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N.3: Undergraduate Internship Program: Fall 2013

Interview N-0022

Gerald Unks

27 September 2013

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ABSTRACT – GERALD UNKS

Gerald Unks discusses growing up in the Midwest as the son of the Principal of a local school. He provides an overview of UNC-Chapel Hill, the Carolina Gay Association (CGA), the reaction of administration to the CGA, and Chapel Hill's reaction to the LGBTQ movement. He describes tactics of the CGA and gay students' tactics for awareness and advocacy. Additionally, Unks discusses the guilt and anxiety of gay men at the time, bar life in Chapel Hill, the AIDS epidemic, and the sexual behavior and interactions among gay college students. He discusses the publishing of 'The Gay Teen' book also pointing to the economic power of the LGBTQ community and comparing the evolution of the gay rights movement to the civil rights movement.

FIELD NOTES – GERALD UNKS

Interviewee: Gerald Unks
Interviewer: Layla Quran
Interview date: September 27, 2013
Location: Caffé Driade, 1215 E Franklin St, Chapel Hill, NC 27514
Length: 61:50

THE INTERVIEWEE.

Gerald ‘Gerry’ Unks is a former professor in the School of Education at UNC. Professor Unks taught at the university for 45 years, beginning in 1967. Many of his former students and colleagues describe him a ‘stand-up comedic’, and he has won several university teaching awards. Unks collected and edited a series of articles titled ‘*The Gay Teen*’, which focus on the lives and issues facing gay and lesbian adolescents, and which eventually became a book. He currently lives in the Carolina Meadows Retirement Home in Chapel Hill.

THE INTERVIEWER. Layla Quran is a junior student in Global Studies and an intern at the Southern Oral History Program for the Fall semester of the 2013-2014 school year at UNC-Chapel Hill. The project for the Fall 2013 interns is the Carolina Gay Association and the sexual revolution at UNC.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW.

The interview was conducted at Caffé Dirade on East Franklin street, a small and locally well-known coffee shop. At the end of the interview, Gerry Unks said he had said more about himself than any interview that he ever had. This interview was the first interview for Gerry Unks after retirement. Unks did not specify on his involvement with the Carolina Gay Association, other than a few meetings at his house, but he did come out to being gay himself. Unks says his parents did not know he was gay and his students or other faculty members at UNC were also unaware of his sexuality, because there was a lot of shame connected to being gay then and still today. He describes the process of accepting his sexuality, and realizing he was gay at a young age. He also spoke about the cleverness of the Carolina Gay Association and the techniques they used to promote advocacy and awareness of gay rights. Unks also mentioned his involvement in the gay culture and the gay bar scene in Chapel Hill and the Triangle Area. He concluded by speaking about the situation at UNC and in North Carolina, and his role in the UNC School of Education, and the ideal situation in the country for LGBTQ rights.

TAPE LOG – GERALD UNKS

TAPE INDEX

<u>Time</u>	<u>Topic</u>
	[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]
0:01	Introduction: “I am with Gerry Unks and we are at Café Dirade...”
0:40	Grew up in the Midwest; born in a city called Peoria, Illinois. Left at age 18 to go to University of Illinois. “I’m a Mid-Western boy born and bred, small town roots...”
1:23	In 1967, came to Carolina because the school needed a professor in the area Unks had been trained. Unks was offered the job and stayed at the university for 46 years.
1:56	Reflects on his love for the undergraduate student body. “What kept me here was the undergraduate student body...”
2:26	Unks always wanted to be a teacher since the 8 th grade, but fluctuated among his interests including a stint at law school. “I would always come back to teaching, high school social studies.”
3:06	Unks took a job at a high school in suburban Chicago immediately after receiving his BA from the University of Illinois; taught social studies there for six years.
3:14	Unks returned to the University of Illinois, earned a doctorate degree, and then came to Carolina.
3:53	Reflects on how he was perceived in the UNC School of Education; says most people perceived him as a nice, good person. Was known as a good teacher with numerous University teaching awards “...and there were some members of the faculty that were a little bit jealous of that.”
4:27	Taught a vast number of students in his 46-year span at UNC, but does not know how in particular he teacher; attributing to “some sort of gift”. Also rumors among the school that Unks was an easy grader.
5:15	Unks was loved by the secretaries because “Oh I don’t know I treated them like they were equals or better”
6:15	Reputation of Carolina for activism “but not a lot”. Activities associated with the 1960s “found their way to Chapel hill”. “Activism with a precaution.
7:00	Unks crying after the march the night after the Kent state murders
7:55	Food workers strike at UNC; march at UNC.
8:55	Unks involvement in activism was minimal; School of Education was conservative.
9:57	Unks wanted to be more conservative than he actually was in terms of activism at UNC.
10:19	Conversation shift to ‘The Gay Teen’ book Unks composed. Reflects on how the book evolved from a journal he was editing. Book began with a widely circulating report that 1/3 of boys who committed suicide were gay.

