

Roey Thorpe

SR 11470, Oral History,

by Roxanne Michelle Holtman

Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest (GLAPN)

2010 February 19



THORPE: Roey Thorpe

RMH: Roxanne Michelle Holtman

Transcribed by: Roxanne Michelle Holtman, ca. 2010

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Reviewed by Roey Thorpe, ca. 2010

This oral history interview was conducted as part of the Portland State University LGBT History Capstone course, Winter Term 2010, with Instructor Pat Young.

Introduction

Roey Thorpe is the current Director of a new division of Planned Parenthood aimed at preserving a woman's right to choose. She is the former Director of Basic Rights Oregon (2001 – 2006) and has held several significant positions, throughout her career, geared towards LGBT rights, non-profit community childcare and overall human rights integrating diverse communities for common interests. We discussed a variety of subjects starting with her college education, political realm, activism, feminism, etc. and how her personal and political life has intersected with one another. Of course, base to this discussion, is Roey's charm, strength, dedication and ability to maintain a positive attitude while fighting for advancing and maintaining basic human rights for all. Additionally, although Roey has never shied away from performing her diverse roles as an openly gay woman, I believe her heart, not her sexuality, is what inspires her to serve minorities and her community as a whole.

Session 1
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RMH: Opening: Good morning. I am here today with Roey Thorpe and my name is Roxanne Holtman and I am with Portland State, a representative of GLAPN, Gay and Lesbian Archives and it is Friday the 19th of February and we are at the new Planned Parenthood offices at Roey's request and I want to welcome Roey and thank her today for her time.

THORPE: Thank you. I am so happy you are doing this.

RMH: So...for formal purposes so we know there isn't another Roey Thorpe running around...if you could give your full name, date of birth and location of birth.

THORPE: My name is Rochella Ann Thorpe and my birthday is December 26th, 1962 in Columbia, South Carolina.

RMH: Great. Thank you. And let's go ahead and . . . I guess you have been in Oregon about the last ten years.

THORPE: Yeah. I have been here since 2001. So what is that? Nine years.

RMH: Nine years. So give me a little background on where you started. I saw that you had majored in history so give me an idea when you were going to college and what direction you were thinking of going with your career.

THORPE: Well, when I first went to college I graduated in 1980 from high school and got a degree in music at Bowling Green State University and really, for me, it was a way to

get out of the house and away from my family and my background. I wanted to sort of do better than what I saw around me, and so for me music was just a way out. And so while I was in college I discovered that I loved politics and that I loved social issues, became a feminist and came out as a lesbian, and then, ah, lived in a few different places on the east coast and decided to go to graduate school. And decided to go to graduate school in history. I thought I wanted to be a college professor. And so I went Binghamton University, which is part of the state of New York system in Binghamton New York because they has a good history program. And I got my masters there and almost a PhD. I stopped . . . I wrote half my dissertation and stopped and in the mean time I moved up to Ithaca, New York and became a city council woman there and acting mayor of Ithaca. I ran for office there.

RMH: Oh wow!

THORPE: Yeah, that was quite a ride and not at all right for me. But I continued. I had worked all the way through school and worked for non-profits. And I continued to work for non-profits and sort of had this parallel career in non-profit organizations and politics. And then ended up coming to Oregon to work at Basic Rights Oregon . . . brought those two parallel streams together for me, which was political change and non-profit work.

RMH: Wow. That was a lot. Well, real quick, on your personal level your mentioning of your feminism and coming out as a lesbian during your college years. Do you want to talk more about that?

THORPE: Well, you know, what I can say is that is at the time I came out in 1980...81, actually as a counselor at girl scout camp, and it was the first time I met lesbians and I had always felt different, but I, myself, couldn't tell you why. And people used to describe me as a really mysterious person, which is just funny to know me now because I'm really not mysterious at all. I'm complicated, but I'm not mysterious. And I think it was because

there was so much about myself I didn't even know. And so once I met lesbians I sort of started to realize that there was, you know, that maybe I was one too. And then came out, which at the time, meant sort of acknowledging to yourself that you were gay, and not telling other people, and maybe telling other gay people, but certainly not publicly. And from there I took some Woman's Studies classes and became a feminist and started to meet . . . I got connected to the lesbian feminist community and, I have a whole lot of stories around that experience. And what I can, in short hand I guess, at the time, Bowling Green, where I was going to school, was such a small town, I mean its a small college town surrounded by corn fields, and the word "gay," you just never heard the word "gay" spoken. It was . . . there was such a silence around it. And so this lesbian feminist community was the one place I felt relatively free but the problem with it was that there was just a million rules and the community itself was so insular and so suffocating and so sure there were right and wrong answers to everything. You know, for years I really struggled because I wanted some kind of vision of a different world and this offered it, but it, in the end it was just too restrictive to me and too rule bound. I just felt like I wasn't sure I wanted to live my life with all those rules so . . .

RMH: And that was within the feminist community that you had become a part of?

THORPE: Yeah, the lesbian community. I would say I was a lesbian feminist from like 1982 or 3, until probably, oh gosh, maybe 1991 is when I was like "I'm so done with this . . ." I was sort of done with it gradually and really done with it by the 90's. And I think part of it for me honestly was the AIDS crisis was happening and the barriers between gay men and lesbians within the queer community in general were breaking down. I mean there was a crisis and a lot of feminist lesbians I knew were blaming gay men and were really kind of anti-sex and anti-sexual expression, and anti-men. They had a powerful woman's centered vision that I really admired but there was sort of another side to that and it just didn't hold up in the face of the AIDS crisis to me. And in that crisis I started to

get to know gay men better, and I started to find more common ground, and I think my vision changed. So I think that was part of it too.

