

Karen Chance: Hello?

*This call is being recorded*

Jennifer Blomqvist: Karen?

Karen Chance: Hey Jennifer! How are you doing?

Jennifer Blomqvist: Hey! It's so good to hear your voice. How are you?

KC: Nice to hear yours! You doing' ok?

JB: Yeah, I am. How about you?

KC: Everything's going great.

JB: I'm so glad! Thanks for talking to me today.

KC: Well, I hope I have something to add. My memory's not as great as it used to be. We'll see what we can do.

JB: Well, I'll introduce myself for the recording. This is Jennifer Blomqvist. I'm the archivist at the DeKalb History Center. I'm talking to Karen Chance, former employee of DeKalb History Center, among her many other talents. Um, so Karen, I usually ask people to start with, from the beginning. Do you mind starting with where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school and all that sort of good stuff and we'll go from there.

KC. Sure. I was born in Wilmington, Delaware, 1960 and grew up in Newark, Delaware, which is about 15 miles south there. Lived there until I was 18 and moved to Atlanta for art college. Went to the Atlanta College of Art, which no longer exists, but was absorbed into Savannah College of Art and Design.

JB: Ok. So, was the school downtown?

KC: It was in the building that's next to the High Museum of Art, the Memorial Art Center, on the third and fourth floors of that building and it was built in response to the Orly field crash, plane crash that happened, where all the arts advocates were killed and then they established the symphony and the museum at the time was in the bottom floor of that building, and the art college was in that building, like I said, the top 2 floors.

JB: So, what did you study?

KC: I started, at the beginning they have you do foundation studies, which is a little bit of everything and then in your second year, you're supposed to choose a major and I chose, at the time, print making, but I kind of decided, part way into that year that really, I was more interested in photography and went on to do photography as my major. But, luckily the, there was sort of some crossover between the two, so it worked out.

JB: Ok. And then, did you find employment right away or did you work as a freelance or what did you do once you finished school?

KC: Well, I was actually working at the Feminist Women's Health Center while I was in school, worked a couple days a week there. So, I worked at the health center a little bit longer after I got out of school and then realized, you know, I didn't want to do that forever, so I proceeded to work a bunch of disconnected jobs. I worked in a wood shop building furniture or I should say my job was to build furniture parts, so I would make a chair arm or a chair leg or whatever, but never actually made the whole. But it was a pretty good job. I learned a lot about using shop tools and met some nice people there, and sort of a bunch of hippies. And then I was lucky enough to get my first museum-related job at the Center for Puppetry Arts, where I worked as the assistant to the museum director, Diane Kempler and it was a job that was just temporarily funded through a grant, so it wasn't something that I could do forever, but I really liked it and that was my first job working exhibitions. And also helping to catalog the puppets and untangling an enormous number of marionette strings.

JB: Oh wow! I can only imagine.

KC: Yeah, and it was lovely and scraping old foam that had started to break down off of things, yeah, so it was interesting. But Diane was a great person to work for and really enjoyed that.

JB: Can I go back to your work at the Feminist Women's Health Center. It's June of 2022 and Roe v Wade has just been overturned by the Supreme Court. I was wondering what kind of work was done at the health center and was abortion one of the services that was offered?

KC: Yes, yes it was. I saw an ad, I was looking for a part time job and I saw ad in Creative Loafing that said "are you interested for social change?" and I thought, yes, yes I am, so I went with a friend, who also went to ACA and we applied for jobs there and Rhonda, my friend, ended up being at very, very good at being a patient facilitator and helping women through the whole person. I was more behind-the-scenes person and I worked in the sterile room, so, you know, dealing with making up instrument trays and that kind of thing. It was primarily an abortion clinic, but also did well-woman programs, you know, programs during the week, I guess they just did abortions 2 days and then the rest of the week, they did pregnancy tests and just basic pap smears and the usual and educational programs and things like that. And a lot of really great women worked there. Most of the people that worked there really wanted to just help other women and make healthcare available that had not been available to them and make it a little bit less scary and you know, more approachable.