- 11:46 Unks did not write book immediately until he gained tenure. 'The Gay Teen' was successful in a constricting society. Unks did not feel he could write on the subject until he had full tenure.
- 13:03 Unks talks about relationship with his father and not being able to come out as being gay to his father on his death bed.
- 14:12 Unks reflects on how different society has become today. "The direction it has gone has just been amazing"
- 15:45 No mass demonstrations with the establishment of the Carolina Gay Association; Unks notes there were very few gay students that were out.
- 16:11 Cleverness of Carolina Gay Association with jeans day and precinct voting
- 17:40 Most people paid little attention to statements like "You're going to hell." Unks mentions comments like this but also says how most people did not pay attention to such statements.
- 17:55 Key person in protecting CGA was Vice Chancellor Don Bolton. Bolton was in a good position to shepherd the CGA.
- 18:40 Some of CGA early meeting was in Unks house. Unks mentions that he was a better position in the closet and did not identify himself as being gay in his classes.
- 19:32 Shame and fear men had in coming out as being gay. Currently lives in a community of upper middle class white people.
- 20:30 Talks about guilt and anxiety gay men lived with and still do live with.
- 21:00 Unks mentions his involvement in gay culture in Chapel hill; mentions the bar named 'The Tempo Room'. Friday and Saturday nights bar was packed with gay individuals. Gay bar moved to Durham and never came back to Chapel hill.
- 22:51 Unks talks about 'After-the-bar' parties at a person's house for gay men because the law in North Carolina at the time was that after midnight beer had to be "out of your hand and into that barrel".
- 25: 40 Unks said people may have wondering if why he went to gay bars or that he wasn't married.
- 25:50 It was a big deal being gay then, not like today. "You will never ever know what it was like, thank God."
- 26:35 Unks knew that he felt different when he was eight but did not have the words to describe it. He did not know that anyone had that same feeling. "I'm the only one in the world, horrible lonely feeling". Late 20s is when Unks really knew he was gay.
- 28:50 The third floor of Granville is what Unks thinks was a top meeting space for gay men on campus.
- 29:25 Feeling safe on campus, Unks said "campus is not safe for anybody". CGA was not big organized organization like civil rights movement; mentions bars being a big part of the gay society. Blacks were far advances in their "slice of the pie". People were sympathetic with African Americans but not with gay individuals because gayness was something you could cure.
- 32:20 Gay men who paid all of bills in businesses with \$2 which showed community the economic power gay community had at the time. Unks does not remember mass opposition to CGA.

- 34:40 Same group of students who were out that tended to be nerdy students. Organization meetings only reason to go to meetings was to find a guy. Nerdy guys are more interested in organizing.
- 35:15 Blue jeans day in which you would advertise that all gay men that day would wear blue jeans so that those who were not gay and still wore jeans would be picked on. "Deprive straight boys from the freedom to dress who they wanted to in the same way as gay people have to conform"
- 36:40 Gays looked for friendly bars to meet other gay people and when Tempo Room burned down looked for bar.
- 38:15 Bullying angers Gerry Unks. The PE class was not positive for gay boys because "the coach is the most homophobic man in the school. I know that from bitter experience. PE was horrible experience for Unks.
- 39:50 As a group, Unks says bullying of gay men did not happen in college. "Get a group of drunken fraternity boys in a car, they'll drop their trousers and go 'Hey faggot, you want this?!"
- 42:50 1980s AIDS epidemic in US; Unks says AIDS was inextricably tied to being gay. Most of the men and boys took precautions in sexual behavior. Unks says it started out as the CGA but transforms in name every year; "well what are we this year?!" Unks used to joke with students in the CGA.
- 45:00 CGA wanted to become a recognized group, mentions how Bolton wanted to help them. At first it was "they're evil and bad and they will give you AIDs" "Getting space in the union was a big deal".
- 46:07 CGA had faculty and administrators as advocates, but Unks does not consider himself a big advocate of the CGA. Unks said that when the CGA was recognized it surprised some of the members that "that didn't really change the world, they were still hated".
- 46:45 Unks does not know what the big actions are today post-Supreme court action because he has been away from the student body for two years.
- 47:32 "Others were welcome, and particularly if they are good looking". Unks notes how beauty is important aspect of subculture for gay men.
- 48:35 Unks mentions how there were two kinds of gays: "Tea room queens" and "bar people". Each separate group would not risk their reputation by mixing. Spots where a lot of men participated in sexual behavior. It depended on the administrator in charge of the particular department if the activities were being stopped. The head of the business department did not approve of the actions so all of the men's bathrooms doors locked at 5pm.
- 51:20 "The whole idea of sex in a bathroom is repugnant"
- 52:00 "There are people who write about poverty and that doesn't mean they're poor."
- 52:45 Unks does not know of any bad consequences of faculty members saying they were gay, but there were faculty members who were open in being gay.
- 54:00 Legislation was not usually pro-something, it was usually something as against. "It's illegal to do this and that...It was just against the law but to enforce a law like that requires a policemen in every bedroom"
- 55:23 Unks opinion on General Assembly thinks "school children of North Carolina will be ultimate losers"; results are unknown but will be mostly bad. "It's a very scary time for NC"

- 58:00 Unks reflects on his past actions at UNC-Chapel hill “I’d say you probably did it right.”
- 58:46 Unks says gay men can be far more out in NC, but there are still plenty of churches and individuals that make life unsafe. Unks believes it is freer today.
- 60:00 Unks thinks the ideal for gay rights is total equality and just winning court cases, although important, are not sufficient; need more to get to equality. Unks mentions business community as very powerful ally and mentions JC Penny catalog with ad of two gay men together with two of their children. Unks says this needs to happen more often.
- 60:01 “Get a name!” Unks gives advice to Carolina Gay Association. Unks does not want to be seen as doing more than he did because he does not think he did much.