RMH: So when did that kind of unveil itself sort of in the beginning when you were associating with the feminist group, or did it start to slowly . . . did you stick it out with the group because you were with them for about 9 years? Did you kind of stick it out or did it start to eventually unveil itself?

THORPE: Well, it started out as a group of people with a certain ideology but then as I, so then I physically moved. I moved from Bowling Green, to Washington D.C., back to Bowling Green, to Ann Arbor, Michigan, and then to Binghamton, New York, all in a space of a few years. So I found some good people in those places, but I had left that tight knit lesbian separatist community behind. And as I did that I was exposed to more and more people, I started to have questions about the ideology itself. And still believe that there was some really good intentions and wonderful things in that ideology, but in the end it just wasn't, for me, it started to stop ringing true. And it becomes a kind of fundamentalism, you know, ultimately, and I am just not a fundamentalist about anything (chuckle). So I think that was my problem, so I moved away from that particular group of people because of my own geographical movement, but I think I stayed connected in some ways, then less and less and less. So it was very gradual.

RMH: You picked the things you could more closely identify within your own personal . . . your personal politics?

THORPE: Yeah . . . yeah but the problem is with any fundamentalist way of thinking, you're really not supposed to question anything, so I . . .

RMH: Your true feminist ideology.

THORPE: Right. At the time too I was very young and as I got older, I think as you get older, you're surer about fewer things . . . you know, I used to have all the answers and now I've got a lot of questions about everything and I hardly ever feel like I have all the answers. And so I think for me there was just some fundamental turning points where I listened to the conversations happening around me and the things people were saying and just thought "well it's way more complicated than that" and "I don't totally believe that." And didn't say much about it ,but sort of once you have . . . I think probably anyone that moves away from fundamentalism can say this, right? You know once you start to have doubts, there's like a crack and all kinds of other doubts flood in and all kinds of certainty floods out (chuckle). So I sort of went through that experience and moved away from that into more sort of broad based philosophy that was about believing in justice, believing in equality, having a vision of community where people can all contribute. Where we have a society that we have now that is more value based on people's differences, and the idea that differences is something you bring. You don't need to create a separate society, but within the society we have you could create a climate where people's individuality and their gifts are valued, and everyone could bring that. It's funny because in some ways I feel really lucky to be here in Portland, because I feel like there are many ways in which Portland is like that. Not every way . . . not every way, but some ways, and I really love that.

RMH: So, going back to your time on the east coast . . . that was a crucial period in shaping yourself and that also contributed to shaping your career direction as well.

THORPE: Yeah. Absolutely. You know, I'm a girl who grew up in a series of single wide trailers and crappy apartments, with a single mother who could not keep a job and a family that did not value education and didn't, you know, I come from a background that's really different from my current life . And when . . . the thing about coming out as a lesbian, sort of ironically, is that at the time it was somewhat of a secret society, but within that secret society were people from every walk of life. And so there was a way

that being a lesbian created this opportunity for me to meet people and get the attention from people I never in a million years would have if I wasn't queer. And so what happened was, within those lesbian communities, like I really gained confidence in myself. And I met people who took an interest in me and were willing to help me out, who really listened to me and challenged me. And so, yeah, that whole ideology was really important to me. It was in terms of shaping whether I was to become a political activist in my career, for sure, but even to have the confidence to have a white-collar job, for instance, was really big deal for me. It totally came from, at the time, the lesbian community and later the LGBT community. I just think that for me it was really critical and the community has done so much for me. So the idea that I could have the chance to give back and that it is paid for is just amazing . . . like that's what I get to do. Other people are going to work at a bank, or other people are selling real estate, doing things that are important, but I get to do this thing, that like, makes my heart feel good.

RMH: That's great.

THORPE: Yeah.

RMH: So, do you want to discuss any of your career roles that had on the east coast in depth?

THORPE: I don't know . . . I don't know if there's that much. I will say I did run for office when I lived in upstate New York and for me it has always been . . . I have always been an activist since college, a feminist activist, and a lesbian feminist activist. And I sort of grew up in the civil rights era so, for me, that spirit . . . I definitely had that spirit from that time, but, but I never actually won any sort of campaign or on any sort of issue. You know I, I did things to make a statement when I was in Bowling Green, like I ran a dog for Ms. Bowling Green University, and I protested at the pageant for Ms. BGSU, and we did all sorts of actions around different issues. But it was really in upstate New York where I

was part of passing a law, county wide non-discrimination law, that was the first time I had ever actually won something and it was the most exhilarating thing ever . . . this was like 1990. I guess it was like 1991, the fall of 1991 and from there I got to meet a lot of people and people knew me and so I got convinced to run for city council. And . . . which is called common council in Ithaca, in upstate New York, and so I was the first openly gay person to be elected to office in the whole county. I was elected in 1993 and took office in 1994 and did a four-year term and two years of that I was the acting mayor; I was like the deputy mayor.

