what they referred to as a homo or homosexual. And so I developed methods of covering that up by probably pursuing sports, acting like the other kids, I perceived, I should be acting like. And, you know, there was even stents of when I was six, I remember going down to the basement, bargaining with God to make me change. That's sort of if you can get an idea. That's what it was like growing up, there

Jenna Spinelle

Was it something you could talk with your your parents or your family about?

Roger Asterino

Oh, no, I was always scared of rejection. And being raised Catholic, it was sort of even harder to go into Catholics grade school and junior high. It was, it was hard, because I knew that it was wrong. I think there was a lot of pressure. In my hometown, we didn't really have good guidance counselor's in high school, so I was constantly trying to figure out, and it seemed like, how do I get out of here? How do I get out of town? How what do I do with my life, because there was a lot of pressure, I think, for me, personally, to stay in town, to marry to have kids and to work, you know, in the Available industry at the time. And that really wasn't for me that I was working on other jobs around Urbana during junior high in high school. And it became a point for me, I did have some neighbors who are gay, but they were older than me. And they were telling me well, you know, if you go to, you know, this larger city nearby, like Columbus, they're they're even gay gathering points, bars and things you go to. And so it became pretty much an objective of mine, and how do I get out of this? And how do I how do I find other people like me, while I was at Ohio State, the American Psychological Association came out and said it was no longer a disorder to be regarded as a mental and they removed it from the mental disorders. And so I think what that did was provide me with the lift was, you know, mentally that even though I wasn't practicing or going out to the bars or anything like that, I was I was living in the dorms. I was living in apartment buildings with friends who had no idea I was getting, I was just, I was just studying a lot and I wasn't ready for that. To go out to the bar shop, and socialize and even to go to the, I remember walking by the door, they had the college group for gays. And I remember reading the meeting time Just walking by the door several times, but like, I've never pushed myself in there, when they were having meetings, I guess there was something in me that said, you know, if you get off this track, you need to get educated, pursue educating, getting a job. And maybe if, by opening that door up, and you know, even though it was the anti war movement, it was a final recognition of who you were. And I wasn't ready for that. I could keep

this thing in my mind, well, maybe I'm, you know, maybe this will all change for me, I'll turn a certain age and, you know, don't no longer be there. But knowing truthfully, it really wasn't going away. It was written in my DNA. It wasn't a mental state. And there was an acceptance of coming out that period of coming out in life.

Jenna Spinelle

When did you come out?

Roger Asterino

To myself, I think I came out pretty much in my undergraduate Ohio State years, pretty much just about when I was graduating, I think, and, but I, I still didn't have the courage to go out to. And I think the bars at the time were the biggest socialization gathering place where you could go to meet others like you. And I wasn't ready to get involved politically, if I couldn't accept just going out and making friends in the gay community. So I put that off. And I pursued what I wanted to do in life, thinking that if I would start doing that, it may determine off my track my track for education, and other things.

Jenna Spinelle

Well, yeah, and you said about, you mentioned this idea of getting a job several times, I mean, were you already starting to think about like workplace discrimination, or you know, whether being gay might impact your your ability to get a job at that point?

Roger Asterino

Well, you learn that, basically, the other gays in the workplace, were doing the same thing. They were living their life in the closet, and that wasn't a personal item that they discussed at work. And if they were going with someone, it became important to describe them with pronouns as they, instead of he, she. And that's how you did it. I mean, I was even, I remember working at the cities starting to work at the City of Cincinnati. And that's when, after graduation, I just my master's graduate work, I finally got the courage to go out with gay bars. And even though I was meeting other gays, it was just sort of like, Oh, finally you can go out and, you know, socialize and meet people. And that, in itself was an experience a training experience and how people reacted, and you'll learn very quickly, it was sort of just in downtown Cincinnati, if you saw someone who you knew was gay, and they were coming down with a group of people on the side, you might not you might ignore each other. But you would recognize, you know, when your saw them again, I saw you. And you know, just so there was no, they wouldn't tend to ask, well, who's that? You just said hi to, you know, it was that type of lifestyle. And it just wasn't Cincinnati, I had a partner when I was, let's see, I was about 1981. So I was in my early 30s, at the time, and, you know, we were living together. But you know, we kept our identities and we didn't go out and hold hands, because holding hands was unacceptable in public, or anything like that. So I didn't even tell my workplace people lived with someone.