JB: How long did you work there?

KC: Three years.

JB: And then before you said you worked at the Center for Puppetry Arts. How long did you work at the Center for Puppetry Arts?

KC: I think that was about a year. Like I said, it was a grant-funded position, so once the money ran out, that was that.

JB: And then, when did you end up at, I know that you worked at the Carlos Museum at Emory for a time. Tell us about that.

KC: Yes. Well, first I worked for Gary Lee Super Associates. That's my first job working exhibits sort of freelance, where we went around to different museums and I guess that's how I ended making the acquaintance of Nancy Roberts, who was head of exhibition design department at the High Museum at the time. And then Nancy eventually moved over to the Carlos Museum and became the head of exhibitions over there so I had done a little bit of freelance work for her and I guess she was happy with the work I did and so I applied there and got the job and I guess that was around 2000. Either 2000 or 2001.

JB: And how long did you work at the Carlos?

KC: Just shy of 5 years. 4 or 5 years.

JB: And then what's the story about the, I want to hear some of the stories about the Carlos because there's one that stands out when you and I used to talk here at work about the, there was a mummy story from the Carlos that was really interesting. Do you mind sharing that one?

KC: *laughing*. Well, was that the one where we talked about Ramses? Remind me which story that was.

JB: I don't know if it had been properly tagged or if it hadn't been found or if you guys found it somehow or something...

KC: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, so that's Ramses. That was slightly before my time. The guy that was in charge of the Egyptian collection, Peter Lakavera (sp?) was very well connected to all the people who were doing Egyptology, and so whenever anything interested would pop up somewhere, people would call him and say "hey you might want to take a look at this". So, there was this fleabag little museum up in Niagara, I'm not positive about this but I think it might have been sort of like a Ripley's kind of museum. It would be easy enough to double-check that. But it was one of those things where they had the two-headed cow and then they had some mummies and some other weird things like that. And someone took a look at this stuff because the museum was going out of business and the Egyptologist took a look at it and said "hey, this actually looks like really good stuff, it's just in a little rough

condition, it needs a little repair and conservation.” And, but the quality of the painting on the sarcophagus lids and stuff was really top notch so they thought maybe there was something to it. And so, they bought this collection and through researching it, eventually came to the realization that one of the mummies was Ramses, you know, the pharaoh Ramses. So, eventually it was determined we would return Ramses to Egypt, but they did allow us to put him on display for an exhibit for a while before we had to give him back and yeah, so.

JB: So, you mentioned the Ramses story came before your time. Do you have any memories, recollections of exhibits you worked on at the Carlos that stand out?

KC: Well, I enjoyed all my work at the Carlos but we did have some. We had a Gordon Parks exhibit that was the first one I worked on, a photography exhibit. Most of the work at the Carlos, most of the exhibits are antiquities, but they do have works on paper exhibits are more modern works, so the Gordon Parks exhibit, was a photography exhibit and it was a really good one. And we at one point had Jack Kerouac “On the Road” scroll, you know, the long type-written scroll that he taped together, 25 feet long or something. And we had lots of Greek and Roman and Cycladic and all kinds of interesting thing. I think the Carlos is worth for anybody who visits Atlanta.

JB: It is a great museum!

KC: So, you’ve been?

JB: Yeah, I have. It’s wonderful

KC: Yeah, it has a collection that is unlike any other in Atlanta.

JB: Right

KC: And it just has that. And I forgot we had the head of Caligula. It wasn’t really his head, it was a sculpture of his head but it was one of the most valuable things we had at the time and it was brought to us in a gym bag, wrapped in a towel.

JB: Oh, my goodness!

KC: *laughing*. It’s amazing sometimes people who are collectors, it belongs to them so they treat it the way they feel like treating it, but I think the thing was worth close to a million dollars and but yeah, it was wrapped in a towel in a gym bag and that’s how they brought it in.