The thing that was really remarkable about that, so there are a couple things; one is I was 30, 31, I was really young, I was much younger than the other people on the council, I was a woman, I was a lesbian, and to be the acting mayor you get elected by the other people on city council and so it wasn't that I thought I was the best at the job. I was sort of the one person that everyone could agree on that they liked and trusted. And that was a real badge of honor for . . . because I sort of came to that council feeling like an outsider and discovered through that I think that I could, you know that I could actually make change and that I could do interesting things within a system. You know, and then I started to understand the value of incremental change, rather than that lesbian feminist "all or nothing" sort of view was like if it wasn't perfect it wasn't worth doing. And what I really learned was there was a lot of value in incremental change, it might not be perfect but it pushes forward, and the next thing will be a little better, and the next thing a little better, and that definitely is at the core of my approach now.

RMH: So it sounds like you got a lot of respect from your peers in New York, so how did you feel the community was receiving you?

THORPE: They were wonderful to me...people were wonderful and they drove me crazy too, you know, when you are an elected official and you go out there is no such thing as a quiet evening out, you know. You go out for a drink and someone is screaming at you

whether or not the golf course past their house has pesticide on it, you know, and it was Ithaca which was a really progressive little community and tons of activists and a lot of people felt like . . . we had a ward system where we represented certain neighborhoods and as a queer candidate and a queer elected official. You know, everyone that was queer felt like I was their person. So people were absolutely wonderful to me and they were grateful and supportive, even though really I felt like the work was not right for me. I chose not to run again because I, and I'm sure I would have been elected, but I chose not to run again because it wasn't what I wanted to do. You know I stuck it out because I felt a really strong responsibility to the community. I felt like it would be wrong, you know, not last each and every minute to do the very, very best job.

RMH: So how long did you hold that position? (Nice paying attention on my part. sorry)

THORPE: Four years and I worked full time the whole time I was on the council so in addition to the council job, so it was really, really heavy burden to try to do both, but I did and it was good. You know I was working, I became the Executive Director for a big early childhood education center and that was kind of wild to me also. So sometimes the press would come . . . there would be news crews interviewing me because of my political role outside the building . . .

RMH: And so that position was simultaneous?

THORPE: Yeah. Well, I wasn't the Executive Director . . . was I . . . I think I was not quite the Executive Director yet but I was in the administration of this center. So sometimes they would be interviewing me about the center itself, you know, where I was working, and sometimes they would be interviewing me about politics. It was just a very crazy time, but really good.

RMH: How did you do separating the two hats and two roles?

THORPE: You know, it was difficult and I was exhausted. But I told myself people that have children also don't get to go home and go to a movie and get to relax and hang out with their friends. People with children are just as busy as I am. And because we were a childcare center, I saw those parents, those tired parents and I thought I'm not any more tired than they are . . . (chuckle) So I have a meeting that will go until 11 o'clock at night and they have a screaming toddler that will go until 11 o'clock at night, so . . . yeah . . .

RMH: Interesting comparison...(shared laughter) So what did you do prior to then when you left that role? What did you do following that?

THORPE: So I continued to work. I continued to do . . . my term was over . . . let me see 1994, 95, 96, 97 . . . so at the beginning 1998 my term was over . . . January 1998. And I continued to work full time at the child care center and then I got asked to do some organizing for Empire State Pride Agenda, which is New York's statewide LGBT advocacy group, like Basic Rights Oregon, only for New York, and at the time it was a small organization and growing and now is just enormous. And there was a core group of people there that was really amazing. The Director was Matt Foreman who later went on to be the Director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, Tim Sweeney who had been the Director of Gay Men's Health Crisis, and had some other amazing jobs, and now is the Director of the Gill Foundation in Colorado, Paula Ettelbrick was on the staff and she went on, she's a very famous lesbian attorney who went on to have a number of prominent roles. You know, there was just a bunch of people there at that time, who went on to be really successful.

RMH: Laying the foundation for all of you . . .

THORPE: Yeah, I was sort of there at the time, and have kept those connections since which has been amazing. I got asked to work part time for them (ESPA) so I did at the

same time I was working at the child care center and through my work with them I ended up, I heard about the campaign out here in Oregon, the No on 9 campaign in 2000. And I was just, you know, that campaign was about Lon Mabon's measure, the Student Protection Act, you know, put heavy punishment on any school where a teacher, or anyone who worked there, said anything positive or even neutral about anything except heterosexuality, right, homosexuality, bisexuality. And so I was so horrified by this, because I mean, keep in mind, I was a gay rights activist at this time, but full time I was the Director of this incredible child care center. We had 300 families from all over the world, they were affiliated with Cornell University, with 30 countries represented, you know, like 8 different languages spoken, and if you want to see people's cultural differences, how they raise their very young children is so indicative of what their values are, and we worked so hard to make that an open, affirming environment. They had an openly lesbian Director, me, said something about who they were . . . when I heard about that measure I was just horrified. I couldn't believe it. And so I took my vacation. I took 3 weeks off of work, and I came out to volunteer on the campaign, just, I had never been to Oregon . . . when Mt. St. Helen's blew up, you know, originally, I thought it was in another country (shared laughter) I didn't, I really, Oregon was not on my radar screen. And I came out. I worked on the campaign and had a wonderful time. I volunteered and met all the people working on the campaign, all the volunteers, and then I went back home. And I heard the election results and that we won and I was happy, and, but I really thought no more of it. I exchanged a few emails, and was just like "well that was worth having helped with.

RMH: Right.

THORPE: And then . . . So this was November of 2000, and then in December I started getting phone calls from people in Oregon saying that the Executive Director of Basic Rights Oregon was leaving and would I want that job. And I said "No! I did not want that

job..” I was planning on moving to New York City and work full time for Empire State Pride Agenda and I . . .

RMH: You made quite an impression . . .

