

Clifford Jones

SR 11478, Oral History,

by Richard Lidzbarski & Rebecca Fessenden

Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest (GLAPN)

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JONES: Clifford Jones

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This oral history interview was conducted as part of the Portland State University LGBT History Capstone course, Spring Term 2012, with Instructor Pat Young.

Introduction

Clifford (Cliff) Jones is a gay activist who has been involved with many organizations in Portland, Oregon since the 1980s. He discusses several topics including his involvement with Lesbian and Gay Pride, Brother to Brother, Cascade AIDS Project, and other organizations including the fight against Measure 9. He discusses racism within the gay community and the fight for greater inclusiveness within LGBT organizations. He discusses his experiences as a black gay man in Portland.

Session 1
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RL: We're here with Clifford Jones. It's May 14th 2012. We're here for the Oregon History... the GLAPN Oral History project that is going into the Oregon Historical Society and we're ready to begin if you're ready. Can I ask where you were born?

JONES: I was born in Osaka, Japan. My father was in the military. Both of my parents are from Tennessee. Well, my Mom was born in Tennessee; my Dad was born in Georgia. I grew up in an Air Force family traveling around the world and a lot of the Pacific Northwest.

RL: OK, what made you decide to move to Portland?

JONES: My parents had state residency here. I spent my last three years and my last two years of college in Germany, so I really came back to Oregon for in-state tuition. I never really thought I'd end up living here.

RL: I think a lot of people do that. So, did you come out here in Portland?

JONES: No, I came out in Eugene when I was in college at the University of Oregon.

RL: OK. Did you find that a good experience? Was it difficult at that time? Was it still a difficult thing to do?

JONES: It was, you know, the late 70s and the gay liberation movement was sort of still a developing movement.

RL: You might say that it took a little bit of a leap of courage to do that?

JONES: I think coming out is both a process and a.. you know.. something that is both... there is a public and political side of it, there is a personal and emotional side of it. I think coming out is really multifaceted.

RF: How did your friends and family react to that?

JONES: You know, in many ways... so.. yeah... a lot of different ways.

RF: OK.

RL: What was your introduction to Portland? Did you fall into a group of friends? Was there a supportive gay community here that you fell into?

JONES: I came to Portland in 1980, really after I had come out to my parents, because my parents were living here. I left college at U of O, got a job in Tacoma, Washington, was there for two and a half years. I thought I was going to end up on the East Coast but decided to come to Portland for a couple years just to live around my parents as an adult after I had come out to them. So, I came to Portland looking for a job --and I got a job-- and immediately one of the things I noticed was that there weren't many groups of... I guess that African American gay men were sort of not very social in the bars and stuff. I both started looking... umm.. I actually started a discussion group of black gay men with a man named Dewitt Horton who no longer lives here and I got involved with... at that time I think Gay Pride had not been going many years but certainly was building momentum and in 1980 there was a discussion about whether to turn, to change the name from Gay Pride to Lesbian and Gay Pride.

There was a huge controversy within the community and actually between 1980 and 1981 there was a series of community dialogs that ended up getting called TKO. I think there were monthly dialogs where we'd get between 40 to 50 people having a process, figuring out what to do. I guess it was really a decision making group, and so out of that group I developed lots of friends... it was a political context, and a number of us got involved in the planning of Lesbian and Gay Pride in 1982 to ensure that the political discussions and decisions that came out of that community dialog got carried through to Lesbian and Gay Pride. So, I would say, probably, that 1982 was the first year that there was a lot more diversity, a lot more community based planning and involvement in Lesbian and Gay Pride.

At that time it was not a year round committee. It would start organizing around December, February and March... form a steering committee and there was really a power... Portland Town Council was the precursor to Phoenix Rising which is the precursor for the counseling service that is now Cascadia Behavioral Health. But in the late 70's Portland Town Council formed. It was a political organization that ended up becoming a counseling organization. I think Jerry Weller was there, but anyway... there was sort of a struggle between when I'd call the white gay establishment that felt sort of like they owned Gay Pride and sort represented the movement. So, I think that was a time that was really an indirect struggle because there were sort of proxy representatives... but clearly out of that dialog a new group emerged and was very invested in the political struggle around how Lesbian and Gay Pride would be presented as representing the community and as part of the movement. Some people wanted a parade, some people called it a march, some people called it a rally. There was a lot of politics. It hardly ever broke even.

