

**TRANSCRIPT—Calvin Allen**  
(Compiled April 14, 2007)

Interviewees: CALVIN ALLEN  
Interviewer: Ian Leinbaugh  
Interview Date: April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007  
Location: Durham, NC, in front of The Bean Trader on 9<sup>th</sup> St.  
Length: 2 CDs; approximately 140 minutes

**START OF CD 1**

Ian Leinbaugh: ...So anyways, as I said before, it is April 3<sup>rd</sup>, and we are in Durham and this is Ian Leinbaugh interviewing Calvin Allen. So if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, what your parents did, that kind of thing.

Calvin Allen: Sure. I grew up in Raleigh, and my mom was a housekeeper and my dad worked for the state government working in the mail office sorting mail.

IL: So what was it like growing up in Raleigh? What were race relations like in the town?

CA: Well, it's interesting...I have to...it's interesting because I just moved back to Raleigh after not living there for many, many years. I moved back there I guess three years ago. Raleigh feels really different now than when I was a kid, and I kind of have different eyes. I think at the time growing up, it felt, I mean you...a fish only knows the water it swims in, so I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. I mean, I think race relations and such when I was a kid, relatively easy, well, quote unquote easy to a certain

extent. Everybody's very polite, get along well and stuff, and kind of using a short hand I guess I did well in school so being kind of seen as a smart black guy it was easier to get along and be okay and not have a whole lot of difficulty kind of fitting in in some ways.

I think for me, in terms of, I think my sexual orientation was...I was really aware of it from the start. I wasn't a person who figured it out much later on. I think I pretty much knew early on because I knew, I think I always developed an eye for looking for people who also felt outside, so I think that played a big part in how I looked at the world. So I think in that way it impacted my racial identity as well in terms of looking for people who felt outside of the mainstream, you know in school and in the neighborhood, and those folks, I've always looked for those types of people.

IL: Well that's good. Could you elaborate a little more on what school was like?

CA: I think it was pretty standard, except for being...most of my classes I was one of one or two black guys in the class and probably only a few black people total in the class and probably only a few people of color total in my classes, that kind of thing. I think I had to figure out what that meant and why. It was kind of hard to process that when I first realized that there was something different in that. But you know I think again, recognizing that if you were smart, then it gives you privileges that other people didn't have and gave me access and I think I realized that pretty early on but then recognizing that it made it easy to a point to not feel so outside of things. I think up until middle school, high school, when those things become more distinct. I don't know if that makes sense...

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[Here I begin to speak with Calvin about my adopted African-American sister. This leads to a conversation on the odd nature of integration in schools, where the majority of students are white in most classes and nearly everyone still segregates themselves into groups. I then ask him if there were any particularly memorable events from grade school.]

8:50

CA: My first date was in first grade. Jan Wilson, relevant to the story that she was white, started sending me notes. You know, "do you like me, yes/no," that kind of thing. And then we started talking on the phone, and then one day her mom picked up the phone and said, "Let me talk to your mom," and they arranged for me to walk home with Jan from school. And so, you know, part one of that was just, when that got out in the class, everybody's asking questions about that and what that means, even back in first grade. And then part two is when I got home with Jan, when we got to her house and her mom suddenly realized, "oh, Calvin's black, oh!" I mean she was nice but I still remember the look on her face. I think it was an indication to me of the power of race, that it meant something. And I don't think I understood that exactly.

I think another thing that I think of is when I was four years old my mom was a housekeeper and she was working at this house, a family she had worked for for several years. And I remember, I don't know what brought this on, but I remember sitting on the front porch while my mom was inside working and I said, "Okay, so there are really like two races. There's like white people and black people. And like, well, Chinese people, they're kind of white, and you know, those other folks, they're really black, or whatever. But it's all white and black. And all white people are rich and all black people are poor.