THORPE: Well, I guess. (shared laughter) I don't really know what to say about it, except to say at some point . . . so I kept saying “no. ” And then at some point I had a reflective moment where at some points in your life other people see things that you don't see and I thought “I don't know if this is right for me but everyone there seems to think so and so maybe they are right, and maybe this is the right thing, and maybe I'm just not listening.” And so I thought about it a long time and decided that I would do it. And so I moved out here over Memorial Day 2001. And me and my cat and my stuff and started working at Basic Rights Oregon and it was, it just . . . I was there for 5 years and it was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I mean I have absolutely no regrets.

RMH: Did you have any idea of the shoes you were filling?

THORPE: Well, I thought that because this was this statewide organization that had just won a huge ballot measure campaign, at a time when, and it still is that time, we don't win statewide ballot measure campaigns in most states, right? If there's a gay rights issue on the ballot, we don't win it. And the fact that Oregon had a history of winning. And the campaign was so well run and so impressive, I assumed that the campaigns had been used to build this statewide organization into a powerhouse. I thought I was taking over the reins of a big organization. The place I was coming from, the childcare center, was 70 teachers and a couple million dollars and I had turned things around. When I took it over it was in really bad shape and had turned things around but I didn't think I was going to have to do that here . . . and I was really surprised at what I found which was that there had been amazing campaigns. The people involved with the organization were

incredible, but what had really happened was we had paid the price here for what had been a continual onslaught from the right.

So every two years there was a new ballot measure filed. As soon as it could be filed, the community was constantly in a defensive position and while there had been a desire to have an ongoing organization I think the campaigns took so much out of people that nobody had ever had the opportunity. I think it was good to come from the outside actually, because no one had taken the opportunity to step back and say “hold on a second . . . how can we set it up so that the next time we have one of these campaigns it's going to build the organization and it's going to build the power we have . . .” Instead of having a build up for the campaign winning and sort of being exhausted and trying to recover until the next time, how can we figure out how to use one of these campaigns to make ourselves so strong that as we roll into the next legislative session, as we think about what our vision is for moving things forward, that that could actually happen. And that had not happened and what I found was an organization that had great people associated with it but it was a shambles. There was no money. There was a kind of an awful little office with no windows and a big stain on the carpet. (Shared laughter) And a friend of mine visited me from California and she saw my office and burst into tears . . . and I, I was, you know I really thought can I do this? Can I do this? I thought . . . I really seriously thought about just packing up and moving home, because my job was still open at home. They would have been happy to have me back. And I thought I could just go back and then I thought, you know, you can't really go backwards in your life . . . it never works out and . . .

RMH: Why did you feel it was going backwards?

THORPE: Well, if I had gone back home...I felt that would have been going backwards and so I thought “you're here, you're not going to do this halfway, if you're going to stay you're going to make this thing amazing and if you are going to leave you need to leave

right now . . . ” And so I thought “alright . . . I'm going to make this thing amazing!” And I was meeting the people that would make it amazing. You know I knew that the people were there, that the human resource in this community and this city. I don't just mean the gay community, I mean the pro-LGBT, human rights community incredible. The level of expertise and the progressive coalition, all, there were reasons we were winning those campaigns, and I knew we had what it took but I also knew we had a tremendous amount of work to get us working. And it did take a tremendous amount of work, but I feel proud of what we built and I feel proud of where the organization is now. I'm glad that I came and I also feel that I left at the right time.

RMH: What would you say was a highlight, or the best highlights of that 5-year period?

THORPE: Oh, I have so many highlights, you know, I have a lot of individual personal memories of people who were transformed through the work, that, for me, that was one of the most rewarding things was to . . . well, some of it was to meet the people that had been a part of our movement for decades and had really made Oregon what it is. I learned about the toll that the first Measure 9 Campaign took on the community. Winning that campaign, the one in 1992, there were a lot people when you say Measure 9 they don't even think about the campaign in 2000, they think about the campaign in '92, and I think the reason, this is my analysis, I wasn't here, but having listened to so many of them, I think the reason is because there was a critical thing that happened in that campaign which was the gay community realized that you could get every gay vote in Oregon to go your way and it, you would still never win, right. There was a profound going out and reaching out beyond yourself, and at the time, going out beyond your comfort zone needed to happen. So think about it, this is gay and straight people having to figure out how to trust each other in a time when the community is being devastated by the AIDS crisis, where there's still, there's still all the vestiges of homophobia, all the silence around that, all the . . . and the differences that had to be confronted, like the rural versus urban, you know, like the gay versus lesbian. You know, like the question

where do bisexual and transgender fit into all of this . . . facing all of that. I think, took this tremendous toll on individuals who were affiliated with the campaign. And some of those people haven't done an activist thing since. I mean they won that campaign and that was all they had in them because it was so devastating. So meeting those people and hearing those stories really had a huge effect on me. It moved me so much just to see how much they had changed and see how much they had also changed the world around them.

I think another really amazing thing for has been, like, has been, I think one moment for me was, and most people wouldn't think that this mattered, this is really an insider personal thing . . . when I think about how we built our power I always think about, the recommendation of Mike Mossman to a Federal court position, and I think this happened in 2003, it . . . Yes 2003. He, so, Mike Mossman, is currently a federal judge, he got that appointment, he was recommended by [U.S. Senator] Gordon Smith to the Bush administration to be a federal court judge, and he was a fellow Mormon, friend of Gordon Smith's, and I learned that he had had a key role, he had clerked for the Supreme Court when he was much younger, and played a key role, in the Supreme Court, not overturning the sodomy laws back in 19 . . . when was it . . . 1986, 1987, back then in Bowers versus Hardwick, he had played a key role, back then, as a young man, and it was really devastating happening to our community.