RL: So, would you characterize it as sort of an old-guard vs new guard, opening up kind of struggle? Is that what you're saying?

JONES: No, I think it was a upper class white male gay community had control of that event and that representation and so I think it was a struggle for inclusion and diversity. And, it was a struggle that was dramatic, so in 1982 a very diverse committee came together to form a steering committee very ...probably 30 to 40 people involved in organizing it. In 1983 the same group came together... either in 1983 or 1984 a white man came to our Lesbian and Gay Pride dressed in black face as Aunt Jemima. Some people approached him and asked him to leave --and he wouldn't leave-- and so confrontation erupted and a number of us surrounded him. He said he was just having fun. A large black Lesbian confronted him. He refused to leave. We made him leave. We started chanting "racism isn't fun, racism isn't funny" and they just followed him around until finally he left. Many people were upset that we had done that. They felt like we were excluding him, they felt that it was free expression. There was an ensuing debate in the gay press. At that time I think it was Northwest Fountain, or maybe it was Cascade Voice . . . no, maybe it was Cascade Voice . . . yeah I guess Cascade Voice was the gay paper at that time, so a huge huge, huge controversy. Just amazing things were not... Something about being reminded of the darkies in the South. It was just amazing interchange in the newspaper.

The next year a group of white gay men threatened to come en masse in blackface. So, there was a whole organizing campaign that was prepared to respond to that. So we sort of went to Lesbian and Gay Pride that year not knowing whether we were going to have a violent outbreak of ...trying to restrain people... a group of white gay men that were going to come in blackface. They didn't come. In the following year the black lesbian who had originally had confronted this man started getting death threats. She, someone wrote in red acrylic paint in her newspaper "this will be your death

nigger". We started having... there was this group... it was a diverse group of multiracial, lot's of white people that were involved in . . . there was really just a very interesting challenge to white gay men authority and power and control and assertion that this was a diverse multicultural movement that no one segment of the community owned it.

So, actually, then the FBI got involved because there was a death threat. It was intense three or four year period in which a group of about 50 to 60 activists really formed solid relationships and bonds that really in turn impacted how Lesbian and Gay Pride was presented those years. So there continued to be a political struggle. Around the mid-80s it became a little profitable. I think the first we had 3000 dollars in the bank and then a white gay man who was a signer on the account absconded with the money and tried to start a separate Lesbian and Gay Pride. We went into mediation and, actually it was Ray Southwick who is no longer with us. So we went through a lot of struggles.

That was the period that massive debates about whether we should have a beer garden at Lesbian and Gay Pride. Up until the mid-80's there was no alcohol allowed. I think during the mid-80's we begin to see that this was profitable in that Lesbian and Gay Pride can actually make money. So then you got all kids of people interested in it.

RL: Do you think that profitability was largely a good thing, or did it come with problems?

JONES: I think it just was. It's a part of our structure in the U.S. Anything that becomes organized, at some point, we'll figure how to make money from it, or how to enter it into some kind of market activity. So, I think some of it did was it allowed organizing of Lesbian and Gay Pride. This was happening across the country. International and National Pride organizations were forming, having conferences to bring people together to try and coordinate themes and stuff. So, I think it represented... the opportunity was to

create a year-round organization that could do other activities and that could have some resources to invest in a mission and goals.

RF: I do have a question for you. Going back to the racial tension and the white male power issue: is this what led you to start Brother to Brother?

JONES: Not really. In the late... concurrently with what was going on in Lesbian and Gay Pride I mention that I arrived in Portland and I noticed that African Americans did not communicate... you'd go out and there... there seemed to be social isolation and that people primarily related to white people. And so I started a group. At that time there was Gay Men Together at PSU that had been meeting for years as a little rap group... so we started a group of black gay men and so I asked... actually it was through some of my connection. I wanted to meet black lesbians. Someone, it was actually a white lesbian. They had a group so we originally brought those two groups together. So through the mid 80s we had a group called Black Lesbians and Gays United. We had potlucks once a month, we threw some fundraisers, we did some big parties. When the anti-gay initiatives started we had some big fundraisers for that. We had 40,50,60 people coming out monthly. It was amazing... I had not seen anything like it in Oregon. It was a time when people went out but people ... it was just exciting to have an environment that was black and queer: black gay/lesbian. At that time the National Coalition for Black Gays and Lesbians (or something like that) was organized so that movement also was happening across the country. So, that was incredibly powerful.