And kind of, you know, it all was that simple to me. And it's interesting; I had to write this up for a fellowship I was in last year and just how I, I don't think I realized how much that framed how I looked at the world for several years to come. And that, that the really scary thing was there weren't a lot of things that challenged that assumption, overtly, until many years later.

So lot's of little things like that. I think certainly, you know, when it came to sexuality stuff, I remember just a lot of little situations where I think as little kids when you express anything, whether it's liking the little boy across the street or whatever and remembering those things being like, "oh you're not supposed to do that," kind of thing. And so there was a very clear message from my older brother, from things I saw in school, and then other things like, you just don't talk about that stuff, you're not open about that stuff. And I think that certainly played a role for me as well in terms of knowing my sexuality but then being really clear that I couldn't talk about it.

IL: How was that? I would think it would be hard to keep something like that under the radar.

CA: It's easy when it's a matter of safety, you know? I mean it's such an oversimplification to talk about margin and mainstream, but I think there's so much incentive to feel part of the main stream. And I think, especially as a kid, you think about, you know, the whole point of being a young person at first is figuring out kind of how you fit into your family. And then you hit adolescence and it's about figuring out who you are outside of your family and building your own identity. And even within that there's still these aspects of being connected to a mainstream that are just so ingrained. There's so many things that push you to be connected to something bigger than who you

are. And so it was always safer not to rock the boat in that area because the threat of being isolated is so touchy. And you know from, being really academic about it now but I think back then it was, "Gee I want to be liked. I want friends, family," you know?

[At this point I share with him my own experience of being an odd outsider, not fitting well with my white friends or my sisters black friends. This leads to a brief conversation on people's need to label and categorize others. This transitions to a conversation about Calvin's reasons for choosing Duke over Carolina and why. He mentions joining his first mediation group, though he graduated without being certain of his direction. He then joined a Big Brother Big Sister branch in Durham, called Durham Companions.]

20:55

IL: So if you started with Big Brother and Big Sister, when did you start making a shift into public activism, more particularly gay activism, that kind of thing?

CA: Well, I wasn't even out, really, until a couple months into my job. And the interesting was, I'd say...the agency I worked for was called Durham Companions and it worked with young people who were in the court system who needed mentors. And we were a small staff, the director was this amazing woman who was just this, like, most powerful, well known activist in Durham when it came to children's issues. And she taught me well. And she helped hone the passion. She made it very clear why we need to support young people and obviously from my own background it kind of made sense. She also was a good friend, became a really good friend, and was a big supporter for me, and made it easy, I mean she pretty much made me come out, in some ways, because she just asked me one day and then just invited me over to her house and her family became a second family for me. And kind of through that kind of things started to blend a little bit.

And it wasn't really until about, I'd say, right...probably—I was at Durham Companions for about two years, so probably about my second year where as I got more involved in things that were going on in Durham and at the time it was just this great amazing time of all these twenty-something non-profit folks, you know, who had just gotten out of college and were starting non-profits and doing some really neat things and you know, volunteering for a few things here and there and a community kind of grew. And I think that was kind of my beginning into getting involved in things. My first big march was Stonewall 25 and so it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York and went with a big group of friends up there, which was amazing to me...

IL: Yeah tell me about that, I'd love to hear about it.

CA: Gosh...I went with a group of friends to New York City and there were, it was the first time in my life I'd been a place where it felt like there were more queer folks than straight folks, you know, walking down the street. Guys holding hands, women holding hands, it was great. It was just this really powerful experience; one of those few moments where I felt part of a mainstream instead of the margins, which was nice. And it was strange because I'm up in New York City and we're marching through town and stuff, you know. I was with a few friends or whatever but I didn't know that many people there, you know. And I'm walking down the street and I hear, "*Calvin!*" and it's like Monica Ibacache, from like seventh grade, you know, like, who lived in New York who happened pick me out of the crowd of folks kind of walking by. And then strangely enough I heard someone say "*Velveta*" and I thought, "It couldn't be..." and a couple of rows up Veeta Renfro who was in sixth grade was marching up there with her girlfriend, or whatever.