Jenna Spinelle

And so let's fast forward a little bit. When did the harassment from your co worker start and how did it start?

Roger Asterino

It probably was so for a period I was sort of looking at my notes and you know, before this and then seemed to be going on for a period of about six years before You know, just going chiding and harassment, him not really knowing my workplace not really knowing a shielded pretty well, I think. And that was the name of the game, if you wanted to get ahead, because I think, you know, at the time, and it's changed, it has changed a lot of cities and things like that, over the years that you and I almost became a don our stone tell type of situation. But he was able to gauge and I think a lot of people were able to gauge Well, you don't have a partner, you're in your 30s you're not married, you know, there was, I think, sort of assumption, assumptions, which he pretty much assumed the, the person that was harassing me. And so would make comments that he went beyond comments, he would harass, openly make comments, by their big fear, and probably hearing them was I just sort of pushed them down and said, If I ever tried to address this, then they will find out. And that would be the end of any job opportunities, you know, which may arise and sort of potentials for promotion in the workplace. And it would be, you know, you would become Mel he was on a different floor. He was also he had no business really on the other floor, which we were on. And that he was a member of the same department. It was too late, you know, it's gotten so big, we are on two floors. And during issue three part of the intimidation, you know, I when I first started making my claims, he would come in and sit at my desk at the office and talk on the phone. I'd come in, you know, and find him at my desk talking on the phone. I said, What are you doing? Why are you here? You just keep talking, he did completely ignored me. And I said, please get off my phone, get out of my desk, there would be periods where it didn't occur, there were periods where it did occur. And several instances, I you know, I was just ignoring so much of it, because I was hoping that people in the area wouldn't think he was directing me what she was doing. And one staff meeting we had for our department, he was moving around the back of the room. And when he became came from my chair, a costume himself over his crotch and said out loud, watch your hands. And you know, and that was reported in the personnel department when they were interviewing staff. And you know, and by finally, you know, sort of just ignoring it, putting up with it for years, was a co worker who I was working with she she just came over to my desk and said, Why didn't you put up with that? Why don't you say something? And I think I remember saying to her? Well, if I do I won't go anywhere here you know, in civic government. And so, but that really checkered started with me dealing with it. And I had people working, I don't want to say they were working for me because they'd say, Well, you're you're you're under filling this position, which is a management level or a supervisory position and said now, we're just coworkers. And, you know, and but I think the person that called me on it, so I just just figured she knew me well enough. And I think she just sort of suspected it, he probably escaped, but it doesn't make any difference to me. And there wasn't any gossip. I mean, because I found out from my other co workers after, you know, the complaint was made in the personnel for human resources. I can't remember if it was personnel. How, yeah, I think his personnel department from that city. When I made the cut, I went first to my supervisor and said, you know, this is going on this gotta stop.

Roger Asterino

And he was is very supportive that he said, Yeah, hi. I didn't know that was going on. Yeah, it's got to stop. But and I think it was just him, basing his his understanding his purpose. perception of me as a gay man in the office. But it wasn't known, I kept my personal life, very private. And so, and that's what I meant the Great Divide, you know, you had your life here and you had to

end, it didn't mix you even with you mixed with your co workers, you never brought, brought your gay friends to those events. And you know, and he knew who some of the other gay workers are in the office place, but you are in the city, within the city, and we didn't, you know, there's no special treatment. Of course, we used to some of us used to talk and laugh and, you know, make jokes about it. It was just sort of a way of life for survival.

Jenna Spinelle

How did you meet Scott Knox and, you know, get involved with with trying to take this outside of your particular workplace or, you know, make it make it into a larger issue in the city?