Kathleen Saadat, Amari Jabani, Rupert Kinnard, and myself were sort of the leaders of that group and kept it together. So that was going strong. I really think as the AIDS epidemic hit you got this other overlay through all of this that was a fascinating interweaving of dynamics. So there was the visibility and the asserting of rights and gay pride marches represented that visibility. For me, black lesbians and gays organizing

and considering how to develop social and political power and looking at the intersections of being black and lesbian and gay, looking at racism within the gay community, homophobia within the black community. Just having a space... it was controversial because it was a black-only space so white people couldn't come. Other people of color could come. So sometimes some black people wouldn't come if they couldn't bring their white lovers. And so we would have white people trying to come, black people trying to come with their lovers and we would turn them away. That was pretty controversial. Some people hated it, some people loved it, but it was certainly a unique space. To have our African American cultural traditions present in a gay/lesbian setting was unique. It was a once a month occurrence. It was incredibly powerful.

What was most interesting were the connections between men and women. One of the things we saw in that period was lots of tension between white gay men and white lesbians. And we saw among black people we didn't have those tensions particularly when we were alone. That isn't to say that sexism wasn't there. I remember one meeting where this guy was saying that the men would bring the alcohol and the women would do the food... and we just handled it...it wasn't like, get made at him, it wasn't like "kick him out" it was just "no its not gonna happen like that, let us tell you how its gonna happen". So many of us noticed that dynamics around gender and sexual orientation within our community were different than what we observed in the mainstream community. We had some discussions and conversations and lots of political education.

As HIV hit we didn't really dealing with it. No one was dealing with it. We didn't know what know what was going on. I would say that there were many things that probably broke that group up. I think HIV was one of them. Everyone was just confused and terrified in 83, 84, 85, 86, 87. And so we stopped meeting one of the founders, Armani Jabari, died of AIDS in 1991. He was very sick in the late 80s, so I think a lot of people turned inward.

Brother to Brother formed in 1992 at a gathering at Rupert Kinnard's house that 40 gay men attended ...over 40... again phenomenal... and some of that was the groundwork laid by Black Lesbians and Gays United. Out of that we formed committees. POCAN, People of Color Aids Network had formed in Seattle and they had formed a Brother to Brother and so people here had connections with those folks. They actually came to that meeting and and supported us in developing in building the Brother to Brother organization here. That's how that came about. We formed committees, started a newsletter. A lot of it was our response to HIV; building a response to HIV. Do some social isolation... we certainly were seeing some black gay men who had HIV not accessing the mainstream systems until they were sick and dying and we were seeing the mainstream system reeling... a repeat of what I had experienced in Gay Pride to Lesbian and Gay Pride was with hat sort of white gay male mainstream community feel like they... this was about them... I remember Armani Jabbari, actually, who died of AIDS, founded Oregon Minority AIDS Coalition. Mary Lee was the first executive director.

I remember when the county put out grants for money focused around HIV prevention among communities of color and we went to CAP to talk to them about that grant, that money, that project, that work... I remember rather pointedly one guy saying "we may decide to go after that money" so they were like... it was just to me it was... I guess it was the same old tension and struggle and a just lack of acknowledgement of racism. A lack of acknowledgement of cultural differences, a lack of acknowledgement of disparities. There were no people of color on staff at CAP at that time. It was arrogant. You have no people of color on your board, no people of color on staff, and your response is "we might go after that money" rather than "How can we support you?" I feel like it was that theme of arrogance. It is what it was: it was white male privilege grafted on to white middle and upper class gay men. That was interesting experience to see the recurrence of that tension and dynamic around HIV.

RL: You said that the AIDS crisis sort of blew the first group apart and then you rallied and then more of a response was made. I was wondering... we've heard some stories and we've been trying to peg it down. There have been stories... we've discussed in our Capstone group that lesbians would take care of gay men who were sick with AIDS. We've found, perhaps, one or two instances of it. Were you aware of any instances of lesbians taking care of gay men during the AIDS crisis?