And at the time Basic Rights Oregon had become more solid, we had become a more stable organization, we were building our grassroots power, we had moved into a new office, but we were not credible to the media or sort of the outside world. People still didn't really know our name and there was this turning point where we decided . . . I called up the Human Rights Campaign, I called national organizations, I tried to get them to oppose this guy. They weren't really all that interested for some reason. And I thought "you know what, this is our fight...we're going to take this guy on." And so we did. And we did it in a very careful and methodical way where we were able to document all of his . . . I was able to get my hands on the original Supreme Court memos that he had written

in the margins of for his boss on the Supreme Court. And I was able to get a biography of Justice Lewis Powell who was the swing vote, and this is who that guy clerked for, talking about Mike Mossman's role. And I was able to get all these things together and then we very carefully built our case against him and went public with it. Tried to get him to meet with us and when he wouldn't we went public with it, and because of the way, because of the organization we had become, and because of the way we approached it, we were on the front page of the Oregonian, every day, for like 2 ½ weeks...The Oregonian editorialized several times in our support. There were articles that said "Who is Basic Rights Oregon?" There were all these things that happened where eventually Mike Mossman agreed to meet with us and that was in a time, if you think about the way the judicial nominees were being treated by the Bush Administration, they weren't answering any questions. He met with us for two hours and then he met with The Oregonian for two hours and in the end we had all agreed that he had changed as a person, but he felt like he had to be accountable to us. And maybe this is a long boring story that doesn't matter to most people . . .

RMH: No . . . it's great . . .

THORPE: I don't think most people think of it as a turning point for LGBT rights in Oregon, and maybe it wasn't for most people in Oregon. But for Basic Rights Oregon it was a turning point. Because it was at that point our pro-active movement, right, started to matter. We weren't just fighting ballot measure campaigns, we weren't just . . . We had built enough of a presence and enough credibility that now the major media was starting to get on our side and that was huge. They had never done that outside of a ballot measure campaign. And so we, that was a huge, huge, huge turning point for me. It was one of my most amazing moments, and after, afterwards I called Mike Mossman and I said "listen, I know that this must have been hard on you, but I just want you to know that I really appreciate that you met with us and I hope that you don't feel so terrible about this," Right. And he said "you know Roey, when you guys first raised the concerns that

you did, I was so angry and I was so horrified and I thought I can't believe they are doing this to me . . . ” He said, and now I look back on it as one of the best things that's happened. He said that “I felt like I got a chance to demonstrate that I had changed and I always felt bad about my role in that, I realize that it was wrong, and I really think it was an opportunity for me and I just want to say thank you.” And I thought, that, for me was one of the most validating, validating moments about the power of people to change, the role an advocacy group can have, and the importance of the work that we do . . . so . . . for me that was a huge moment. It was great.

RMH: That was great. What a great story. Thank you. What about the flip side of that? How you were on a personal level as far as all the stuff you were taking in and all the stories, you know, trying to maintain this boundary between your own personal life and professional life?

THORPE: Well, I was definitely less successful at that, you know, I think people used to joke with me that I should change my name to “BRO-ey” because I just completely lost myself in the organization. I worked really long hours - it became my whole life. I think in retrospect that I don't think there was another way to do it. I wish I could say there was. I wish I could say that I shouldn't have done it that way and that I should have found another way but I don't think there was another way. I think I, I sort of gave everything I had . . . and I don't say that in a martyr-ish way. I got back just as much as I gave. I mean people have been nothing but kind and supportive, at least most people, have been nothing but kind and supportive. I always thought people were grateful for the work and supportive and the way, the things that people were willing to give. You know one of the jokes around the office was the kinds of things I would call people up and ask them for . . . when we were getting ready for the Measure 36 campaign in 2004 I called 3 different people and asked them to quit their jobs and come work for the campaign and all of them did. I mean, can you imagine getting a call saying I need you to quit your job and people ...

RMH: Well, that speaks to your reputation . . .

THORPE: No. But it speaks to their commitment is what it does. I mean, that there are people . . . that is not true in every state. And I know that now because of the work I have done since, it speaks to this community. So people saw me as a leader but I don't they realize that there were huge commitments that hundreds, hundreds of people were making all the time, for that organization and for the movement to make that possible . . . unbelievable. So I think in part, because I was seeing that all around me, I just wanted so desperately to do well by it. I wanted to represent that in some way that was really, that was worthy of what was being given to the organization. It was incredible. So, I completely burned myself out. I was exhausted. You know I remember coming out of the No on 36 campaign I was actually hospitalized twice in 2004 during the campaign -- not because of the campaign, but sort of because of everything leading up to the campaign with the marriages in Multnomah county and everything that had happened leading up to those. And then when the campaign was getting going my body just gave out and I was in the hospital for a week, taken there in an ambulance and then in the hospital again for several days over Labor Day but I think most people don't know about that because it was a holiday weekend (RMH "yeah") so I could to hide it, so I absolutely broke down and burned out and eventually had to leave just to recover from the whole experience. (chuckle)

You know, I had been in public life for such a long time before that I think I needed to just step back for a while and I am glad that I did.

RMH: And so you chose to, in 2005, that you left Basic Rights . . . ?

THORPE: Well there was still a position for me in New York that allowed me to still live in Oregon and spend half of my time in New York, as you recall from this interview there

was a time I was going to move to New York City, so for me it was like a dream come true.

