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Title

Lynn Jordan Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

February 23, 2012

Extant

2 hours 1 minute interview (three files) and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Lynn Jordan, founding member and de facto historian of MCC San Francisco, discusses his experience as an active but closeted gay man in the Air Force and the 1970s party culture of San Francisco. As a deacon and publication manager, he was involved with MCC's liberation theology and social justice programs, including prison ministry and bag lunch programs

Biographical

Lynn Jordan was born Leonard Clayton Jordan in 1944 in Lorain, Ohio, to Jim and Ellen Jordan. His sister Geraldine Ann was born two years later. His maternal family ancestral lineage included the first English Puritan families—Stearns and Carpenter—who settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 to 1650. They were soon followed by the English Barnum ancestral lineage (titled aristocrats) who settled in Connecticut by 1660. Descendants of these families became Universalists and emigrated to Ohio as early as 1815 and founded North Olmsted (west of Cleveland) and established Universalist Churches wherever they settled. In the early to mid-1800's three branch of his German ancestors—Bower, Ault, and Frey—began emigrating from towns in the German state of Bavaria, purchased large tracts of farmland in Ohio and intermarried with both English and German lineages of his family. Leonard was raised primarily by generations of women on his mother's side of the family in rural, mid-central Ohio farm towns. He was a fifth generation Unitarian. In his youth he became involved in the Penfield Junction Baptist Church in his hometown as a Youth for Christ leader.

But he saw the light at age 16 (as an unrepentant male with overt, homosexual tendencies) and abandoned anything having to do with church for ten years.

Leonard—or Len as he was called by his family—survived a one-year bout with polio at age four that required hospitalization with an iron lung. The isolation and separation he experienced during his hospitalization and convalescence is embedded in him. However, this experience also led him to understand himself as a survivor with a deep sense of searching for his purpose in life. In the years following, he increasingly became a loner and introvert who did not fit in with masculine gender and role expectations. Being told that he was “sure different from all the other boys” would ultimately reinforce Len’s decision to always be an original and to demonstrate to his family the many ways that he could—and would—be different.

Len was a gifted student who excelled in academics recognizing that books and learning were his escape and his sanctuary. He took college classes while still in high school and through an accelerated study program earned a degree as a chemical operator engineer at age 19.

Jordan was called up in the U.S. military draft in 1963 and decided to enlist in the Air Force rather than seek a student deferment. After specialized testing, he was sent to training at U.S. military intelligence schools in Texas. After a year of training in security services and the Russian language, Len was stationed in Germany where he worked in Air Force security services in Zweibrücken Army Base from 1964–1965. After having his security clearances revoked (as a security risk), he was reassigned to base operations administrative duties at Ramstein Air Force Base, Ramstein, Germany in late 1965.

Also fluent in German, Jordan traveled easily around Germany and Europe during his military service. Having had experience in cruising parks and sexual encounters with men as a youth in Ohio, he quickly discovered places for sex with men in Europe. He developed extensive homosexual networks that included both German and American men and women. In one private gay German bar in Kaiserslautern, Germany, he met and became friends with army sergeant Troy Perry. When off base he was often disguised in German clothing, kept his drag attire at women friends’ apartments, traveled to private gay clubs—and had lovers—throughout Germany, Holland and France. For Len, if he was going to be discharged from the military for “homosexual activity or association,” he could at least be the best at what he was doing with no apologies.

Len completed his four years of Air Force military service and returned to Ohio in 1967. He had become such a different person—in appearance, temperament and attitudes—that within a month he realized that there was no going back to what would have been a closet. He certainly did not fit the role expectations of his family, which included the abhorrent words “marriage and children.”

On December 27, 1967, he went on a visit to San Francisco to learn more about the gay and countercultural life of that city with a focus on the Haight-Ashbury District. Within two weeks he found employment with the State of California Compensation Insurance Fund (a workers’ compensation insurance carrier public agency) where he ended up working for 34 years. He initially worked in part-time clerical positions in insurance processing while attending Golden Gate Business College on the G.I. Bill. Subsequently he worked in supervisory and management positions in data processing, accounting and claims, retiring in 2002 as a senior claims case manager.

Jordan became immersed in the growing gay subculture of San Francisco. He moved in the fast-paced, intertwined “I am invincible” party life of sex, alcohol, and drugs, multi-tasking with work and college. He was also engaged in gay political activity with the Society for Individual Rights and other groups. As he was trying to move out of the self-destructive party circuit and achieve sobriety in 1970, Jordan saw an article in The Advocate about a new “gay church” that had been founded in Los Angeles in 1968 by the Rev. Troy Perry. Jordan reestablished contact with his former military buddy from Germany and attended a revival service with 800 other San Franciscans that Rev. Perry led in September, 1970.

With Perry’s encouragement, Jordan became one of the founding members of MCC San Francisco which had been chartered as a church in April, 1970, under the leadership of Howard Wells. Due to the absence of job protections as he was becoming increasingly visible with his activism in the gay community and in MCC, he began using the pseudonym of Lynn instead of Len or Leonard. Over the following years, Lynn served in many different leadership roles in this congregation that became a progressive center for liberation theology, social justice, and civil rights both in the community and in the larger church. Lynn provided leadership in church publications, the deaconate, and prison and social justice ministries—including the Cuban Refugee Resettlement Program of 1980-1981—and AIDS lay chaplaincy ministry from 1985 through 1997. He has been a steadfast witness and presence in the congregation through cycles of growth and decline for the 42 years of its history.

As MCC San Francisco prepared to celebrate its 35th anniversary in 2005, Lynn agreed to provide documentation and illustration of the congregation’s history. Out of this effort he realized a passion for preserving our LGBT/queer history and has become the de facto church archivist and historian. He has since collected extensive records both of the history of MCC San Francisco since 1970 and other religious groups in San Francisco as well as documentation of the early seeds of the homophile movement in the U.S. in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Lynn chose an early retirement in January, 2002, listening to a persistent, small voice that he was being called to do something that did not have to do with “completion” or “renewal.” Within months he began volunteering at MCC San Francisco, initially for a program called Simply Supper, a social justice meal program started in 1997 for homeless persons. With Lynn’s leadership, Simply Supper, which began by providing bag lunch meals, added a Department of Health Needle Exchange program and then grew to preparing and serving vegetarian and non-vegetarian dinner meals to 100-150 guests twice a week—until it ended in December 2009. Since 2009 Lynn has been one of the coordinators of a volunteer-run bag lunch program, called Simply Sandwiches, which provides 200 bag lunches on Fridays to five non-profit organizations with at risk clients. He has continued to serve on numerous fundraising committees at MCC San Francisco, mentored seminarians, lectured, written and given interviews on MCC San Francisco history, and of late served on the pastoral search, stewardship, and congregational life committees. Additionally he volunteers with Openhouse San Francisco, a LGBT senior advocacy organization. Lynn is also researching and gathering oral interviews on the generations of his family lineages and genealogy in preparation for a book on his English, German, and Norman ancestral heritage.

For those in search of the question to one’s purpose in life Lynn has learned that you must be open to becoming the answer(s) to the question and living life more than in the moment.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Lynn Jordan, a founding member of MCC San Francisco and their de facto historian, discusses his experience as an active but closeted gay man in the Air Force, followed by the party culture of San Francisco. As its deacon and publication manager, he was involved with the church's liberation theology and social justice programs, including prison ministry and bag lunch programs.

This interview was conducted by Mark Bowman, the executive director of LGBTQ-RAN. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has played a key leadership role in establishing a number of religious ventures and programs.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/lynn-jordan>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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Tags

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