JONES: Yeah, I think there were lesbians getting involved in all parts in their response to HIV. In the mid 80s we still didn't know what was going on. We didn't know the science of it. Back then it was AIDS, before it was HIV. You said it blew the group apart, what happened was everyone was confused and afraid and we didn't talk about it and that confusion and fear resulted in people dispersing. So its not like it was blown apart, it was like people became more socially isolated. People wondered who had AIDS. It was a period where we were still discovering how it was transmitted and there were all kinds of rumors and myths around it. It wasn't common to know someone who had it. It was 1987 before there was a test. We were going from 83 to 87 with people not even knowing they have it, people dying mysteriously. It was just a period of confusion and turmoil and trauma. It's having that kind of overlay on the community.

CAP, I'm guessing you heard, Cascades AIDS Project was originally an education program at CHES, Community Health Essential Support was the support end of HIV. So those were the two organizations that formed. And CHES, CAP... Paul MacDonald I think was the executive director. I think CHES was more... I think CHES did not have an executive director. It was more a group of volunteers so that's where a lot of lesbians got involved in supporting gay men so it was like the PAL project, the Personal Act of Listening project, originally at CHES, where people would be paired with someone with

AIDS as a buddy, a companion. Patty Ladd was just here this weekend who was volunteer coordinator at Cascade AIDS Project so when I went to...

I think it was 1988 or 89 I got offered a job at Cascade AIDS Project and when I went there Patty Ladd, Mimi Luther, Gay Monteverde... there were a number of lesbians who were involved in HIV. I think lesbians definitely stepped up to be engaged in mapping out a community response to HIV and in many cases... in any social network maybe most of the gay men in that network had AIDS. It was also a time when people will not tell their families, they would be further rejected... and so extreme social isolation. I think lesbians really stepped up to the plate. Mimi Luther, I don't know if you have her name, she now works for the state health division, she was the help line coordinator at CAP for probably 5 or 6 years so she would probably be a great person to talk to about how lesbians got involved and stepped up. Another piece of that was the analysis that if the situation had been reversed how many gay men would have stepped up like lesbians did. A number of years later an emerging new focus on lesbian health so I think there was a period of time when lesbians were very focus on gay men's health. Again, another theme of oppression domination one results of that was a greater focus, intentional focus, on lesbian health issues.

RF: We talked in our class about Measure 9 which was in 1992. You also also talked more importantly about the racial divide between the whites and the blacks within the gay and lesbian community. How did the black community and other minority group communities react to Measure 9. We've seen a lot of the white perspective on it but we've not been able to discuss minority perspective on it.

JONES: Uh hmm. There is a myth that the black community is more homophobic than the black community and that... I haven't seen that. There is as much homophobia in the black community as there is in any other community. I think that in response to Measure

Art Alexander and a number of straight black people as well as black gay and lesbian folks, formed African Americans Voting No on 9 ... and so Ann Sweet, Antoinette Edwards, ah Antoinette may not have been involved in it, but certainly Art Alexander and Avel Gordly, Kathleen Saadat, myself, and a number of other people were heavily involved in basically building alliances with African American community, with churches, and so I think one thing that emerged then with mainstream responses... I can't remember all the names of all the organizations. There was some really... the internal politics of those anti gay initiatives were . . . the gay community's response, again it's interesting . . . I've never really thought about it . . . there is this recurring theme of the perspective of both those most privileged and those most marginalized. So that tension and struggle recurred in the gay community's response to the anti gay initiatives.

And in Measure 9 it was particularly divisive because there is a faction that wanted to sanitize the message and there was another faction that wanted to tell the story of people's lives. You know, all of this is being informed by polling and political strategists but there was an attempt, I think, by the campaign by those most empowered to not make it too gay and actually Peggy Norman who I think is at Neighborhood House was the director of that campaign. Really bitter fallout from that and then SOS [note- he was talking about SOC – Save Our Communities which formed to fight the 'mini' measure 9s that were passed in small cities in 1993 – sort of a practice run for the Oregon Citizen's Alliance before the OCA put Measure 13 on the ballot in 1994] -- I think was formed to respond to Measure 13 which came after Measure 9. I don't remember what SOS was. But progressively those movements became which eventually Basic Rights Oregon [BRO].

