



## Interview 2 – Frank Perez interview.

### 1) Could you identify yourself?

My name is Frank Perez and I serve as the co-founder and executive director of the LGBTQ+ archives project of Louisiana, and we are a nonprofit organization that works to preserve queer history.

### 2) Who exactly is your association for?

So what we do at the Archives Project is we reach out to the LGBTQ+ community. That could be an individual, could be an organization, could be a business, and we ask them if they have any materials that would record our history and obviously, they do, because organizations and people generate either paper or emails or some type of documentation, and so we reach out to these people and organizations and say it's very important that this be preserved.

And so, we try to connect them with libraries, museums, archival institutions in order to find a permanent home for these are collections of materials. So that's the main thing we do. On the flip side, we also serve as a resource for people who are doing research into queer history in Louisiana. So, we get contacted all the time by documentary filmmakers, podcasters, graduate students, professors, researchers, who are researching all manner of topic, and so, since we know where everything is, we are able to say: here's what's available, here's what you need to speak with here is where it is.

And in addition to that, we also do public programming, mostly in New Orleans throughout the year, highlighting local queer history and the importance of preserving it. And when I say public programming, that can be workshops, could be public lectures, could be conferences, you name it.

### And can you explain why is it important to have such archives gathering all the documents and history for the queer and LGBTQ+ community?

Well, it's important to preserve this history, and maybe not even just preserve it but actually recover it, because do you have the metaphor of the closet in France? okay, so much of queer history in the United States is still in the closet and we have to get it out, and so the work that we do is important because it's, for the most part, unknown.

A lot of people are not aware of LGBTQ+ history because it's not something that people wanted to document for a very long time, until very recently, in the last twenty or thirty years. I know that doesn't seem like a long time to the students, but until recent decades, being gay or lesbian or trans or bi, was not something that people wanted to admit or document, because to do so in the United States could mean that you were fired from your job or arrested and put in jail or perhaps put in a mental institution and all sorts of bad things, and so a lot of that history is still hidden, and so we want to unhide it. We want to take it out of the closet and make it available now. It's also important because if we don't know our history, there is an old cliché that says: if you don't know your history, you are doomed to repeat it, and if there's anything, the political climate in the United States right now illustrates is that these very hard fought rights that have been won can easily be taken away, and it seems like in the last several years, since he who shall not be named was elected president, things are going in the opposite direction. We're going backwards, and so this history is very important, and our philosophy, the way we look at our work, is that preserving history, reclaiming it, recovering it, recording it, is a form of resistance, because these are often stories that the power structure, the, the hetero normative, patriarchy does not want us to know and or tell.

### **Can you name for the students who is the person you don't name?**

Yes, Donald Trump.

### **Who is also on the race for the next elections, if you can explain a little bit, sure?**

Sure: in the United States we have a presidential election every four years and we're in the middle of one this year and Donald Trump is running for president again, and this is cause for great concern for a great number of people, myself included.

### **3) How do help the LGBTQ+ people that contact you?**

So, we're very fortunate in New Orleans to have a lot of very sizeable LGBTQ+ population and that means we have a lot of organizations helping that community in addition to the work we do at the LGBT archives project there is also a group called 'No Age' which is a nonprofit group that works with seniors, old people and not only with social events but also training for medical staff on how to handle LGBT issues that older queer people have. So, 'No Age' is a very good group that's doing a lot of good work. We also have a number of trans organizations because that is a that is a big issue right now in the United States and so there are a number of groups working for police reform with regard to trans peoples particularly sex workers but also just trans rights in general. There's also a political action committee called 'the forum for equality' which endorses candidates and tries to work on the political side but there are a lot of other organizations as well.

### **4) Is homophobia an issue in Louisiana?**

Homophobia is very prevalent in Louisiana. It is a big problem. The vast majority of people in Louisiana are very religious, both protestant and catholic. Those people are not very friendly to queer people. Now, I have to say that in New Orleans it's a little bit different, because New Orleans is a metropolitan urban center in the middle of a rural state, and so in the city of New Orleans queer rights are prevalent. They're not a controversial issue here. They do have homophobia here, but it's not as widespread, as you would find outside the city of New Orleans, in the rest of Louisiana, but yes, it is still, very unfortunately, common.

### **5) Are LGBTQ+ rights here different from other places like France or Europe?**

I'm not very familiar with the laws in France and other European nations. My general sense is that Europe as a whole is a little bit more advanced than we are in the United States, not just with regard to sexuality and gender, but on great many things. So, I would suspect that the laws in in France and other European countries are better than they are.

