

**TAKING THE TRUCK OUT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

WASHINGTON, DC

Oral History Interview

**with
FRED FISHMAN
by
AUDREY BARNETT**

**AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
September 28, 2021**

TAKING THE TRUCK OUT

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: Fred Fishman

DATE: September 28th, 2021

INTERVIEWER: Audrey Barnett

PLACE: Zoom

SUMMARY

In this interview, Fred Fishman shares his experiences living in DC through the AIDS epidemic. He pays tribute to the queer organizations, the Lesbian and Gay Chorus and Bet Mishpachah, for supporting him through his own HIV-positive diagnosis. He discusses the lingering trauma and the way that the current COVID-19 pandemic has effected his understanding of the AIDS crisis.

KEYWORDS

HIV, AIDS, Washington DC, gay and lesbian community, UCSF cancer studies, the Washington Blade, Bet Mishpachah, Jewish culture, social justice, the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, gay choral movement, San Francisco Men's Chorus, Kennedy Center, Civil Rights Movement, Liberation movements, Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), Performing Arts, LGBTQ visibility, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, political action songs, South African freedom songs, identity politics, gay religious organizations, COVID, Trump Administration, Reagan Administration, mRNA vaccines, Anthony Fauci, virology, clinical research, PTSD, AIDS health project, disability, Tikkun Olam

Audrey Barnett 00:00:01

Okay, so this is the September 28th, 2021 interview of Fred Fishman by Audrey Barnett for the Humanities Truck Community Archive recorded on Zoom, in both of our respective homes. So first and foremost, I'd like to ask you do I have permission to record this interview?

Fred Fishman 00:00:23

Yes, you do.

Audrey Barnett 00:00:25

Thank you. Now would you be able to tell me what your name is and also spell it?

Fred Fishman 00:00:31

My name is Fred Fishman F-R-E-D F-I-S-H-M-A-N

Audrey Barnett 00:00:32

Perfect. So it would be awesome if you could just tell me a bit about yourself. For example where you currently live and like, what's your current occupation?

Fred Fishman 00:00:53

I currently live in San Francisco, California and my occupation is I'm a supervisor for the data safety monitoring committee, which is part of the infrastructure of the cancer center at UCSF, and my organization monitors clinical trials in the cancer center, cancer studies.

Audrey Barnett 00:01:14

Okay, cool. So I'm curious then just to connect to the topic of this interview which is HIV/AIDS activism in DC. How long did you live in DC and what initially brought you there?

Fred Fishman 00:01:33

I lived in DC for 18 years and what brought me there initially was I was in school at the University of Maryland College Park. And during the time that I was in college started going downtown and familiarizing myself with Washington. It's a little complicated I actually moved away for a year after I graduated, but came back to DC with my partner at the time and we actually came back to DC just for a visit and we were planning to move to the West Coast then. This is like in 1977. Yeah, 1977 I guess.

Fred Fishman 00:02:19

We were planning to move to the West Coast at that time. We weren't sure where exactly. Maybe San Francisco, maybe Seattle. We really hadn't prepared anything and the friend that we were visiting, we were staying with him and he was managing a little restaurant and a little carryout place, and anyway, we took temporary jobs there and I ended up staying for 18 years.

Audrey Barnett 00:02:47

Wow. What prompted then you guys to stay?

Fred Fishman 00:02:53

We were having a great time in Washington. It just seemed like the right thing to do. It was a good place to be and you know we sort of started putting down roots there. I already knew a lot of people from college. And, you know, there seemed to be quite a thriving gay community.

Audrey Barnett 00:03:14

Yeah. I'm curious then if you could tell me a bit about your LGBTQ community in DC. Was there a moment when you first felt connected to the community? Was it instant or did it require some navigating on your end?

Fred Fishman 00:03:39

Well, I think it happened fairly quickly, you know, if we had a time machine and could go back, you know, DC was a rocking town at that period. You know, we don't think about it that way today. It seems like, you know, our DC has a different reputation today than it did then. But it's always been a very progressive town, very politically astute, of course as politics is the main industry of the town.

Fred Fishman 00:04:08

And, you know, there were a lot of people doing a lot of political activism that felt good and right and there were many many organizations. There was a lot of community organizing, lots of organizations were springing up all over the place. The Washington Blade was a good newspaper that, you know, not all places had a good newspaper as good as the Blade and I don't know if there was one particular moment. I don't think I could name one moment when I felt connected, but very quickly I started to make connections everywhere.

Audrey Barnett 00:04:48

What spaces did this connection revolve around? For example, organizations or events or hangout spots?

Fred Fishman 00:05:04

All of those things. So for organizations, I would say I got very quickly involved in the gay synagogue, as we called it the gay synagogue, not the lesbian and gay synagogue as it later became known. Because initially, I think it was mostly men, but it later became Bet Mishpachah. It had started a couple of years earlier, I knew about it but really at that time when I first went, it was a very fledgling organization. I think there were maybe a dozen people involved and that felt important. That felt special and important and powerful, empowering.

Fred Fishman 00:05:48

I had a very strong Jewish upbringing, conservative, but you know, leaning towards Orthodox and my Jewish values still really inform how I go through my life. Although I'm not affiliated with any synagogue today, I still think the way that we were raised, you know, and if we were raised in a religious tradition regardless of what our superficial connections might be, there are values that are inculcated in us that we keep for the rest of our lives. And anyway, it felt like a very welcoming space and people was joining fairly rapidly and it was exciting to be there.

Audrey Barnett 00:06:36

And I'm curious, just because you speak of these values that have remained kind of a constant in your life. In what ways did this gay synagogue and your community in DC impact those values or solidify them or mold them? What was the relationship between these values and that period of time in your life and your faith at that time?