Roger Asterino

Well, we went through several gyrations, that complete thing, once the complaint was made, the personnel department came in with staff when they were interviewing the staff and my department said, Did you know Roger Asterino was gay? No. Did you know that? You know, this person, this coworker was harassing them? Have you ever seen that? Have you ever seen others? And by then it just was, you know, my wife was out of the closet?

Roger Asterino

It wasn't. In a sense, there wasn't a door to retreat back to.

Jenna Spinelle

Did it feel that way? To you at the time? Like, did you have the thought? Okay, well, the you know, cats really out of the bag now or, you know, there's there's no turning back from here.

Roger Asterino

Oh, yeah. And that became, you know, luckily, I think in all sexual harassment, or harassment cases that go through governmental agencies, the process is somewhat similar. In the city of Cincinnati, I went to personnel department they studied at they looked at it. And then, but in the meantime, he learned what I was doing, of course. And I was beginning to get intimidated by him on top of that, but it became a point where the intimidation, I mean, the you know, the rest of it just grew even after I went to my supervisor, and he talked to him. Because I was going down to the reception area, in the office. And, you know, being a Housing Department and other programs house there, we have a large reception area, and there are people waiting, and I was going down to meet the people that I was going to be taking through the program. And he came up behind me. And he just blurted out, is it a man or a woman and just sort of disappeared? Whatever you want in that reception area just sort of turned around and looked. I don't know what they were thinking. I just pretended okay, I didn't hear it the set. And so from there, I went over to the personnel department and made blank complaint. That's where it went from there. I experienced different intimidations he intimidated others. And it came out that he had been disciplined before for intimidating or harassing women in the workplace. But the discipline never went any further I guess. And the department, I mean, the RASSMAN that they he was told to stop. And, but he really didn't. And I was just another person on the radar that he could intimidate and try to harass. And they hadn't really spoken up in the workplace, they may have taken it to their supervisor and the supervisor said something to him, but it was never really taken to the personnel department. And that's when I think sexual harassment and everything was coming into play the cities and they were dealing with a lot more harassment, just besides sexual

harassment. And then women, you know, they were now dealing with sexual harassment based upon gender orientation, and those types of things even though Yeah, it was a process. So went to the personnel department, then he he was disciplined as a result that you know, I I think the city was sort of in a lot of denial. Why is this so ordinated here, a lot of, you know, and isn't really a factor in people's life, even though it was going on, I think they were sort of oblivious to it, sort of like in many gender discrimination, harassment of women, I think, you know, it may be taking place and people who are looking at it hearing it don't regard it as harassment and discrimination. And it was sort of, I think, the time, I could see as a result of this, where he was harassing other women, and they were also saying what he had done to me. And because they were co workers and things, I had one of them, one of my co workers even comment, it took a gay man to bring my attention to this, you know, their, their own harassment. Because it was sort of like, I guess something, they probably felt too, that they had to tolerate, and they had no recourse. I think they helped in my appeal, even though they didn't have a case. And they came as witnesses or witnesses when we went to the Civil Service Commission. And that's where I met Scott Knox, because Scott Knox represented me before that committee, and with the other witnesses. And then, because they issued, I think, they were unaware of that. I appealed the decision to the Civil Service Commission, which was the highest level that it would go to.

Roger Asterino

And the Civil Service Commission was like other Commission's they were independently or appointed by members of city council, but actually approve the writing of the ordinance inclusion of gays, bisexual, and lesbians into the human rights ordinance. So, and that was conveniently scheduled. I always use that word, by the personnel department, on the same day that issue three was going before the voters. And so we they were saying, Well, you know, they couldn't they had to go back and formulate their decision and talk about it and write it up. But they were sort of, can we even issue an opinion at this, given the fact that voters just approved taking out and removing this through this charter amendment? And cannot even be ruled on by think? Yeah, that's the point where I just like, this is totally unfair. And Scott, Scott, Scott Knox, who, who was in new goods, civil rights attorney, for gays gay causes, and instance, and at a, he approached me, I guess, I guess I'll Garrett stain at the time, had was thinking this should go into a federal lawsuit. And he had approached Scott to talk to me, he said is Do you think he would join as a plaintiff in this lawsuit? And so Scott, asked me, and I said, Yeah, sure. And while they were, you know, there were several other I think, total five plaintiffs in the case.