Now [BRO] is the culmination of the Right to Privacy PAC and the anti gay initiative that basically came together. And the Right to Privacy PAC was conservative, basically white male controlled political action committee that... the responses to the anti gay

initiatives that went through many lives... initiatives was the more progressive, inclusive sort of want to tell our story side of that. So, it was interesting to see that struggle recur, and really interesting to see it get consolidated into Basic Rights Oregon which became the model political campaign, you know, the very sophisticated modern political campaign which really had worked to incorporate a multicultural, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, diverse message and have really worked hard to be vocal on issues of oppression other than gay and lesbian issues, so that when they're calling on communities of color... you know for many years it was those initiatives wanting to participate when they had never showed up for the issues in communities of color.

I think Basic Rights Oregon has done an outstanding job in showing up for a broad range of issues, and that was a strategy that was discussed and developed through hundreds of political relationships and interactions through the 80s and 90s so its really interesting to see how it manifested as an ongoing reality of Basic Rights Oregon and strategically has been successful in terms of how they have standing to really engage communities of color because basically what's happened is . . .

In the No on 9 Campaign I remember I was called 3 o'clock one day, could to come down to City Hall? A forum, I think it was on Channel 2, where they'd have controversial issues where Jeff Gianola would be out there with a microphone, before it was someone else. So I had this desperate call at 3 o'clock to be there at 5. I arrived, I was the only person of color on the gay lesbian bi trans group and Lon Mabon has 5 African Americans who have been briefed and are ready to speak. It was so clear that the anti-gay initiative folks were really doing a great job reaching out to communities of color and I had to be called at work at the last minute so there would be some diversity on the gay lesbian side so it was really irritating and upsetting to be put in that position to see that time and energy they had invested so each of those women had a story. Clearly, I feel that they had been given substantial misinformation. I remember I huddled with the 5

of them after the taping. It was like in those settings you could hardly get a word in edgewise.

I remember Emily Simon was there and she sort of chatted with me and said “you have to be aggressive with these guys.” She was like a bulldog to make sure she was heard and I was sort of prepped or prepared to do that, but I do remember huddling with these 5 black women afterwards and I remember I said to them, I asked them, if they had kids. One woman had 5 or 6 kids and I said, “there is a good likelihood that one of your kids is going to be gay or lesbian. How will you feel if that happens and you’ve supported this measure that would really have a negative impact on their quality of life?” I remember her saying, “I will love my children no matter what.” And another thing I said, this woman worked for the county and her husband had some stroke our heart attack issues, so I said do you think its OK for gay couple who is ineligible for insurance... do you think its ok that someone dies because they are ineligible for medical like your husband is. She said “yes” that’s what she’d have. So it was interesting that those 4 or 5 women who had those different perspectives but what really stood out for me was this woman saying that she would love her children no matter what.

And what the OCA had pumped them up with, what they had passed out was NAMBLA literature. So basically they had convinced these women that gay men were recruiting children and here it is in paper, here it is in print: National Man Boy Love Association. That was their image of what gay people were. So I was infuriated that we had not done a better job of being prepared to respond to communities of color. I’m really excited that that has changed.

So it was in ‘92 that Brother to Brother formed and I would say that my... that we... in Brother to Brother we continued the tradition of having potlucks that were black only and we had... we were really resented, and there was a whole narrative going throughout

the community of how prejudiced and racist... we were ... and we didn't have the right to exclude white people and we'd regularly get calls from white men who desperately needed to get in touch with us so they could make connections with black men and it was just a really interesting dynamic and also on HIV and working with Cascade AIDS Project and also our first grant came through a partnership with the Urban League and so it was 13 years of an interesting journey with Brother to Brother.

RL: Go back. You mentioned prior to Brother to Brother, when you first got here. You mentioned that you started or were involved with a social group for black men. Was that a discussion group? What was it called?