Fred Fishman 00:07:04

I think I would say it was the primary motivator. First of all, social to meet other Jewish people. And also the idea of social justice, you know, for us at that time, I think when we said social justice we were mostly talking about Gay Liberation, which was extremely important to us at the time.

Fred Fishman 00:07:26

And again today we might forget what it was like back then. But you know, we really were oppressed and in a way that I think people forget or you know, young people might not realize how real that oppression was. And there were, you know, myriad examples of that. Laws, you know that prevented people obviously couldn't get married, couldn't adopt children, but even more draconian things than that, there were sweeps of gay people being arrested, appropriate healthcare was denied to people, people lost their housing, people lost their jobs.

Fred Fishman 00:08:16

This is very, very serious systemic oppression, which I'm so happy to say that in my lifetime I've been able to see huge changes and we really can't claim to be an oppressed minority so much anymore. Of course, there is still homophobia, but it's nothing like it was back then. So forming institutions was a very critical part of our liberation at that time. And of course, you know this connection but by being part of the synagogue I found the chorus, the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, and I could tell you that story now or we can save it till later.

Audrey Barnett 00:08:57

Yeah, why don't you tell me that story now? That would be great.

Fred Fishman 00:09:04

So as the synagogue grew we were aware that there were other LGBT synagogues springing up all over the world. And there was an organization formed at the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish organizations, and we started having conferences. This is in the 1970s that they started having conferences and the 80s that grew and I don't remember exactly what year it was, but it was in the 80s maybe about 85, maybe, I don't remember what year it was. We could do some research and find that out.

Fred Fishman 00:09:42

We were a host congregation, Bet Mishpachah was a host congregation in Washington, and I was one of the chairs. I was a co-chair of the entertainment committee for this big conference, where we had Queer Jews coming from all over to Washington. My co-chair was a woman whose partner was in the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, and so she got them to come and perform one night, and that's how I found out about the chorus.

Fred Fishman 00:10:16

Now, I knew that there was a Gay Choral movement. In 1981, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus went on a national tour and they came to the Kennedy Center and I went with my partner to see them and boy, that was a hugely emotional night.

Audrey Barnett 00:10:35

How so? Would you mind describing a little bit more the feelings that you experienced?

Fred Fishman 00:10:39

Well again, we don't really remember today. It's hard to remember what conditions were like for gay people and how we had to be hidden. How hard it was to be out of the closet and in public. So this was the gay men's chorus that came around and did a national tour. They came to the Kennedy Center. So my partner and I packed up our leather chaps and our vests and our hats and we put them in our backpacks and walked to the apartment of a friend who lived near the Kennedy Center.

Fred Fishman 00:11:14

And there we changed into our outfits and proudly walked in our leather to the Kennedy Center and to be there in the audience of mostly gay people, to hear a gay, an out and proud gay, chorus performing was extremely powerful, extremely emotional. And I just remember we cried and cried and cried and cried and couldn't stop crying. And we never had an experience like that before. We had never had an experience of ever being in the majority anywhere. So, that was really important.

Fred Fishman 00:11:48

After that national tour, gay choruses sprang up. I mean, there were other choruses in existence already at that time, there's always been a little competition about who was the first. Who cares who was the first, not important to me, but that national tour did stimulate this idea that there could be gay choruses and so I already knew about that.

Fred Fishman 00:12:19

I always felt it was very important for gay men and lesbians to work together. So this idea of an all men's chorus while it was appealing to me, I was not, you know, I was not that happy about the idea of auditioning for one. And the idea of a Lesbian and Gay Chorus was much more appealing to me and just like the synagogue we talked a lot about equality and equity and concepts that today we're all very familiar with, those concepts. But in those days, that was a new idea for many of us and that we wanted to have both men and women representatives on all of our committees and in all of our leadership, and all of our infrastructure, and that seemed better to me. It just seemed better. I liked it better.

Audrey Barnett 00:13:07

Yeah, and I'm curious, because as you note that's an idea that I think me and a lot of my peers are familiar with, the idea of gay and lesbians working side-by-side together, but I'm curious if you could expand a little bit more on how that might have been revolutionary or a new concept and also what your experiences were like within the Lesbian and Gay Choir. I mean, it's purposeful how the lesbian comes first within that title and so I'm curious if you could illuminate how maybe your experiences in that organization differed from experiences within all-male gay settings or other social scenes at the time.

Fred Fishman 00:13:57

Say the question again.

Audrey Barnett 00:14:01

That was a bit long, but just if you could explain how that concept was new or revolutionary, and then a follow-up is just sharing how your experiences within the Lesbian and Gay Choir differed from other social scenes at the time that were possibly more segregated by gender.

Fred Fishman 00:14:27

Yeah, okay. So first of all, I want to correct you. The name of the group is the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, not choir. That's the correct name. That was intentional also because people associate the word choir with a church and we did not want to be associated with church choirs. We wanted our name to be chorus rather than choir. So there was intention behind that too.

Audrey Barnett 00:14:50

Oh, that's interesting. Why is that distinction important between church choir and chorus?

Fred Fishman 00:15:00

We, you know, I don't think this was explicitly written anywhere. There's no documentation of it, but we did not perform religious music. Generally, I mean, there were some exceptions. We did not do a Christmas concert, for example, we did not do a holiday concert. We really wanted to be egalitarian for everybody and it was kind of revolutionary. So as a Jew it's like, you know, in all the singing that I had done in my life, I sang a lot of Christmas songs.

Fred Fishman 00:15:35

Oh, and then, there was sort of like, an increase in awareness that there were Jewish people. So I would sing a Christmas concert with 15 Christmas songs, and they would put in one Hanukkah song for me. No, that never felt good.

Fred Fishman 00:15:49

So in the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, we did not perform a holiday concert and we didn't go caroling. Although maybe some people went caroling, but that was independent, you know, and we did perform some religious works, but we performed them as great works of music not in conjunction with a holiday or for a religious purpose. That was important to me, that made a big difference to me.