JB: Wow! Well, I know you’ve heard this before, but one of the last exhibits you worked on here at the history center was the Ranch House exhibit and I think it is probably, by far, just from what I’ve heard from people the most popular in recent history, the most popular exhibit. It’s my favorite of all time. That is a wonderful exhibit that you put on. We still have people come in looking for it- “where’s the Ranch House exhibit?”

KC: *laughs*. Well, that’s really nice to hear that. I was looking on Facebook the other day and was strolling along and all of the sudden, a picture of it popped up and I was kind of startled. So, yeah, it’s nice that it resonated with people. My guess is everybody could look at that exhibit and find something that they remembered or that was at their grandmother’s house or they grew up with. Even, if not, it had some nice design elements with the mid-century modern furniture and style is something that anyone can appreciate.

JB: Yeah, it’s such a popular topic with folks that visit us or follow us on social, that mid-century modern look is very popular. Still.

KC: Yeah

JB: So, before we get to your time at DeKalb History Center, I want to, I’m going to backtrack a lot. Sorry about that!

KC: No, no problem

JB: I wanted to talk more about your advocacy. You obviously were an advocate and interested in social change, working at the Feminist Women’s Health Center. But you are also an advocate for LGBTQ rights. I’m hoping you’ll talk about, you’ve been sharing some pictures with me and I’m hoping you’ll tell the full stories of those two/too. You had one incident in ‘87 with Michael Hardwick and another one in the 90s. Do you mind talking a little bit about those?

KC: *laughing* I like the word “incident”. That’s funny! The first one with Michael Hardwick was the March on Washington in 1987, October 1987. I think it was only the second gay and lesbian rights march at that point. And I went to that. I had been on the planning committee for that for most of that year, prior to that year. And I think near the end of it, something came up and I wasn’t able to keep going with it, so there was a little break. But I went anyway to the march. My partner at the time, Holly, and I went. And when we got there, we saw a flier that was talking about the fact that they were going to do civil disobedience at the Supreme Court the day after the march and we were planning to be there, in the area for a few days and so we talked it over and decided and would look into it further and went to a little informational session the night before and we were walking down this hallway, I remember, and going past a doorway where somehow or other caught the name Michael Hardwick and of course, we were very , I mean that was the reason we were there in the first place. The Hardwick decision had been so offensive to us that we decided that we really need to do something to respond to that. And it turned out that Michael Hardwick and a couple of people were looking for a couple of extra folks to join their little group that, because everybody had their little action group, for this civil disobedience arrest thing.

JB: Can I just ask you real quick about Michael Hardwick? It’s my understanding, I read about him after you and I were texting a couple of weeks ago and I hadn’t heard of him before so I read about him and it’s my understanding that police came into this man’s home, his private residence...

KC: Yeah

JB: And arrested him on charges of sodomy and...

KC: Yeah

JB: He was found guilty of having a relationship with someone in his own home and I guess at the time...

KC: Yeah

JB:...sodomy was illegal and he was found guilty and did he go to jail? Did he serve time?

KC: I don’t, no, he didn’t serve time, but he was arrested and sent to jail that night and it was very traumatic. I talked to him about it the day of our arrest and it had a real negative impact on him, as it would anybody obviously if you were having intimate relations with your partner