Jenna Spinelle

I know you did your newspaper interviews and things at the at the time, did that make things worse for you in the office, because you were receiving so much more attention?

Roger Asterino

No, there was, I gradually learned that by coming forward and claiming your identity in the workplace, even though it probably might mean the end of that new promotions, because you're actually suing the city, that it gave me a sense of strength. You know, who your friends were? It did. But the other point, I guess, and and I've read this in similar lawsuits, you know, arounds around the United States at once you come forward, there's also by those who remain in the closet, you know, friends, it becomes guilt by association. So you shouldn't expect them to accommodate office to say, oh, Roger, you did a wonderful job. Because it didn't happen. There

were, there was even a point which I found really interesting. You know, once the lawsuit was filed, that the, the receptionist came back to me and said, Roger, there are people from other departments coming, asking us, I will point out the gaming. She said, What should I do? And I said, you can show him back to my place if you want to. She said.

Jenna Spinelle

So, as I, as I understand it, this really kind of wound its way up and down the courts and went on for several years. Can you you know, what was that like? For you? Was it sort of like a roller coaster? Or, you know, how did you did? How did you think about that period of time? Well, it was working through the courts.

Roger Asterino

It was a period of thanks, because I knew that it wasn't accepted by the overall voters of Cincinnati. And they, and it, it also meant to me that even though I was working there, and I had, you know, the department had to change the mice still have my old supervisor, and they supported me, I was taking on new. So I think I was in a role and they were very supportive of the work that I was doing. It filtered in through, you know, the, the, you know, cuz I was out in the community. And I'm sure the people associated with the programs who were funding the programs, and who were cooperating partnerships with the programs that we were operating. I don't think they knew quite how to react to me, even though they did, you know, they knew I was in this idea of suing the city of Cincinnati. And from there before the civil service. When the Civil Service Commission took place, I had to be represented by a city attorney, because I was appealing. You know, my coworker who was harassing me had to find an attorney, because they were representing me, because I had appealed. And so that later came out that, you know, they reinstated our hours. Great when you're sitting there, and they brought up well, can they do the can they have to roll? And he said, Yes, of course, they have to roll. Yeah, this is, yeah, this was all taking place before this. And of course, they will. And so they did, and it came out in my favor. And they instituted the discipline against him. Even though we had gays and lesbians had no more recourse to city council as a result of Issue three, it was pretty strict. And we couldn't meet with them. We couldn't discuss gay issues with them. And, yeah, it's much more restrictive. I think Colorado was experiencing the same somewhat similar situation. State of Colorado. And, you know, I sort of wondered about my vulnerability and living and what I, you know, would there be you know, I did get a security system for the house. Guys like that. Yeah, it worried me.

Jenna Spinelle

So, did your family know that all this was going on?

Roger Asterino

Well, actually, that's an interesting story. Because I knew when, you know, when we talk to the attorneys, we were meeting with the attorneys on, you know, what, this whole ninth federal lawsuit questionings they were questioning us about, you know, background and, you know, and as they prepared for the case, and they said, once we file this, you realize it's going to make the news. And I didn't know I heard that but I was just thinking, Oh, who's going to be interested in outside? Oh, ha, you know, Cincinnati, Ohio. And no, I had not told my parents that I was getting and my family so you know, the it hit the newspapers, and I was just like, blaring headlines. I'll see if I'll buy gays. Yeah. And which, you know, when I saw it, oh, my God, this is