Fred Fishman 00:16:15

And again, it was a consensus-based organization and that was appealing to me also. So a lot of my socializing, those were the two organizations, the synagogue and the chorus, were the two major social organizations where men and women mixed. Because in my other gay social organizations and well, not really organizations, but just in hanging out, I was mostly with men. I felt that being involved with those two groups really balanced out my life. Women have always been very important in my life and I've made most of my women friends through those two organizations.

Audrey Barnett 00:17:04

Of course, yeah. Thank you for the clarification also between choir and chorus because that's really important. That's a really interesting anecdote actually that I wasn't fully aware of before. And so I appreciate you sharing that. It's really interesting.

Fred Fishman 00:17:28

Also, the chorus used to be the Gay and Lesbian Chorus, and then you mentioned this also, we changed the name to Lesbian and Gay Chorus to put lesbian first and I'm sure you, people might have even told you these stories before, but the number of times that I told people I sang with the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, and they would say, oh, the Gay Men's Chorus. Because the men's chorus has always had the limelight, and that's what people thought.

Fred Fishman 00:17:56

And this idea of even having a Lesbian and Gay Chorus, I think, was more strange, more revolutionary, harder for people to understand because they assumed that gay men would only want to be with men and lesbians would only want to be with women. So again, I think that was the climate at that time in Washington DC was that all the organizing was around trying to provide equal treatment for everybody.

Fred Fishman 00:18:26

At that period, you know, the BT, we said LGBT, but we're really talking about lesbians and gay men. I think we all wanted to get that established first and then little by little more awareness grew about bisexual people and trans people. And of course today, I think the balance has shifted. So there's a lot of organizations outside of just lesbians and gay men.

Audrey Barnett 00:18:57

Yeah, that's fascinating. It's really interesting to learn about how that has evolved. Because as you noted, I think it's kind of commonplace now, but it's fascinating to learn more about the origins of that organizing and how the Lesbian and Gay Choir was kind of at the forefront of that like collaboration and emphasis on also consensus-based decision making and making sure everyone has an equal voice.

Audrey Barnett 00:19:33

And so I am really curious. I'm really, I'm touched by that story you shared of you listening to the Gay Men's Choir for the first time at the Kennedy Center and so I'm curious if you could

talk more about the connection between singing, and maybe even more of your personal experiences of singing within the Lesbian and Gay Choir, and then also the connection there to LGBTQ visibility or LG visibility.

Fred Fishman 00:20:08

I'm going to correct you again. It's chorus.

Audrey Barnett 00:20:12

Oh, I'm so sorry.

Fred Fishman 00:20:14

It's okay. It's a habit. So I'm just going to correct you again.

Audrey Barnett 00:20:18

No, thank you so much. I have just changed my notes. I'm so sorry. I thought I had it correct. Yeah, okay it's chorus.

Fred Fishman 00:20:24

It's okay, you weren't thinking about it. It's okay. And now I forgot the question.

Audrey Barnett 00:20:32

Oh, no worries. I can reiterate. So how for you personally was singing within the Lesbian and Gay Chorus connected to lesbian and gay visibility? Gay and Lesbian Chorus has...

Fred Fishman 00:20:46

It was huge. It was huge. So I've always been musical. I played instrumental music since I was a little kid and I sang in high school and I played in college and, you know, after college, I was wishing that I could continue doing musical stuff, but I wasn't quite sure how to do that. Finding the chorus was really, it was exactly what I needed. It was the right fit at the right moment. And when I joined it was a very small group. There were only, I think, maybe six people was the total and they only had one other bass, and I sing bass, and they really needed me.

Fred Fishman 00:21:34

And so, the friend that I had, who was the partner of the women that I work with on that committee, you know, sort of nagged me, a little bit to come to a rehearsal. And I went to one rehearsal and that was it, I was hooked. The people were so nice that's when I met Jill and some of the other members who are still, you know, I still know them and I'm friends with them.

Fred Fishman 00:21:59

The ability to combine my love of making music with the politics of the hour, with the politics of the day, was really powerful and kind of intoxicating that we could, you know, sing publicly, sing well, sing beautifully artistically, and carry a powerful message, and I think that's in the tradition of, you know, the Civil Rights Movement. Liberation movements throughout history have used music and singing very effectively and it really felt like we were on to something and I will tell you in 1989.

Fred Fishman 00:22:49

So they formed a movement and were a huge organization, called GALA choruses, Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, you may know about them. And we went, our small chorus by that time had grown. I don't know if it was maybe 25 people or 30 people, something like that. And we went to the first, our first GALA chorus conference, and that was in Seattle, Washington in 1989.

Fred Fishman 00:23:21

And you know, we had performed a lot by that point but you know, we had never done anything like this where we walked onto this major stage of a big venue and there were, I don't know how many thousand people in the audience, and to hear them applaud for us, our little group singing, it was one of the turning points.

Fred Fishman 00:23:39

A really powerful moment in my life recognizing, like, my voice is powerful. I feel like I'm going to cry right now just saying it, you know, the choruses mission statement or vision statement, I'm sorry I don't remember which it is, is every voice matters. Very simple and very profound, right? So I started to feel like, oh my God, my voice matters. I can make a difference in the world by standing up and singing. I mean, it was really intoxicating.

Audrey Barnett 00:24:21

I can imagine.

Fred Fishman 00:24:24

Yeah, and that fueled everything, you know, all things are connected. So that fueled my desire to do more, to be more visible, to be more out and proud, to demonstrate, to march, to just not care so much about hiding myself.

Fred Fishman 00:24:49

And again, we today tend to forget because everybody knows gay people today, but I mean, when I came out to my parents, they told me they'd never seen or heard of another gay person course, it wasn't true. But that's people, you know, we were really in the closet.