JB: Yeah! In your house

KC:... and a cop bursts in. I mean, the story was that he’d been arrested for some open container violation. I think he was a bartender at I hope I’m getting this right, the Cove bar, and he’d walked outside and had a beer in his hand and this cop who had been lurking around, I think looking for trouble nabbed him and arrested him. And so, I don’t remember exactly what the details were- maybe Michael hadn’t shown up for his hearing or something and the guy went to his house, which seems really odd. And the roommate, Michael’s roommate, says “come in, he’s back in his room there.” Well, Michael, you know was back in his room with his boyfriend and I don’t know what this roommate was thinking, but this cop went in and opened the door a crack and aw what was happening and stood there and observed for a little bit and arrested them and for private adult consensual behavior and I personally was so horrified that the Supreme Court basically said that that was just, that that was acceptable, that I felt like something had to be done to protest. So yeah, we went to the, we would’ve gone to the march anyway just because I had been marching for gay rights and protesting for gay rights since I came out in 1980 but that was the extra kick and that was the reason we decided to go ahead and do civil disobedience and once we realized that Michael Hardwick was looking for a couple of other people to be in his group and they realized we were from Georgia, that and so we all got together and decided to do it. The next day we went and got arrested.

JB: So, what exactly was the civil disobedience. What were you doing that got you arrested?

KC: There is a law that you cannot do protests on the plaza in front of the Supreme Court so all you have to do is walk onto that plaza and sit down and that’s all you have to do and you’ll get arrested. So, the police had been informed that we planned because there were quite a few people who planned to do

civil disobedience that day and it ended up being the second largest civil disobedience, it was definitely the largest one they had had since the Vietnam War. There were over 600 people were arrested that. They were not prepared for it. They didn't have the buses, they did not have the manpower to handle us at all. In fact, people eventually got a little impatient and were chanting "we're tired, we're hungry, we want to go to jail" because they just had us waiting and waiting. But the way it worked, each group, each affinity group would walk up onto the plaza and sit down and chant or something and then the officers would come and drag people away and some people went willingly and soon as that group was finished, the next group would walk up. So just wave after wave of people and it was incredibly moving. It's hard to explain, but I spent most of the day in tears and I'm not a big crier but it was just so emotional and so moving to me to realize that I was not alone, that my little group of friends were not alone, that there were hundreds of other people, if not many thousands of other people who believed as I did that we deserved to be treated the same as everybody else. And there was something about looking up at the edifice on the Supreme Court that said "Equal Justice Under Law" and knowing that that wasn't true, but we were going to do what we could to make it true.

JB: Do you have a sense, so this was in '87, and you'd been advocating and protesting for gay and lesbian rights since 1980. Do you have a sense in 2022 about when you felt the tide started to turn? Whether on a national level or on a state level, do you have sense, what era or time period that started to happen?

KC: You know, it was a very gradual thing and then sort of all at once and then I guess is how a lot of civil rights issues are. It felt like for a long time nothing was going to change, nothing happened. I guess in the 1990s ACT UP made a big difference. In fact, ACT UP was the group that organized the arrest in Atlanta and that was protesting the sodomy law that criminalized... again same sex. It actually criminalized straight relations too, but they were used very selectively, usually used to harass gay people. I think things probably got somewhat better toward the end of the 90s and I certainly felt like they go better when gay marriage was legalized and my partner and I went up to Massachusetts to be there the day that gay marriage was legalized in Massachusetts. That was the only state at the time, I think that was 2002 or 2003. We went up there just to watch other people get married because of course you could only get married there if you lived in Massachusetts. There was no, you couldn't go there and get married. And then my partner Claudia and I in 2003 went to Canada and got married even though it didn't really have any legal weight here in the United States at that time. But we just wanted to be legal somewhere so we went to Canada and got married. But I remember talking to my sister several years back, during the Obama administration how wonderful it was to feel that I could finally be a part of things, that I could be... I don't know, I felt like I could be on equal footing with my heterosexual friends and family members. And my sister who is, tends to be very blunt and not at all sentimental said "oh there are still plenty of people who hate you" and you know she was right. I was really kidding myself. It just seemed to me during the Obama years that things were heading in the right direction and that we could be a part of the greater community. We didn't have to be just in our little gay bubble. But that really wasn't the case. There are lots and lots of people out there that still hate us and would be happy for us to be wiped off the face of the earth. It's a little disheartening to see that now with all these changes in the Supreme Court. I feel fairly nervous that we're going to be the next target.