RMH: Like calling you back . . .

THORPE: . . . that I could do both. Right. That I could be bi-coastal and that I could be in both places that I love and do work that I love and not be in a leadership role and, you know, be in a supportive role (chuckle) and I thought this is what I really need to do. But at the same time I was pretty miserable in my personal relationship and I think it was very hard, you know for anyone in the type of position I was in would tell you, and their partner would tell you, it is very hard to maintain a relationship and be in that kind of a role. I certainly maintained no level of sanity around it. And so, you know, I left both my relationship and my job right around the same time and needed to move on to something else and did, but it was, but I knew, I knew the organization would get along fine, I knew, you know, there was people saying “what are we going to do without you,” but I said to them, and I really believed, it was never me . . . I had a role to play to play in it and I'm proud of it and I did it to the best of my ability but it was always every amazing, amazing people. So wise and so dedicated and so, so enthusiastic. So, so because of that I knew it would be OK, I knew I didn't have a choice . . . I sort of hit the wall, so I, so I did step down in 2006.

RMH: And so you maintained the role . . . you maintained living here and the role in New York . . . with Freedom to Marry?

THORPE: Yes, yes, which was great. There was nothing quite as good as getting to fly to New York on someone else's dime a couple weeks a month and live in an apartment in Manhattan, you know. And experience everything that Manhattan has to offer, then get to come home to Portland, be flying in and see Mt. Hood (RMH “yeah”) from the plane window and know you were coming home. So that was fantastic. So I did that for

about a year and then I started working for an organization in San Francisco called the Equality Federation. And from there I traveled all over the country with groups like Basic Rights Oregon in all the different states and worked from home, spent some time in San Francisco, but mostly just traveled around the country and did that for two years and that was lovely, really fun. Got to share what I had learned at Basic Rights Oregon with my colleagues that I had known from that work and so that was, that was really great. And I got to experience being single for a few years which I really needed on a personal level . . . to just sort of curl up on my couch, with my cat, and have some quiet time and just recover from everything that had happened. So it was really good. A really good time.

RMH: Yeah. It sounds like it was a great growing period for you emotionally and professionally . . . time to catch yourself but also be on the outside and be involved . . .

THORPE: Yeah. You know how you take a roast out of the oven and you need to let it sit and let it absorb all of its juices? That is what I was doing. I was resting.(shared laughter), but not like a sleepy girl, like a roast right out of the oven and I think that's right and I think I came out of it better for sure.

RMH: Well, great . . . and so that was around 2008 when you finished working with Equality in San Francisco?

THORPE: That was 2000. That was early 2009. And so I went from there and decided I really wanted to be based back in Oregon again. I was really living here the whole time, but I was running into people all over town that would say “ohh, it's so nice for you to come all this way for our event.” You know people thought I was living in New York or living in San Francisco and I, I . . .

RMH: People thought you had gotten the heck out of Oregon.

THORPE: Yeah. And that never was the case. I was never leaving Oregon and I never want to, I mean I had so many different career opportunities if I was willing to move to another city, but especially [Washington] D.C., but I just can't imagine leaving Oregon. It's such a special place and I wanted to have my work more focused back in Oregon and I felt like I was ready for that again. And so I found out about this job at Planned Parenthood essentially trying to build at Planned Parenthood what we built at BRO and so that is what I am trying to do.

RMH: Can you describe more of that?

THORPE: Yeah, I the idea is to grow our grassroots political power and influence and to, Oregon's already a pro-choice state so the struggle is a little different, but it's really to make sure we stay a pro-choice state but that we build our political influence, that we increase access for healthcare for women all through the state so regardless of income everyone has the ability to access affordable healthcare. And, sort of, to just hold the line and push forward to have reproductive rights here and it's really, it's been a huge education, and continues to be. But it's very exciting and a lot of things I learned at BRO, about how to do that, apply, and a lot of the people I know from my work at BRO are some of the same people that care about this issue so that has been terrific.

RMH: Do you feel at all, or have you heard people say, that you have abandoned the gay community in that respect?

THORPE: Umm . . . not really. But you, but here's the thing about me (chuckle), I think this was something a little controversial about me when I was at BRO amongst some people, not a lot of people, but some people, is that I have never been really a gay community person, I, the thing that I love about Oregon is that I feel there is not a barrier between straight and gay people here in the way that there is in other places and I have been everywhere . . . and I am including New York, San Francisco and L.A., you know . . .

and I think Portland particularly. But the state of Oregon generally is different. And so for me when I came . . . one of the things that was so amazing for me about BRO is that it was founded by gay and straight people together and the board of BRO has always been, I mean it's not a rule, but the tradition had been when I came there, that the board would be half straight people . . . half non-gay people. And I really worked to maintain that and because I thought that was something incredibly unique and I remember when I worked for Empire State Pride Agenda in New York there was a big to do in 1990. No I guess it was 2000, because we got our first straight board member and everyone was all excited and it was a PFLAG mom who had joined the board of the Pride Agenda. This was New York City! To celebrate the one straight person to be on your board . . . I mean I am sure there were plenty of other straight people would have done it, but it wasn't one of the kinds of things that the gay community asked for or that straight people thought of doing.(RMH "right...right") I mean the fact that Oregon was different was, to me, was a breath of fresh air . . . was amazing. I never wanted to close off that possibility. So, I never . . . so for me of course I have tons of gay friends, I'm a lesbian, I go to lots of gay community events and I enjoy that, but I also want to take advantage of there being fewer barriers here, so I don't situate myself with the gay community. I don't think there is a real gay "ghetto" here the way there is in other cities. I love that. So I don't, I don't feel like I've abandoned the gay community. I think that there are people that wished that all along I was more focused on the gay community in a certain way, like in gay community events and services, but that's never been me. I'm into the political advocacy.