So it's just kind of funny, this thing of being completely in this new space but there's these elements that were really familiar as well and it just created a different vision for me about kind of what the world could be and what it felt like to be in a really safe, comfortable space. So it was really powerful. And seeing, you know, the police were there, kind of, you know, looking out for any problems or anything, and they were great. They were smiling, they were friendly. It was completely different than what I expected. And I, you know, for a moment, you let down your guard.

IL: Yeah, and I've always noticed that when you become a little more vulnerable, that kind of thing, let down your guard, things are definitely able to...

CA: ...shift...

IL: Yeah, easily shaped by that. That's great. That sounds pretty exciting!

CA: It was fun. And of course going to that made it, you know, coming back here and wanting to, you know, the local gay pride parades and that kind of thing, and getting involved, made it a little easier as well. But I think a lot of it was just the non-profit community, there's always opportunity. And then kind of long story short, as my community of friends developed there was kind of a friend of a friend who started...she worked in the governor's office for citizen affairs, basically an arm of the governor's office that works on volunteerism. And as she was promoting volunteerism across the state she was kind of coming to her own realization about her sexuality. And as she was doing that work I think just the gaydar, either people picking up on her or she was picking on other people. And her work was with young people and there were these connections that kept happening where people would come out to her and talk to her and stuff. And so she wanted to do a leadership program that was about leadership, and not

just about like, safe space for queer youth, you know? Which is, there's nothing wrong with that, but she's like, "I really want to do a leadership program where it's about like, where we work on issues of homelessness, we work on issues of race relations, we work on....you know but it's queer kids that are doing that work. And the point is leadership, it's not the queer aspect." And she was really clear, she's like, "I don't want it to be just a support group, you know, it's for people who are ready to be active." And she called it the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network--

IL: Sorry what was that?

CA: North Carolina Lambda Youth Network, N C L Y N, which eventually became NCLYN. Troy worked there eventually, years later. So I was on the board of that pretty early on and it was a great opportunity to just kind of have an active hand in kind of doing that work. And I think for anyone who's out, I think, you know, you get calls. Like, "Kenny, can you come talk to this class?" That kind of thing, so, that made a difference too.

And then, kind of strangely enough, the really interesting thing was, connecting back to college, I was in a fraternity, and interestingly enough, it was a fairly conservative fraternity, mainstream white organization. After I graduated, the new class of folks called me one day and said, "Hey, would you be willing to come during Hell Week, which is the week when the pledges don't sleep, and talk about your experiences being black and gay in the fraternity." And I was like, "You're kidding!" "No really!" and they were doing it because I think that year there was somebody who was bi. They knew he was bi but he wasn't out about it and they wanted to make safe space for him, so I was shocked. And I was like, "Okay..." and it was a little nerve racking, to kind of go



in and have that talk, but in the end it was fun. I mean I just told my story and then opened it up and we had a good conversation about it. And they asked me back; I did that talk every year for, like, three or four years and I was surprised every year that they still wanted me to come back and have that talk. So there are a lot of things kind of along those lines that created safe space and lots of little opportunities to use my voice in that way. Very different fraternity today than when I was there.

[Calvin continues to talk about NCLYN for a few minutes, mentioning how they helped start a gay-straight alliance at a Durham high school. He then tells a funny story about “chickens,” which is an offensive term for gay youth, and how NCLYN helped stop a gay bar from advertising “chicken night.” He then talks more about some his William C. Friday Fellow award, which leads to another conversation about my sister. He goes on to speak on the merging of gay and straight culture and the organizations working on making issues public.]