Fred Fishman 00:25:05

So it was so important to come out. It was so important to be visible, but very uncomfortable in a lot of situations. But if you were performing, if it was part of the Performing Arts, that was a way to be out and proud and have something to say and know that our voice really mattered. And then people told us that we were changing their lives.

Audrey Barnett 00:25:32

Wow.

Fred Fishman 00:25:33

So that was really powerful.

Audrey Barnett 00:25:35

Completely. Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing. I agree. That statement is really succinct and very powerful and profound as you said, so I am curious then to know how the AIDS epidemic impacted your performances or collaborations that you had as a part of your time with the Lesbian and Gay Chorus. Because obviously you've talked a lot about lesbian and gay visibility, but I'm curious about the specific ways the AIDS epidemic impacted your

performances.

Fred Fishman 00:26:17

Well, as I said, a moment ago, all things are connected, so they really can't be separated. AIDS, you know, was first reported in 1981 by the time we're talking about in the mid-80s it was ravaging the gay community, gay men's community primarily, and boy living through that period, again, really shaped me and shaped who I am today.

Fred Fishman 00:26:55

It's like, it would be like growing up during a war. It was a war. And again, we don't remember the government rejected us, the government abandoned us. They didn't do anything. And there were thousands of people dying, and many of my friends died. And we had chorus members who died and synagogue members who died and all my social circles were all decimated. People were dying all over the place. Literally.

Fred Fishman 00:27:25

So, that was a big part of the motivation where we recognized that we have to do something. We have to take action, we have to do something politically. How can we get the government to pay attention to this? And not just let us die.

Fred Fishman 00:27:43

I myself, tested HIV positive in 1985 when the test first became publicly available. So I'm a medical miracle today when talking to you about this. At that time in 1985, a positive test was essentially a death sentence because really people were dying. It wasn't understood that anyone could survive AIDS.

Audrey Barnett 00:28:11

If you feel comfortable, would you mind sharing a little bit about the feelings that accompanied that diagnosis or how these respective communities maybe helped you at this point in time?

Fred Fishman 00:28:23

Yeah, when I talk about it, I call that year my lost year. The truth is I was so freaked out and terrified that I don't even remember anything. For about that year after I got my diagnosis, I really don't remember anything. I just remember, I cried a lot. I cried at every sunset, I cried at every movie, I cried every, every time I saw a flower blooming. I was just crying all the time because I thought this is the last time I'll ever see the irises blooming, you know, very melodramatic.

Audrey Barnett 00:29:05

It was justified I would say.

Fred Fishman 00:29:07

I was 30 years old. You know is that right? Yeah I was 30 years old when I got my diagnosis and I also had, I was seeing it all around me. I was seeing people, die, all around me. I remember the first one of my friends who got sick and died and it was somebody, he was not a close friend, with somebody that I had known for quite a few years by that point.

Fred Fishman 00:29:36

I'm guessing this was probably about 1983 or so, but I'm not sure of the year, but I'm guessing around then, and I ran into him on the street and he said, hello Fred. And I looked at him. I didn't recognize him and I literally didn't recognize him. I was like, who are you? And then he told me his name and I was, I'm sure I didn't hide my dismay and shock very well. I regret that because I'm sure he was getting that reaction from a lot of people and it must have been extremely painful.

Audrey Barnett 00:30:16

Because he looked so different?

Fred Fishman 00:30:18

He was emaciated, he just looked, you know, 20 years older. Yeah and that really shook me. And then it started happening. It started happening all over the place. You know, during that period I lost my doctor. I lost my dentist. I lost my therapist.

Fred Fishman 00:30:41

I lost lots and lots of people and I had broken up with my recent partner at that time, but he lived nearby and we had made a pact. Again you have to remember there was no treatment. Literally, no treatment for AIDS and we had made a pact not to get tested because there was no treatment and we assumed we were positive anyway. Why get tested?

Fred Fishman 00:31:10

But one day he showed up at my door in tears because he had gotten tested and tested positive. And I tried my best to comfort him but of course, then it really nagged at me. I thought well, I need to get tested too because if he's positive, I'm probably positive. And that's when I got tested and it was a terrible moment to be told that. It was like getting a death sentence. I fully believed that I was going to die.

Audrey Barnett 00:31:44

Who was your support network at this time?

Fred Fishman 00:31:48

So it was, yeah, so the synagogue, and the chorus I'd say were my support places and my network of friends which by that time was pretty extensive and we all, you know, everybody knew what was going on. And using the time that I had to stand up and sing and to demonstrate and to march felt like the right thing to do and because it was personal at that point for me. I thought that my life depended on it. And so that motivated me to be more out and more visible and not care too much about what other people thought.

Audrey Barnett 00:32:32

Yeah. First, thank you so much for sharing all of that. That was incredibly vulnerable and I am really appreciative to have this opportunity to listen to you. I can't really, I can't imagine what that must have been like. I mean, it just sounds like extraordinary grief and so, I'm really curious how people within both your community at the synagogue and within the chorus, how did people care for one another? [undiscernable]

Fred Fishman 00:33:15

So chorus, I remember one concert called, it's about the Names Project and the quilt. I don't remember the name of the concert, it might have been the Names Project, I don't remember but we sang a lot of songs of support. We sang, oh, that's what friends are for, that concert.

Boy now I'm not remembering the individual songs, but a lot of political action songs.

Fred Fishman 00:33:51

We adopted a lot of South African freedom songs because they really, they really spoke to us. So one was alone and frightened. That was not South African, I think that was by a Ugandan, really Bengali Latoya I think, he was a Ugandan activist if I'm not mistaken, who wrote that song and others were from South Africa. Oh goodness. Fred Smalls's song anything possible was maybe like an anthem for us that we performed again and again. No, I'm not remembering programming that well right now, but a lot of our songs were freedom songs and activism songs.

Audrey Barnett 00:34:47

In what ways did those speak to you then? Because Jill also emphasized that within our conversation.