RMH: They are misunderstanding the representation for a diverse community, not just a gay community . . .

THORPE: Right . . . yeah that's right . . . that's absolutely my vision. You know, I want to be able to have friends who I am genuinely interested in who I really want to interact with because of the affinity we have for one another even though we might be different in some fundamental ways. Now the irony, right, is that when I first came out the fact that

there was this insular community gave me opportunities that I wouldn't have had and in some ways I'm sort of letting go of that, because I think while that was true, I think the advantages of having people, having less oppression in the world and having people be able to be full citizens, is better. You know I have a friend who says he misses the days of secret society, of gay men, he feels like we lost something and I know what he means and I completely disagree. I think if you really scratched the surface of that secret society there was so much shame and so much pain and so much discrimination and it's not worth it.

RMH: So many closed doors.

THORPE: So many closed doors, I mean, right . . . and it just wasn't worth it, you know, that fun feeling of being a part of something that no one knew about and something sort of sexy and dangerous and edgy was not worth it, because if you're not a dangerous, edgy, courageous, hearty person, you are lost and not every LGBT person is that. Some of us are more fragile, some of us need more support, some of us are shy, some of us are fearful. It's not worth it to lose those people so . . . (RMH "it's true") So for me I don't really feel that way and I also think the fact that Basic Rights Oregon is doing so well, I feel like that means that that organization can do its work and I'm still engaged with it to the extent that it seems right and I sort of feel free to do other things, you know, and I think that's good.

RMH: Like "my work here is done!" (shared laughter) You built the foundation . . .

THORPE: Yeah, yeah. Well right like some leaders think that being indispensable is a mark of their success, but I think to be able to walk away and have it survive and thrive and be better than it could have been if you stayed, I think that's the credit to your success, for me (RMH 'absolutely') that feels like success. And I don't have to be "BRO-ey" anymore. I can be Roey (shared laughter) which is really . . .

RMH: Regaining your identity.

THORPE: Yes . . . which was really, really good.

RMH: So how do you feel about this new role with Planned Parenthood?

THORPE: Ummm . . . I love it, it's challenging, it's so challenging to me and interesting. I think it's more different from the gay and transgender rights work than what I expected. It's really different.

RMH: In what way?

THORPE: Well, a couple of big ways, one is that the needle is moving on acceptance of LGBT people and you can move that needle, you can see it happen, that's not so true with, particularly with the issue of abortion. There are reproductive rights issues where I think we can find common ground and where we can move the needle, the issue of abortion just isn't one of them. It is polarizing and so figuring out how to deal with an issue where you are not going to change people's minds at all. It's like how I felt about that tiny fringe like becoming tinier of people who are just anti-gay, nothing's going to change them, they just hate us. Right, there is a much bigger percentage of people that feel that way about abortion, like I was just, like that is just one way. It's so polarized. Changing that and figuring out how do you deal with that in your grassroots work and how do you confront that fact and not back away from the fact that 1 in 3 women, I was shocked about this but it's true. One in three women has an abortion in their lifetime (RMH "wow"). Yeah, and we don't talk about it. Women don't talk about it and so we don't know that and so knowing that and having that choice is so important for women. How do you just not back away from that and not allow that to become this polarizing factor that doesn't let you get the rest of your work done. So there's that.

There's the personal safety angle and I, in the 1980's, in 1986 I worked for an abortion clinic in Toledo, Ohio that was bombed . . . (RMH "oh wow") that's why I stopped working there. I only worked there for a couple of months and it was bombed and that physical threat still exists and it's incredible. I mean we had our grand opening the other day and there were bomb sweeps, in the morning, before the grand opening and this morning. I mean there are protestors outside right now, and this morning when I went in there was some woman, with a big sign, screaming at me that I was killing babies, I mean, that sort of, that is something that is really different to and, and challenging, right. You have to just tune it out. I think, but I can say like for as much anti-gay sentiment as there is out there no one was accosting me when I went into my office every morning and finally . . . (RMH "it's true . . . yeah") you know it's just really a different dynamic where you feel embattled. I felt embattled at BRO, but there's a different quality to it here because, because for a lot of these people here . . . a lot of these people violence against clinics and people who work at abortion clinics, violence is justified. They see it as saving lives. Now that's not every anti-choice or pro-life person but there is chunk of people who really, if you really break it down they don't really feel bad if a clinic burns down or an abortion provider is hurt or killed.

But then the other big difference is, for me has to do with the embracing of sexuality. You know the gay rights movement is so, because when you say the word "gay" the people who are afraid, or, you know, uncomfortable with us, immediately have sexual images that come to mind and we spend all of our time down playing sexuality. Planned Parenthood embraces sexuality, healthy sexuality by nature so this is a much sexier place to work and that has been something that has been really kind of freeing and fun for me, so, that, that is a big difference too. And I'm hoping that there is a time, you know, when the gay rights movement was there at one point during gay rights liberation in the '60's and '70's pre-AIDS crisis there was this strong sexual liberation component to the movement and we can't be there right now anymore and I'm hoping at

some point we can because I can say being in an environment that doesn't shy away from sexuality as an issue, not orientation, but actual sexuality, it's pretty great.