going on the wire services has gone everywhere. And, you know, they may have told me that, but I just didn't think it would be that big a deal outside of Cincinnati. And it was. And so I went to go into my supervisors taken the newspaper and said, I need to, I need to go home. He said, Sure, what's up? And I said, I need to tell my parents about this, is they're gonna learn about their newspapers. And so I drove up, you know, surprise, my parents, you know, source. What are you doing here? And, you know, what's, what's going on? And so I sat him down and told him I'm still surprised, you know, my reaction to this. And anything came up in the court case, when I was on the stand and federal district court. When I was being questioned by the city attorney, who I knew and who's, you know, part of, not the, you know, the plaintiffs attorneys, but I've worked with them, you know, through your contacts and everything else, and they know me. So that came. And it was, it was a good experience. My, my dad basically said, Well, if anyone says anything, he says, I tell him to go to hell, it's none other business. And, of course, my mom was sort of tearing up and crying. And, you know, she said, This doesn't change how you feel about your garage. And I said, you know, as I said, you know, don't cry, it's not your fault. I said, you know, this is very much a part of me. And I believe it to be just, you know, my genetic makeup. She turned around and said, Yeah, but we gave you those days. And I said, you know, I think is just sort of a natural process they go through.

Jenna Spinelle

So tell me about your decision to leave Cincinnati

Roger Asterino

It was very much in the equation for me, I think, as part of the equation for my believing was the issue three, issue which we lost it Supreme Court by that time. And so I think that was all sort of bundled up, right? I don't think until I realized, once I moved from Cincinnati to the West Coast, and I was looking for friendly places. You know, it was just sort of realization, I was sitting at my desk. And it was right across from City Hall. And I think we were on the sixth or seventh floor and had a view of the city and I was just sort of looking out the window. And it just sort of struck me like a bolt of lightning. There's just like, I gotta get out of here. I gotta go someplace else. And the next question was, where do you go? And so I immediately, you know, I traveled enough rounds to know, you know, where the, I think, and I think this is very similar experience for gays and minority group minority people. That then, you know, just see where you have these oppressive laws being place, that they're no longer welcome. So yeah. It played an important part in the play. And I was looking for, you know, much more gay friendly environments. And California offered that. So to New York City said Washington DC, that, you know, so I'd learned enough to become sort of the valuable commodity and said, he's done enough work in different programs and things like that. And so I figured I could find a job. Yeah. And so I, you know, I made the decision to go to the West Coast. I really like the laws in California. You know, if they were to pass the Equal Rights Act for LGBTQ people on a federal level when change that much in California, when you include laws, either locally state or locally or state laws, that such acts cause the most creative talent, the loss of the most creative talents and skilled people to leave the communities in which they are oppressed. And that's, and that's one thing. I really believe what happened with issue three, because there was several people who ended up leaving Cincinnati as a result, including me. But as I learned more about employment discrimination, within the police department, coworker harassment, and also the fire department, I went back to personnel department. After all this, you know, after going through this and issue three, and ask the director

if I could start a gay employee support group for? And of course, she said, No. And I think, as the city side, it was sort of something they wish they didn't have to deal with. I know, they came out with a report the study saying, Well, only eight people have claimed discrimination under, you know, the Human Rights Ordinance. And we just missed five of them, they didn't have any issues like this. And you know, so they were saying, it's not used that much. So it's not important, meaning minimizing the LGBT community. And that was in the paper. And, you know, it was just the whole process that was rather disappointing. But also, one thing you asked me is to How did my activism start. And that was because my first partner died of AIDS. I'm sorry,

Roger Asterino

No, but I had to shield all that from the city. I couldn't tell people that because it's very early in the process, they still didn't have a test for it. And he, oh, and he, he had moved from San Francisco, to Cincinnati. And I think he thought he was safe, he was living in long enough in Cincinnati. But you know, sort of that up being able, you know, running home, taking care of him, we hired someone, you know, when he got to the point, and he wanted to die at home. So, all during that time, I couldn't say that. I had to work my regular hours. And then, you know, rush home in the morning, get ready in the morning to go to work, make sure the health care provider was there that you know, the private person that we had hired to, you know, to sit with them during the day and take care of any needs to feed them. And I thought that was very indicative. Until employees start dying of AIDS. Luckily, you know, when the tests came out, I was just figuring, well, I'm just gonna die in two years, what the heck yeah, and I remember, I gave a name, so it was sort of like The Walking Dead. You go around and figure out how am I going to live long enough to see this completed, you know, a project that I was working on or something like that. And, but I ended up finding out because my good friend pushed me into the testing clinic with him, because I had driven him to another city because he was ashamed to be seen at the testing site in Cincinnati. And so, you know, he talked to his person who was drawing blood and said, talk to him, you know, make them take the tests. And so I did, and when he reported the results was negative. I just looked at him and said, You mixed up your blood supply.