### **Is same-sex marriage allowed in Louisiana?**

Yes, it is allowed throughout the United States, but only because of the supreme court of the United States made it so. If the state could vote on it would not be legal. But they don't have that choice.

### **Are there examples of some priest who refused to marry people from the LGBT community?**

I'm sure there are. I don't know of any specifics, but I'm sure there are.

### **Can also LGBTQ+ people adopt children here?**

No, that is a little bit trickier. I think that is currently being litigated right now. But the State as a whole, the State government, is not friendly. In fact, some would say it is downright hostile- to LGBT people in Louisiana.

#### **6) Are these rights being threatened right now?**

LGBT rights in Louisiana have been under attack a lot lately in recent years. We have fortunately until this month, had a democratic governor, and the democratic party here is a little bit more progressive and liberal than the republican or conservative party. The problem is our legislative body is very conservative, but the governor was not as conservative as they were, and so when they would pass anti-LGBT legislation, he would veto it.

But he left office, earlier this month and now we have a new governor who loves Donald Trump, is extremely religious, fanatical almost, and incredibly ignorant, and there is great worry and concern and fear that the legislative agenda is going to be very hostile, but we don't know yet.

#### **What can happen for example in the legislation?**

Well, right now, the big focus is the issue of trans people using bathrooms, which to me, is a silly issue but it is an issue that really fires up, that really excites, that really angers the religious people because they don't like trans people, they don't understand it. I mean they don't like gay and lesbian people either, but trans is even worse in a lot of people's minds because they don't understand it, and so the politicians in Louisiana and throughout the United States I guess everywhere, tend to use these silly, superficial issues that are not really problems as a way to excite their voter base and exploit people's prejudices, and that is what we see happening in Louisiana right now.

#### **What are the rights, for example, for the trans people today in Louisiana?**

Well, one of the big issues is the police attitudes toward trans people. The police used to harass gay and lesbian people quite a lot. That is a thing of the past, but they still are not very advanced with regard to trans people. Another big issue that the trans people will tell you is access to healthcare, medical treatment, as well as the legal process for changing one's name is very difficult to do in Louisiana, so those are other issues that they would be concerned about.

#### **7) Is there a Gay Pride in Louisiana or an LGBTQ+ Mardi Gras?**

Yes, those are two separate things.

Several cities in Louisiana have pride, which is in June in the summer. New Orleans has that as well and the gay Mardi Gras, or gay carnival, is a separate issue and we have a very rich history of gay carnival in New Orleans. In fact, the first gay carnival krewe - and when I say krewe I mean a private club - was formed by a group of gay men in 1958, and their annual party was raided by the police in 1962, and so throughout the 1960s and 1970s it was very dangerous, and it was illegal for homosexuals to gather together and especially to dress in drag. That was illegal. Despite the legal threats, a gay carnival did thrive and grow; it became very popular and in the early 1890s, before the AIDS epidemic really hit, there were probably 18 different gay carnival clubs, only one lesbian krewe. But the AIDS epidemic just decimated the krewes and they have slowly made a comeback. Today there are eight or nine gay carnival clubs and none of these clubs parade, you know, when people think of Mardi Gras in New

Orleans, they think of the parades. None of the gay krewes parade, but rather they do really elaborate balls which are wonderful shows, events.

And that all happens during carnival season, which of course is from January 6th, which is the Twelfth Night epiphany, to Mardi Gras, with Mardi Gras on a different day every year, depending on when easter is, which is determined by the what first full moon after the spring equinox, even though the catholic church doesn't believe in witchcraft.

### **And can you name some of the gay krewes?**

Sure, the current gay krewes are the Krewe de la Rue Royale Revelers, the Krewe of Patronius, the Krewe of Apollo, the Krewe of Amon-Ra, the Krewe of Arminius.

You can tell that most of these names come from Greek mythology or Roman mythology, but not all. We also have the crew of Mwindo, which is a predominantly African American krewe, when Mwindo was a folk hero from African literature. We also have the Lords of Leather, which is the world's only leather krewe. These are men who are very into leather, so that's a very interesting ball each year.

### **Interesting, and are you part yourself of a krewe?**

yes, I am. I am the captain of the Krewe de la Rue Royal Revelers, which started simply as a party on Twelfth Night to celebrate the arrival of carnival season, and it just kind of took on a life of its own and now we're a registered krewe.

And the party started my apartment when I lived in the French quarter.

But we quickly outgrew that and now we have to rent a space and its hundreds of people and it's a big deal.