JB: So, abortion rights first and then gay rights. Is that what you mean?

KC: Yeah, they've already ... just in the short spell of time, they've gone after abortion rights. They've gone after separation of church and state. They're about to rule on climate change issues. Yeah Clarence Thomas made it pretty clear in his ruling on the abortion rights issue that he wants to revisit contraception. He wants to revisit gay rights, the right of just gay intimacy. He's not going to be happy til all of it is reversed, I think. But you know, I'm only 61. I've still got a lot of fight in me and if it's time to get arrested again or do whatever needs to be done, I'll be out there.

JB: I'm interested to hear about your work with ACT UP and you mentioned the arrest in Atlanta. Is that the one that occurred in 1990? You showed me your arrest sheet, I guess it was?

KC: Yeah, that might have been the receipt they give you when you pay your fine. It was very faded but I kept that. Yeah, that was organized by Chip Rowan, a gay lawyer and he was one of the main people I knew in ACT UP at the time. They did a speech at the Georgia State capitol and immediately afterward, I think it was about 60 people were arrested, so much smaller than the D.C. one. But, we were dressed in our pajamas and had our little blankies and went and laid down in the street and blocked traffic and were arrested for that. And so that was our protest.

JB: What's the story about the pajamas?

KC: We figured if they were going to come to our bedrooms, then we were going to bring our bedrooms to the street. In fact, someone brought a big brass bed to the protest which I thought was kind of a nice touch. But then somebody else brought some inflatable, you know, sex dolls and I didn't like that quite as much because I thought that was kind of tacky. But hey maybe I'm a prude. But you know they had a 'kiss in', but I was there by myself, so I had to kiss a boy. And my friend Andrew Wood, who is in one of the pictures that I sent, and Andrew is now a dedicated cat rescuer. That's what, he rehabs kittens and kitty cats and stuff. And Jeff Graham is the head of Georgia Equality. And The other guy I didn't know really as well. I think his name was Greg Strickland, but that was our affinity group and unfortunately that meant that when we got to the detention center, I was kind of by myself.

JB: Gay clubs or bars in DeKalb County or was everybody going to Atlanta?

KC: I think it was most, I didn't hang out too much in DeKalb County. I mean Decatur now is such a hot spot, but in the early 80s, there was really nothing much happening in Decatur. I mean there was a Pico camping center and a car dealership and maybe a little breakfast, but there was really not much happening out in Decatur and I can't really remember anything in DeKalb that was gay. I know there was the Digging Dikes of Decatur were a garden club that used to come to all the marches and they would bring their little plastic toy lawn mowers that they would spit out bubbles and they did these little coordinated maneuvers where they'd march along for a little while and they'd all sort of break and then do their routine. I mean there were a lot of lesbians that were living out there but there wasn't a lot in terms of nightlife. I used to go to, when I was in college, I went to a place that was called the Sports Page, which was on Cheshire Bridge and of course there were a lot of gay bars on Cheshire bridge. That was a lesbian bar. But I didn't drink and I didn't dance so I wasn't a whole lotta fun. I just kind of went there to be around other women. People watching. But there were quite a number of gay bars that my male friends went to. The Back Street. I would go with them sometimes and that was on Peachtree and Numbers and Sweet Gum Head was a drag bar on Cheshire Bridge. And so yeah, there were lots of them. They've all kind of died out. I guess that's the downside of inclusion is that there's not as much of a need for that kind of space anymore so everybody just kind of hangs out together, but sometimes I miss it a little bit.

JB: Did you come to the history center after the Carlos?