Fred Fishman 00:34:55

I think it really, for me, it made me understand that our Liberation movement had a place in history among all the other Liberation movements and that I had a feeling of solidarity with the people in South Africa and with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and with the Women's liberation movement and, you know, it just put us in a context that made us feel like we're not this hidden group of people all by ourselves, lonely all alone and you know, nobody knows about us, we're invisible. But made us feel like we were part of a much larger stream of history and that was powerful.

Audrey Barnett 00:35:43

I can imagine I think those cross-movement connections are really important, actually, especially in this day and age. I think it's what will propel people forward too. So that's fascinating to learn.

Fred Fishman 00:36:00

I completely agree. I completely agree. And I think that as I keep saying all things are connected, it's like, I think that we need to see that today. We need to see this really badly. There's so much identity politics and stuff in my group versus your group and the polarization and everything. I just mean we need to come together and we need to see that our struggle is all the same struggle.

Audrey Barnett 00:36:27

Totally. Were there any other connections or collaborations between the Lesbian and Gay Chorus, or even like with your synagogue, were there any connections made between movements beyond?

Fred Fishman 00:36:46

Yeah, so the synagogue had a social justice program and we served food in a homeless shelter once a month and they did a lot of other community organizing. And of course, at that time, there was a lot of, again we forget today that these [organizations] like Metropolitan Community Church, and Dignity and Integrity, and all these gay religious organizations were fighting to be recognized by their religious institutions. So that also was going on and that was a big struggle that was going on at that time.

Fred Fishman 00:37:26

And also there's another connection and that was that the music director at Christ United Methodist Church in Washington DC in Southeast, was a reconciling congregation. They were explicitly welcoming LGBT people into the congregation and there was a big argument in the Methodist Church at that time about what they thought about LGBT people. So anyway, the music director there turned out to be, we got him as our director for the Lesbian and Gay Chorus.

Fred Fishman 00:38:01

His name was Mark Bowman, lives in Ohio now I believe, or Chicago maybe. No he came from Ohio, I think he lives in Chicago now. Anyway, that church also was the venue where Bet Mishpachah met for many years. So that reconciling Church, these two things happened independently, Mark didn't facilitate that, it just happened independently, but I thought that was pretty interesting.

Audrey Barnett 00:38:33

Well, I really would love to know more actually about the connection between your spiritual practices and your activism and how one might affect your ability to do the other.

Fred Fishman 00:38:55

There's a very strong component in Jewish history and Jewish culture of social justice and I think that, you know, I don't think we call this, I didn't personally think of it, I didn't call it social justice at that time but like doing the right thing. Doing the right thing politically is very important. And I think that again, I said at the beginning of this talk like those values informed my behavior at the time.

Fred Fishman 00:39:31

And in talking about it right now, it seems like well singing that's not much of a political activity while going to a synagogue that's not a political activity, but we don't realize it was a political activity at that time. It was political. Just by doing what we were doing. We were making a statement. We were changing things little by little. And I think what we saw for queer people, what we've seen over the last 30, 40 years is that you work, you work, you work, you work, it seems like nothing is changing, nothing is changing, nothing is changing. But actually, things are changing, slowly and often under the surface. You might not notice the changes that are happening, but then when those changes reach a critical point, a big change happens.

Fred Fishman 00:40:20

So that's what happened with gay marriage for example. People said like, well, that will never happen. In the next year it happened. But people have been working for that for decades. So it didn't just happen suddenly, even though the moment that it happened seemed like it was quite sudden. And I think that you know, all parts of liberation are like that, but, you know, you just have to not give up hope.

Fred Fishman 00:40:45

And again, that's what the freedom songs tell us that we are strong, we are powerful. Don't stop, don't give up hope. Don't give in to despair and keep on moving forward. Keep your eyes on the prize. We're going to get there and even if not all of us get there we as a people will get there. I'll just want to make one more little piece of that.

Audrey Barnett 00:41:16

Oh please do. Sorry.

Fred Fishman 00:41:18

Then it's like so in Jewish history we, you know, in the Bible, we talk about wandering in the desert for 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt and how the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the desert and finally, they got to the promised land where their ancestors had come from and, had come from, and you know, Moses himself, who was the leader did not get to enter the promised land.

Fred Fishman 00:41:46

He died before he entered and I think that that's a powerful narrative that, you know, you might wander in the desert for 40 years, you might wander for a long time in a place that seems like there's nothing there. It's barren, it's desolate, you might feel lost but you're actually going somewhere. And if you personally don't get there, that's okay, your contribution matters, your voice matters, your presence matters and you will get there. Your people will get there. There will be a good outcome.

Fred Fishman 00:42:26

And you know, I felt that, I will say I relate that to the AIDS story. It's like if I didn't think there was going to be a cure, all these many years, I wouldn't have been able to get out of bed in the morning and I mean that literally. Going through this, going through that epidemic was, it really was like going through the fire. It forged me into the person I am today. It made me strong. It made me weak simultaneously.

Fred Fishman 00:43:03

I feel and now I'm alive and I think I'm going to live to see a cure. I think we really are making progress towards a real cure and I work at UCSF and I'm tuned into a lot of the work that's happening at UCSF and it's mind-blowing. When this thing started it was a death sentence. I saw literally hundreds of people that I knew died.

Fred Fishman 00:43:30

And, of course, then worldwide we have this horrible calamity and I know we haven't talked about covid yet, but I want to bring this in and say, one of the things that was hardest for me was when COVID came to the United States at the beginning of 2020 and people ran around with their, wringing their hands saying, nothing like this has ever happened before, and I'm like, what are you talking about? It has happened before. First of all, it's happened over and over and over again, and it only happened right here only a few years ago. Not that long ago and it's still happening by the way. AIDS is still a big problem in this country. We haven't conquered it yet.