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CA: ...Surely some change has happened. I never thought, in my lifetime, there'd be gay marriage and things along those lines. But I think there are a lot of internal politics that happen as well, in terms of—there's this bigger question about what's the goal. So is the goal to have equal rights? Is the goal to have the same rights as straight folks? Is the goal to be accepted? What's the big picture on what we're trying to get? And different groups and factions—factions is maybe too strong a word—but different groups developed around those different goals. And again I'm overstating it a little bit but a lot of the...there's a really...the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had been doing a lot of work, you know, had been out there for years and had sponsored many marches and

demonstrations and different things out there for a while and then, all of a sudden, there was this new thing called the Human Rights Campaign, HRC, which looked a little bit more mainstream. And their marches didn't have the leather daddies and lesbians with the, you know, going topless and that kind of thing. They looked a little bit more mainstream. And all of a sudden at their marches there were gay men with, there were parenting areas because gay men were going with their kids and stuff and all of a sudden there was this question of, the question was, Are we changing to be more accepted because we're you know, the old way is, you know, we're a little too out there and we'll never get the rights that we want because we look too different, we look too margin, so we need to feel a little bit more mainstream. And I think it's still a question in some ways that we struggle with.

I think it's, you know, there's still this...unanswered question of, "What does progress look like?" I'm on the board of—Pride PAC eventually became Equality NC—and I'm on the board of Equality NC and I know one of the big issues that we as board have had to deal with is say a legislator is sticking their neck out to put some legislation, state legislation, that would make it safe for LGBT folks in their work places, that they wouldn't be fired from their jobs. But, you know, when it comes down to transgender issues, they're like, "Oh no that's way different." Well, would we support that? Or not? You know, is it an all or nothing, or is it, you know, we just have to accept that that's the way politics works. And it's hard because LGBT is a lot of letters, and that list of letters keeps growing, and there's power in that and kind of being a collective, but at the same time there's a lot of responsibility. So, you know, what does it mean if we support L G and B but not T? Are we selling out our friends? So, you know, that's still something that

we as a community have to figure out and there's some people who are fiercely on one side or the other in terms of any progress is progress or, you know, we are a team, we, you know, we don't, you don't drop your friends.

So it's a big issue. So I think some of those issues developed in the time that I was kind of figuring out all this stuff of how the queer movement worked and recognizing how, like anything, there are a range of experiences. The whole issue of outing became big, as I was kind of gaining some consciousness about whether it's okay to out somebody's sexuality. You know that a famous person is gay and you say it as a political power or is that inappropriate? You know, what's, you know, are individual rights more important than the movement? I think these are things that we're still struggling with and we've kind of settled into a space where we don't have to answer that so much. But those questions were in the forefront.

IL: How do you see people confronting those questions these days?

CA: The question isn't so obvious, it's subtle. I mean, I think actually now, it's more around, I don't know [laughs] this is one person's opinion but it seems like we're more focused on the fun of guessing somebody's sexuality rather than recognizing, asking that question for political or power reasons. So it's less a matter of—I think his name was Pete Williams, who worked with NBC news, and I happened to see him on the news today. I never watch the Today Show but I did this morning and he happened to be on there I think, and I remember when he was outed and supposedly it was because he was doing stories on gays in the military and people knew that he was gay and they felt that it mattered in how he was reporting it. And his outing was seen as a way to acknowledge what was there, that the invisibility of gay people was holding back

progress. So pointing out that we're already there, it's not a matter of showing up, it's like we've been there, was important. And now it's, you know, the game show of Gay, Straight, or Taken? Which I have to admit, I love that show, it's fun to guess. But you know, it's, we're less, that method of gaining power is so stark and so in your face and it flies so much, it creates so much tension around that age old question of, "Is the individual more important than the collective? Is the collective more important than the individual?" that people stay away from it. So, you know, I don't think you're going to see any big outing unless some actor decides, for some reason somebody wants to out an actor, you know. Or it's a juicy story to out a politician. But, you know, that's different to me. It's more about gossip than power.

END OF (transcribed) INTERVIEW

Ian Leinbaugh

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