KC: Yes and no. There was a long gap because the Carlos, it was right when I was working at the Carlos that I lost my leg in a motorcycle accident and I was not able to find work for a long time after that because for obvious reasons, there aren't a lot of jobs that don't require some kind of physicality and exhibition work does require being able to climb ladders and carry heavy stuff and carry valuable artifacts and it's pretty hard to do that when you can barely walk without falling down, which for the first year or two, I fell all the time. So that was one issue. Also, a lot of places don't want to hire disabled people because they're considered a liability, you know, they're going to make your health insurance costs go up and could possibly have an accident or something so it's hard to find a job as a disabled person. I did eventually get some work at Fernbank as a freelance mount maker and I worked as their mount maker in residence for about 6 months to do mounts for their St Catherine's Island ceramic exhibits. I met some very nice people over there, Will Grewmillins is the registrar over there and became friends with him and his wife Patty who is a conservator and they eventually came and did

some work at the history center when we needed some of our ceramics restored. It's good to have connections.

JB: When did you start working here?

KC: Let me see, when did I start working there? Gosh, you would think I'd have a better memory for dates.

JB: That's alright. Do you remember how long you were here altogether?

KC: Yeah, I think I was there almost seven years. I mean, I think the first thing I did was worked there as a volunteer. My friend Maureen Morrisette had become acquainted with one of her neighbors, who was on the board at the time, I don't know his name. But when he found out that she had been the registrar at the High Museum and the Carlos, he immediately said "hey, you're not doing anything, why don't you come to history center and help us get things organized a little bit?" And so, she worked there a little while and then talked me into coming to assist her and we and we helped on a couple of exhibits, they needed a little tweaking and it was nice to get back into it. And then Maureen moved away and so then I was kind of on my own and eventually you know Melissa decided to have me come in and do some part time work there and it went from part time to full time. It happened a little at a time.

JB: You're back in Delaware, retired. So how are you finding retirement? I know you've got your dog and your rabbit. And do you have deer too, in your yard?

KC: We don't have any deer, but we do have foxes and there are deer in the area. We see them frequently as we're driving around. Yeah, there are a lot of really great opportunities to look at wildlife. We're not too far from a place called Bombay Hook, which is a really amazing wildlife refuge, national wildlife refuge and you can go and see foxes and eagles and great blue heron and all kinds of critters. But yeah, I've had groundhogs and foxes and raccoons, possums, all kinds of things. But now I have a regular group of foxes that come and visit and they, we were made aware that they had been part of the neighborhood, this family of foxes, so they were already kind of habituated to people and so when they came around, we didn't feel too bad about putting a little food out of for them because everybody else does. Now they come and they eat hard-boiled eggs. They're so cute! They come and they have their hard-boiled eggs every night and so we go through a tremendous number of hard-boiled eggs.

JB: So, what do you your dogs think about the foxes?

KC: They find them fascinating and they also hate them. They are aware that we find the foxes very cute and they find this offensive.

JB: They're jealous!

KC: But they like to, Alice particularly, likes to sit behind a curtain and wait for them to come visit and then she barks her head off, which is why she's outside right now because she pretty much barks her head off any time a dog walks by or a rabbit. She's a good dog, but she's very vocal. We keep busy, Claudia and I bake twice a week for the dog shelters, local dog shelters, the Humane Association of Delaware, and the SPCA and they are very happy to get their treats. I think at last count, we had made about 2,600 pounds of dog treats. I kind of keep a little running list to keep us motivated so every week add them and weigh them and see where we are. I'm kind of hoping that we'll get to 10,000 pounds before one of us is too old to do it or croaks or something.

JB: Oh, my goodness! That's amazing! That's a lot of dog treats.

KC: Yeah, especially since I never baked. I don't know a darn thing about baking, really, but just did some Googling and figured it out and the dogs are not critical.

JB: Ah, that's so good! Thank you so much, Karen, for talking to me. This has been so much fun!

KC: It's been lovely, yes, I love hearing from you and I hope everybody there is doing well and you know, thriving.

JB: Yes, we are. We miss seeing you. You take care and we'll be in touch more

KC: Ok, Jennifer you take care too and give my best to everyone.

JB: I sure will. Bye!

KC: Bye bye

Transcribed August 2023

JB