## **8) Is there a city in Louisiana that is more open-minded towards the LGBTQ+ community?**

Yes, that would be New Orleans. We have a number of cities in Louisiana, but that they're just not anywhere near as tolerant and open-minded as New Orleans is.

### **For example, I found that in Lafayette they have this Acadian pride organization. Do you feel like something is changing? what's the situation in Lafayette?**

Well, I think. I think, in order to answer that, I should point out, and people may be interested to know, that the state of Louisiana is really three different states, culturally.

Okay, so there's New Orleans, which is like an island. Southern Louisiana is very catholic, very French. This is where the Acadians are, the Cajuns. Not Parisian French, but a Cajun version of French, spoken in Southern Louisiana and very catholic.

Right. So the southern part of the state, including New Orleans, is derived from a mediterranean Latin flavor, whereas the northern part of Louisiana was settled by protestant Anglo Saxons, right, and so they're very puritanical, very rough, rigid, very close-minded, which thankfully none of that really took hold here. People who have never been to Louisiana. I think it's useful to think of Louisiana as three different parts:

Northern Louisiana, which is very protestant, very boring, very religious.

Southern Louisiana with - what's the phrase? - joie de vivre, a little bit more embracing of life, you know, "laissez le bon temps rouler" attitude.

And then there's New Orleans, which is just a whole world unto its own.

**So, you would say, yeah, New Orleans is more open, and then maybe the Cajun area is also not so conservative in comparison?**

Well, they're still pretty conservative, but they're not as bad as the northern part of the state. You know, Catholics are not as hardcore as Protestants.

**9) Are the struggles of the minority (sexual, gender, ethnic) groups similar?**

Sure, there's the struggle for civil rights - for us, say, African Americans, black people- is still very much alive here. Racism is very common throughout Louisiana. That is still very much an issue. The current situation, I think, bears mentioning, you know the attack on women's rights and reproductive freedoms, which have been revoked just recently, and that is another result of Donald Trump and why he is an evil, evil man. But the women's struggle for equality, the African American struggle for equality, the queer struggle for equality, these are all interrelated because the enemy of all of them is the same, and so there's an old phrase in the United States, I don't know if you have it in France, but it says that a rising tide lifts all boats.

**I don't think we have same. What does it mean?**

When the tide, when the water in a lake rises, all the boats in that lake are going to rise as well. They may be different boats, but they're in the same lake and that's kind of how I would answer that question.

**You said the same enemy. Can you name it, to clarify?**

White Christian men.

**What do they do? Do they want to keep their power? What do they do?**

well, you know, for so long, in this country, the patriarchy has gone unchallenged, right? And you know, we're supposed to be a secular nation, but the Christians believe in, and don't want to wander too far off topic, but I think it's important to answer your question, you know? Fundamentalist Christianity is basically fascist, right? I mean, they believe in a dictator, a supreme being who controls everything, can read your mind, can punish you for your thoughts, right? So, authoritarianism, it shouldn't be surprising, is not a problem for a lot of Trump voters and people in America who are conservative, because it's a, it's a natural outgrowth of Christianity, which is basically a celestial dictatorship, right? And so, in Christianity, the man is the head of the household, the man is in charge. Women are lesser. You know all the sin in the world, all the problems the world has, according to Christianity, is because of a woman. It's a very misogynistic religion and that has permeated our entire society and so, those in power. One of your great French philosophers, Michel Foucault, argued that, you know, those who have power don't want to give it up and they will fight to preserve it, and that, in a nutshell, explains the appeal of Donald Trump.

**10) Do you have a particular message for the globe reporters?**

Yes, the message I would give the students is to be politically active, vote, express your opinion. Don't take your rights for granted because they can easily be taken away.

**Thank you.**

ouvez-vous vous présenter ?

- • À qui s'adresse votre association ?
- • Comment venez-vous en aide aux personnes LGBT qui vous contactent ?
- • L'homophobie est-elle un problème en Louisiane ?
- • Les droits LGBT sont-ils différents de ceux qui existent en Europe ou en France ?
- • Ces droits sont-ils menacés actuellement ?
- • Existe-t-il une Gay pride en Louisiane ? Y a-t-il un Mardi gras LGBT ?
- • Y a-t-il une ville de Louisiane qui soit la plus ouverte d'esprit envers la communauté LGBT ?
- • Les luttes des minorités (sexuelles, ethniques, de genre...) se ressemblent-elles ?
- • Question bonus : Avez-vous un message pour les globe-reporters et globe-reportrices ?