RMH: Yeah, I can see that where you are having to change the perspective on female sexuality versus and the word choice around that, versus gay sexuality, people don't want to hear about that. You have to present it in more human rights position.

THORPE: Exactly. One of our staff people, a couple of our staff people, one of our volunteer leadership teams in Corvallis (OR) . . . one of the team members stood up and talked about her college pro-choice groups was going to be doing a workshop on oral sex and what the, sort of, cultural meaning of oral sex was. But then having an oral sex workshop on how to do it and I just, I just cracked up when I heard that. And I thought if this was a gay rights, so Basic Rights Oregon has the same kind of leadership teams around the state . . . if this was that kind of organization instead I would have been really scared that would be, that that somehow that would have come back to reflect poorly on our movement. At Planned Parenthood I think it's fantastic.

RMH: Yeah. Absolutely.

THORPE: You know it's all about sexuality and sexual expression and I think "do I want to go to that workshop or offer it myself? No." (shared laughter) But I love it that young people are doing it. I think that it's great. I love that they get to feel that way. It feels personally freeing to me.

RMH: That's great. Well how exciting that you are heading this up for them. They are very lucky to have you.

THORPE: Well, thank you. I hope so. I hope so . . . yeah.

RMH: Well, we have covered so much. How would you define yourself? How would you define Roey Thorpe today?

THORPE: Wow. Hmmmm.

RMH: In ten words or less. (shared laughter)

THORPE: It's funny, you know, I think I'm at a point in my where I'm starting to feel, I'm 47, and I'm starting to feel like a lot of my life experiences are kind of coming together. And I'm learning how to use the things that I have learned in a new way and at the same time to have some balance in my life between the part that is personal and the part that is about work. And maybe that is the definition of wisdom. Maybe that's what people mean when they say you get wiser as you get older. I think that might be true. I don't usually feel all that wise, but I definitely feel that things have come together for me, so I think that is what I would say about myself, you know. And I think, I definitely feel really excited about the things going on in my life and really proud about the things I have done and I have very few regrets and, just like, I feel really excited about what I am going to get to do both in this job and in my life. So it's a very good time for me for sure.

RMH: Yes. A really good time for you.

THORPE: Yes. It's a very good time for me for sure.

RMH: So, I just want to close today with, because I love James Lipton, and I wanted to pick 10 of his questions.

THORPE: Oh my God. This is so exciting. Like who doesn't dream of being asked the James Lipton questions! This is awesome! (shared laughter)

RMH: What is your favorite word?

THORPE: Oh . . . justice.

RMH: Justice. What's your least favorite word?

THORPE: This is going to be very telling. Nurture. (shared laughter). I don't like the way it sounds but I think it also might be well . . . yeah, yeah . . .

RMH: What turns you on?

THORPE: Uh . . . courage turns me on, I really, I, I admire courage.

RMH: What turns you off?

THORPE: Umm . . . I think that kind of fear that people have that causes them not to be honest because they are protecting themselves in some way. I don't have a good word for that. Maybe there is a word for that. I can feel it when I say it and it really it is one of the worst things about human nature.

RMH: What sound or noise do you love?

THORPE: Hmmm . . . there are so, there are so many sounds I love, um, I love, I think, I think I love the sound of a cat purring more than just about anything, but I also love the sound of coffee brewing.(chuckle).

RMH: Very good. What sound or noise do you hate?

THORPE: The sound of a vacuum cleaner makes me completely insane, actually any whining noise. Like I hate bluegrass singing and I hate Eastern European choral music. It's all nasal. (laughter) Anything with a whine, but really a vacuum cleaner and the coffee grinder. It's crazy.

RMH: Maybe you were a cat in a past life. (share laughter)

THORPE: That is exactly right. Yes.

RMH: Ahh . . . the best . . . one of the best . . . What is your favorite curse word?

THORPE: Oh, God. It's hard to even know what counts as a curse word anymore. I have such a potty mouth. Umm . . . Well, I think I have to say "asshole." I think for me everything's an "asshole." Everyone and everything. (shared laughter) And I think that I can say it with such . . .

RMH: Because they are like opinions. . .

THORPE: Yes. Exactly. I think I can really sneer the word "asshole" and that feels satisfying.

RMH: What profession, other than what you have, would you like to attempt?

THORPE: I would give anything to be a professional poker player. I, it would, it's my total dream and I'm too old and I'm not good enough. But if I had it to do over again, if I was in college, I would absolutely take my last dime and move Vegas and give it a whirl.

RMH: And what profession would you not like to attempt under any circumstance?

THORPE: Umm. I think I would be a really bad factory worker. (shared laughter) Working on the line. Too repetitive and boredom is the thing that crushes me.

RMH: Yeah, you wouldn't do well.

THORPE: Yeah. I think any profession where I was bored I think, but really the factory line . . .

RMH: And the last question. If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say as you arrived at the pearly gates?

THORPE: (Laughter) What a great question. Um . . . what would I want to hear? You know, I think I would want to hear "Hello Roey. Your suite is ready." (shared laughter) That's what I think I would want to hear. I would want it to be very posh and very lovely and decadent. That's what I would want!

RMH: That's a great answer. Well super, we are wrapped up. I appreciate your time today.

THORPE: Well, thank you, thank you so much.

RMH: It was fun.

THORPE: It was fun.

[End of Session 1]
[End of Interview]

Keywords

Activist

AIDS

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Basic Rights Oregon (BRO)

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