JONES: It didn't have a name. It just was a group that got together at my house a few times, and shortly after that I was involved in Lesbian and Gay Pride and really wanted to find, to connect, with black lesbians so as soon as we met with black lesbians we stopped that meeting and we started having joint potlucks. So, we were having gatherings where we'd meet for a couple hours and talk ...I think they were having potlucks, and then we just had joint potlucks, and then we had another one that just took off.

RL: I see.

JONES: We were really hungry for contact with each other. There was sort of a narrative -- I think what we noticed was that our collective experience was different from the experience of the white gay community in that it was really a time for us to explore what our experience was. I think that black lesbians were more connected with the white lesbian community, and so it was a time of learning for all of us. I think it was a really interesting realization that our issues that our issues around gender were different within the black gay and lesbian community in that we just...it was a time of refreshing

awareness that the dynamics of sexism were there but we dealt with them very differently. I think the common bond of experiencing racism . . . Yeah, it's interesting because when you juxtapose it to the mainstream black community where men were in charge of the liberation movement... the Black Power movement was led by men, and the women were expected to support it.

So here we are in the gay liberation movement where black men and women were there is no question that those dynamics are not gonna happen. So, just because of who we are in terms of our sexual orientation.. so its just interesting how sexual orientation in the context of racial minority impacted gender dynamics. It was just fab... there was not a question, whereas how that played out white gay community was a real separation between gay men and lesbians. In the black gay community it was like we were it wasn't an option. It was for some, but for most of us it was like "we're in this together." People may act stupid but we'll deal with it, we'll tell you "you're acting stupid shut up" or whatever. But were not, we don't feel like we're factionalized. So it was really a rich experience and those relationships really provided a strong social network for many many, many years.

RL: So you do feel that, at least in Portland, that a small community made for a lot more cohesiveness, a lot more togetherness, a lot more...

JONES: It was I don't know it was that we were small. It was that we had a common experience that oppression that was that we understood. So for the white community there is not an identity that binds them together. For black people, our experience... we all have so many common experiences that that commonality superseded sexism. It just the juxtaposition of sexism in the Black liberation movement and what we were experiencing I think was in some ways it was like oh it was "this refreshing".

RF: I found an article online from 2004 that talked about the black community churches how they . . . accept HIV members the churches trying to deal with that. How did the black community churches deal with that here in Portland?

JONES: Well, basically it's congregation by congregation. During the No on 9 Campaign, I can't remember the church, I think it was the pastor at our temple, but we held a press conference in one of the churches. One of the ministers led the press conference so it was really congregation by congregation. Brother to Brother, probably around 1996-98, one Sunday we got a bunch of members together and we attend a church and then we had a gathering afterwards. So I think there were efforts . . . Kathleen Saadat when she went to Cascade AIDS Project led efforts to bring the clergy together. I think that article from 2003 is about developing a unified response among clergy and there are many national projects that were trying to organize clergy. I think the clergy was very reluctant to respond in a cohesive manner and very unclear what their response should be. I think that, again, in terms of analyzing the response on many levels.

So how did people respond to congregation members with HIV? I remember Robin Wright, who was the first paid staff person for Brother to Brother. Jonathan was the first staff member who was paid by the county, Robin Wright was the first paid staff person for Brother to Brother and he went to Clark College in Atlanta, got sick, suffered from a substandard county medical system, got an infection that was not curable but that was avoidable had he had better medical care, came back to Oregon and basically got sick and died. Huge funeral. I think it was at Vancouver Baptist Church. There was an antigay message in the sermon for his funeral and so I think the clergy struggled with it. I don't think, it's again...I think it is a myth that the black churches are more homophobic than mainstream white churches. There are progressive black churches, and there are conservative black churches. And so, in that way it probably mimics the larger culture fairly closely, and I think what is most telling is people's response to congregation

members. Had people been turned away. Now we see the church, the black church, more and more taking on HIV prevention messages. I think why some greater attention is placed on black churches is disparate HIV communities of color so, um . . .

RL: I think we've been at it for an hour now. I think that's what you had us scheduled for. I want to thank you very much for doing this. It's been a good interview. Interview is concluded.

[End of Session 1]

[End of Interview]

Keywords

Ballot Measure 9

Brother to Brother

Cascade AIDS Project

Gay Pride

Lesbian and Gay Pride

Portland Town Council