Fred Fishman 00:44:12

And the people who knew nothing, younger people particularly, who knew nothing about that history. And that was shocking to me since it was like the most important part of my personal history was going through that epidemic. And of course, I had to, I had to understand, I had to realize that well, how would they know? It wasn't a defect on their part that they didn't know. No one had ever taught them about it. There was nothing in their history books.

Fred Fishman 00:44:42

You know if their parents didn't know gay people personally, it wouldn't have touched them, and similar to other epidemics and pandemics that have happened around the world like

Ebola. Nobody in the United States cared about ebola. I won't say nobody cared. That's not really true, but you know what I'm saying? Well, it doesn't bother us it's those people in Africa and the AIDS epidemic was very much like that.

Fred Fishman 00:45:06

Even though we were right here among everyone else if you didn't know somebody who was gay, and I think everybody probably knew people who were gay, but if they weren't out, you didn't know they were gay, you wouldn't think it touched you. So it was like, you know, it's those queers. It's their disease. And you know, I think there was still at that time in the public mind thinking like they deserve it. This is God's punishment. Many people actually believed that God was punishing us for our terrible behavior.

Audrey Barnett 00:45:43

Yeah, that's fascinating.

Fred Fishman 00:45:44

I know I went on a tangent there.

Audrey Barnett 00:45:47

No, but it was amazing. I appreciated every moment of it. I, similarly, think it's really fascinating. Although I can't pretend as if I was not one of those people. I will say during this pandemic I have really sought out information about the AIDS epidemic and primarily have learned about this history, in part because of the pandemic, we're living through currently, but I noticed this rhetoric. I mean, this rhetoric is evident within many facets of life and it certainly was really explicit and obvious to me during the Trump presidency. Also, the rhetoric of this has never happened before. This is almost like an isolated historical moment, which of course, is a complete fallacy.

Fred Fishman 00:46:43

Completely. Yeah, not only has it happened before, we anticipated it. There were scientists that were warning this was going to happen. We had a task force in Wuhan to study this and to make sure that it didn't happen and the Trump Administration, I'm sure you know this, took us out of there.

Audrey Barnett 00:47:02

Yeah. No, it's horrible. And I'm just really curious because I like your point about how this rhetoric was so startling to you as someone who lived during the HIV-AIDS era and so you do have this unique positionality as someone who is still with us today and has had all of these experiences. What connections would you draw between the pandemic we're living in currently and the AIDS epidemic? I imagine there are some similarities and differences and so I would love your perspective on it as someone who was there living during this time.

Fred Fishman 00:47:50

Well, one major similarity is that the government completely bungled our response. Completely. And that's I think, for AIDS, it was really intentional. It really felt intentional. That was the Reagan Administration. It really felt like President Reagan just didn't want to deal with it at all and didn't have to. Nothing forced him to.

Fred Fishman 00:48:15

And since it was gay people dying and by that point, you know, intravenous drug users were dying. And, you know, it was spreading in communities of color and all the people that he didn't care about. And I think in general, the leadership just didn't want to deal with it and didn't know what to do. Partly they didn't know what to do. They had no idea what to do and they didn't want to spend any money on it and I think the Trump Administration similarly.

Fred Fishman 00:48:49

It wasn't exactly the same in that, in that, they... in some ways it was the same. I mean again who was dying, old people, communities of color, you know Latinx communities, Black people. Oh, well, they're dying. It's okay. We don't care about them, really. The rich white people are not dying and that's all they cared about. That's what it looked like to me. It's horrible, just horrible.

Fred Fishman 00:49:22

But you know, as people were, again people didn't have any awareness that this had happened. For I did a lot of... I hope I wasn't too obnoxious in trying to educate many people in the workplace. What happened in the 1980s, only 30, 40 years ago. You know, this was not new, it wasn't surprising to me. I saw, had seen it before so that the government could completely bungle its response to a terrible crisis like this.

Fred Fishman 00:49:56

I mean Trump, Reagan looks like June Cleaver compared to Trump, in my opinion. Nothing. I don't ever want to say nothing could be worse because we keep saying nothing could be worse, but then we find out that something is worse, so I don't think that but terrible. A really inexcusable terrible. I consider Trump to be responsible for the deaths of half a million Americans.

Audrey Barnett 00:50:31

Yeah, are there any noticeable differences between the two?

Fred Fishman 00:50:37

Yes, so the scientific response was breathtaking for COVID. Very very quickly things were put into motion. The fact that we got a vaccine as quickly as we did, several vaccines, is amazing and mind-blowing. And again, I know that that's the result of decades of basic science that was put into developing these kinds of mRNA vaccines and also understanding biology altogether and all those studies that gave us the body of knowledge that we have today that enabled us to address the COVID pandemic as quickly as we have.

Fred Fishman 00:51:22

And a lot of that interest in biology interestingly came from the AIDS years because many of these top virologists, so like when Tony Fauci started going on TV, like who's this guy? I'm like, oh I know him well because he became famous during the AIDS epidemic. He very famously.

Audrey Barnett 00:51:42

That's such an interesting connection.

Fred Fishman 00:51:43

It is right? So he very very interestingly responded positively to gay people who were demonstrating to get FDA approval of drugs through the pipeline faster, these drugs that were

taking 15 years to be improved and they, you know, for quick approval. So that became many of the changes that were put in place in the 80s and 90s as a response to the AIDS epidemic were put in place, and were in place for covid.

Fred Fishman 00:52:17

So that enabled us in addition to the great technology that we have now, the DNA sequencing and all that stuff that we can do now, and many world-famous virologists got their start working on HIV. So, you know, that really set the stage for working on SARS and MERS and West Nile and all these other viruses that have come up and Ebola, you know, all these turbo viruses that have come up since then. Virology has become a really burgeoning field and we know so much more now than we did in the 80s when we really knew like comparatively, we knew nothing.