Roger Asterino

So, he convinced me that he had drawn the right blood. And so I was I got active I mean, I was became very active in Working with a swamp, the first programs that they were starting, became a volunteer and started working in those. And that's where it sort of started, probably, you know, my seeing people, half my friends died. But seeing how they were treated by their families, and their lovers, once they were, you know, they had AIDS and found out they had AIDS. And so, you know, that, I think, pushed me into there, just speaking up. And one of the things that really sort of ultimately pushed me to give you a call back was, I was recently, one of my friends lives, I was visiting another city. And it moved from San Diego. And he was, he was watching all these old movies, documentaries on gay, gay life, LA, for the actors and actresses during the 40s 50s 60s. And how the production studios kept control over their lives and told them, you know, you're too old to have a roommate get out, oh, it's won't look good. And there's very long history of that, who the stars were. And I've heard all my life and just gay chatter, who wasn't who wasn't. And finally a documentary came out on a book. I think it came out several years ago. And they finally put it into a film as a documentary and called the guy around. And he ran a service station, he built a service station. And his, his attendants, were actually because the gays productions to do producers, writers, actors, was sort of a tell all of people who had died, who

were actors and actresses, and who are gay and lesbian. In that documentary, and the subsequent things that they had done around that documentary, you know, and revealing the secret lives of, and how they were controlled by Hollywood, they, they couldn't act. Gay, they couldn't be. And they could they, it was very much about the image, as such, you know, and it reminded me so much of what, you know, that carried on, I started reading a lot of gay history, when I was working for the city of Cincinnati, and how cities would form and how would the culture carried on and how they worked around all the laws that were enforced and how they actually these centers, and house these initial cities such as San Francisco, LA traveling New York had such sizable gay populations was because when the military after the end of the Second World, world war, they knew they had kept records on people who had served faithfully done everything, who they suspected as being K. And when they were dispersed, like San Francisco was one of the biggest sludge, you know, that coming through, and, you know, Ted bringing him back from the Asia or a would give them even though they have served honorably done, you know, had medals and everything else, they would hand them a dishonorable discharge because they were gay. Or they suspected that not being gay,

Jenna Spinelle

You know, I know, this has not been been easy for you to you make this decision or or to have the conversation. Yeah.

Roger Asterino

And so my friend turned to me and I said, you know, I'm gonna make a phone call to this person. And he said, what's this about? And I said, Well, I never told you I became involved in a Supreme Court case, blah, blah, blah. And he said, Roger, why wouldn't you talk to them? Yeah, they can't do anything to you now. That was, I think the final push. It was also a final push for me because I've maintained a friendship with a gay couple, who moved to Charleston, South Carolina. And his partner ultimately died of AIDS about 1520 years ago, but they fix me, probably. But they were together for 30 years. And he of course, wasn't positive but his partner worked for the city of Cincinnati. And I knew him and he was high up and some of the, you know, the department's Public Works and things like that. And I knew his stories on the discrimination that he got, because he was suspected of being gay. And it was sort of, you know, the same story. And he just recently died probably about two months ago. And his partner had died years ago. But we, we had stayed friends for God, since I was 28. I think that's when I first met them. And they knew my first spark. So I think that's sort of pushed me to, and it's just like, a lot of the younger gays have no idea what it was like to do that. And, but also they don't, they didn't see the real horrors and the tragedy of the AIDS crisis. You know, they really had no idea what it was like back then.

Jenna Spinelle

All right, Roger. Well, listen, thank you. Thank you again. Thank you. Take care.

Roger Asterino

You too. Bye.