Audrey Barnett 00:52:58

Yeah.

Fred Fishman 00:53:00

And I will also add one other little piece, so like it's because of my HIV-positive status that I started enrolling in clinical trials and that led me to the career that I've had now, working in clinical research. So, again, one of those funny things that was not my background and I had no intention of doing that, but I was a patient in so many studies that in one of them, the nurse practitioner, who was my clinician said, oh, you know, are you interested in a job here? Because we had gotten to know each other and knew I was looking for work and she knew that somebody was leaving so that led to the career that I have today.

Audrey Barnett 00:53:50

That's so interesting. Yeah. I'm curious in what other ways the reverberations of the HIV/AIDS continue to be felt in your life today, I mean as you've stated throughout the interview. It was an incredibly formative time obviously, how could it not? It's a very traumatic time as well. So that obviously will leave an impact but I'm curious given the distance you now have, if there's any other reflections you've been able to make.

Fred Fishman 00:54:27

I want to mention the trauma because I believe that I have suffered from PTSD my whole life because of the impact of that epidemic from the 80s when I got my diagnosis, and I literally, I started keeping a list of people I knew who had died and after I got to 200 names, I stopped keeping a list because it was too upsetting to keep recording.

Fred Fishman 00:55:05

Yeah, so I think I struggled with grief my whole life and I'm struggling currently. I was in a lot of years of therapy when I came to San Francisco. I joined a support group at AIDS health project and I was in that group, we met weekly for 13 years and many of the people who came through that group died during that period. So it was a revolving door somewhat. I was one of the very few people who was still in the group. I think there maybe were only two of us, I think, who were the remaining from the time when I joined to the time when the group disbanded.

Fred Fishman 00:55:50

So, that was enormously helpful for me to be meeting weekly, with other guys who were struggling with HIV-aids and share our knowledge and our compassion, for each other, and it

was an odd kind of thing because we weren't really good friends. We were good friends in a certain way, but we weren't like normal good friends. Like we weren't going out to dinner together or anything like that. We didn't have strong close relationships outside of the group, but the group was still enormously important.

Fred Fishman 00:56:26

I was also in individual therapy for a lot of those years and that helped me tremendously as well. But the damage is real and I think that I am, I'm a grieving person and I do have PTSD from it. I mean, I think it's not maybe obvious to everybody because I'm a pretty functional guy. I had one therapist tell me that I was a highly functional depressed person. I am highly functional, you know, I was advised by my doctors to retire from work because of my diagnosis, they expected me to die and some, more than one doctor strongly advised me to retire.

Fred Fishman 00:57:09

But actually, I never wanted to be a disabled person, you know, I was encouraged to go on disability. I saw many people go on disability and become more disabled because our system requires you to be disabled if you go on disability, so I didn't want to be in that group. So I thought I'm going to work till I can't work, and I think it was the right decision for me. I think work sustained me. I had work, I had a lot of jobs that didn't really sustain me in my heart, but when I got into clinical research that did give me a lot of sustenance, a lot of nourishment, because I felt that I was helping people.

Fred Fishman 00:57:54

And the initial part initially in clinical research, I got into the study that hired me, was the one I was referring to just now, is for HIV-positive men who have sex with men and so I felt that I was directly giving back to my community. That was powerful for me. And then from there I now went to the cancer center so, you know, it's not exactly the gay community but it's still clinical research and it's still, the hook, is still that we are helping people. We are improving the world.

Fred Fishman 00:58:28

Another very fundamental Jewish value is called Tikkun Olam, which means repairing the world and we're really required to do Tikkun Olam. It means you have to do something to make the world a better place. And I feel like, you know when I had jobs in other industries, I wasn't making the world a better place and now I am making the world a better place and that my little part might be a tiny little bit, but it does add to the whole and we are finding better treatments for cancer. And there's no hook better than that. If you can find a treatment that will save somebody's life.

Audrey Barnett 00:59:05

Totally. Wow, yeah, I can see that connection for sure.

Fred Fishman 00:59:10

And I'm still in a lot of studies today. I'm still in a lot of studies for HIV-positive people today.

Audrey Barnett 00:59:17

It's fascinating because someone else I talked to is actually in a really similar line of work to you and like similarly. He still works in DC but is like support for cancer patients at

Georgetown Medical. And so there's some overlap with what you do and he just shared a very similar sentiment. So that's really interesting and I see the through-line, that makes sense to me. And I'm happy that you are doing work that feels fulfilling on that, like spiritual emotional level, as well.

Fred Fishman 00:59:59

Thank you. Although I'm now planning, I'm scheming to plan my retirement, so I won't be doing it that much longer.

Audrey Barnett 01:00:06

That feels well-deserved honestly. That'll be nice I think. I'm curious if there are any, like, or what your connections are to people from DC, from that era of your life? Obviously, you're still connected with Jill, but are there other people you're connected to?

Fred Fishman 01:00:24

A lot of people yeah. Yeah, I mean, I'd say Jill is a primary contact. I also have one friend from the synagogue, who's a primary contact. Actually he is like my best friend from college days back from the 70s. So, our relationship goes back even farther, and we still talk frequently and, you know, unfortunately we had a pandemic recently so I haven't been able to really see my friends, but all the years that I've been in San Francisco, 26 years now in San Francisco, I always went back to DC.

Fred Fishman 01:01:03

I never, there wasn't a year that I didn't go back at least once. And many times I went twice back to visit people and those relationships are very important to me. That continuity is important. Last time I was there, last time I was in Washington, I was there for Jill's 70th birthday party in September 2019. Right before, right before pandemic.

Audrey Barnett 01:01:31

Hmm. That's awesome. Yeah, Jill is really, really wonderful. Obviously we were speaking about this on the phone, but it makes sense to me why that continuity would be important. And so it's interesting to hear you say that, or I guess it makes sense that you would have kept in touch with these people.

Fred Fishman 01:01:53

Yeah, and I would say Jill is one of those people whose like the center of a wheel with many many spokes because she's connected to so many people. So my friend at his name is Larry Neff. He also is a person whose connected to so many people and he has lived in Washington his whole life. He was born there. So, knows, he knows everyone. Really knows everyone. So, also I would put you in touch with him if you wanted to talk to him because remember we talked before and I said I had friends who would be able to talk to you about that history also.

Audrey Barnett 01:02:27

That would be amazing. Yeah, that would seriously be awesome. That's crazy that he's lived here for his whole life then. That's such a wonderful unique perspective. I would love to talk to him. But I know we've talked now for about an hour. So I wanted to check in and see if there was anything else you wanted to spotlight or anything else you felt was important to have on the record before we kind of conclude our interview.

Fred Fishman 01:03:09

We covered a lot of territory.

Audrey Barnett 01:03:12

It was amazing.

Fred Fishman 01:03:14

I've enjoyed talking with you quite a lot. I think this is such a cool project. I'm so glad you're doing it.

Audrey Barnett 01:03:21

I've been having really, I guess fun. I don't know if that's the right word because honestly it's a difficult material to deal with so it's not always fun, but it's interesting and it feels really important and close and dear to my heart. So it's been really like a wonderful experience making these connections with people I would say.

Fred Fishman 01:03:46

Yeah, I think I'm inspired by talking with you and I think that I've always been interested in history also, and the more I learn, the more fascinating it becomes because the history... you know, I didn't like history in school I will say very much, but that's because I didn't really learn very much and the interesting stuff is all in the details. That's what captures my attention and captures my excitement. So I think what you're doing is really valuable.

Fred Fishman 01:04:24

As I said like it was hard for me to swallow that there were so many people that live here in San Francisco that didn't know anything about the AIDS epidemic. And I think, you know, it's a history that needs to be recorded and needs to be told. Again we, I'm sure this is true in every generation I'm not dissing your generation or any generation. I think it's natural that of course, when we grow up we think this is the way the world has been and it's only with the perspective of getting older and seeing how things change and the way that they don't change, that we have that perspective and can really understand that.

Fred Fishman 01:05:06

But I think the more we can tell stories, individual stories, that taken together show what was really happening on the ground. Not from 30,000 feet, but you know, what was actually happening on the ground. What do people think? What do people do? What do people say during a particular period?

Fred Fishman 01:05:29

The more you can get that information the better. The more we can record it the better and I think also, because we're living in a time when the traditional ways of studying history which is all from documents has changed and there aren't a lot of, there aren't going to be a lot of documents, you know, there aren't going to be letters that anyone has written today to study. So making recordings like this, that's where that information is going to come from. So, I think what you're doing is really fantastic.

Audrey Barnett 01:06:00

Well, thank you. That means a lot to hear you say that. I agree, I think oral histories are such like an amazing, personal look into an individual's life and I find it fascinating. I've always been more drawn to social histories than anything political or even I don't know just something about like, hearing a person talk and being able to hear the emotion reflected in

their voice. I think there's a lot more you can learn from that, than from written sources, although, of course, there are pros and cons to learning from each, but I found myself personally drawn to the oral accounts and oral histories.

Audrey Barnett 01:06:52

And, and yeah, so thank you also I appreciate you saying that because I think there's a lot of inherent value in the work of oral histories and oral historians, and so it's nice to hear that you have that appreciation as well. So, I don't know if there's anything else you would like to share. Otherwise, we can conclude.

Fred Fishman 01:07:16

I think that's about it. For now anyway, that covers it. I'd be happy to talk with you again if you have questions about anything that we discussed and want more clarity. I also could put you in touch with Larry if you are interested in. I would talk to him first. I feel certain that he'll say yes, but I would ask him first if you want me to do that. I will. If there's anything else that I can do to help you promote this just let me know.

Audrey Barnett 01:07:45

Thank you. Yeah, I really appreciate all of those offers. I actually would love to be able to talk again. I think it would be awesome. I'll be in touch with you because I'll transcribe this interview within the coming weeks and share that with you so that you can look it over and approve before having it become published within the archive. But I always find that an hour can sometimes feel insufficient. Or there's always more to talk about really.

Fred Fishman 01:08:18

Well there's always more to talk about. I mean, you're never gonna cover a hundred percent of it.

Audrey Barnett 01:08:24

Hmm, and I always like I'm aware of people's time and generosity and so when first chatting with someone I like to keep it or keep it to a certain time constraint, but certainly, if you are interested in talking more, I always have more questions. So I think we should continue to be in touch and I'll obviously reach out once I finish the transcript and possibly questions will arise from me reviewing the recording and whatnot. But it would also be great if you could put me in touch with anyone but especially like your friend, Larry is his name? He sounds really interesting. I mean he has a really valuable perspective.

Fred Fishman 01:09:08

He would be good one to talk to.

Audrey Barnett 01:09:12

Yeah, so that would be wonderful to be able to be put in touch with him.

Fred Fishman 01:09:16

Yeah, he's a couple of years older than me. He's going to be 70 this year.

Audrey Barnett 01:09:23

Cool.

Fred Fishman 01:09:23

You know older than me, younger than Jill. We're all in the same cohort, the same generation.

Audrey Barnett 01:09:29

I'm really looking forward to connecting with him. That'll be great. Yeah. Thank you so much for your time today and I will definitely be in touch. This has been a really wonderful experience for me. So thank you again for your vulnerability and for sharing with me really personal stories and anecdotes. It's really meaningful to me. So, thank you so much.

Fred Fishman 01:09:55

You're quite welcome. I really enjoyed it.

Audrey Barnett 01:09:57

Yeah, well, have a nice day and I'll be in touch.

Fred Fishman 01:10:00

You too Audrey.