

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Guy Striano

Interviewer: Adam Varoqua

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Location: Conklin Hall, Rutgers-Newark Campus, Newark, NJ

Adam Varoqua: Hello, my name is Adam Varoqua. Today is February 29th, 2020. I am interviewing Guy Striano at Conklin Hall for the Queer Newark History project, Rutgers-Newark Campus. Thank you for joining us.

Guy Striano: You're very welcome. Thank you for having me.

Adam Varoqua: So when were you born Guy?

Guy Striano: 1959. December 23rd.

Adam Varoqua: December 23rd. And when were you born? Oh, I'm sorry. Where were you born?

Guy Striano: St. Michael's in Newark

Adam Varoqua: St. Michael's? Okay. And did you always reside in New York?

Guy Striano: In New York or Newark?

Adam Varoqua: New York.

Guy Striano: New York. I don't live in New York.

Adam Varoqua: Oh, Newark. Oh, when you were born? Okay.

Guy Striano: I was born in Newark. I lived on Wilson Avenue, and then we moved to Kearny.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. Wilson, and did you live in— how long did you live in Kearny?

Guy Striano: On and off for a better part of sixty years, ya know.

Adam Varoqua: What was that like for you living there?

Guy Striano: Nice old town. Very close knit. Very family oriented. Good schools, good friends. So it was a great little town to grow up in.

Adam Varoqua: And you said you were born in 1959?

Guy Striano: '59, correct.

Adam Varoqua: And you've stayed in Kearny for six years?

Guy Striano: More than that.

Adam Varoqua: More than that? Okay

Guy Striano: Sixty.

Adam Varoqua: Oh sixty.

Guy Striano: Six, zero.

Adam Varoqua: Oh, okay.

Guy Striano: But I lived other places in the meantime.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. And how many places did you live in?

Guy Striano: Four, four paces

Adam Varoqua: What were those places?

Guy Striano: Belleville, New York City, Bloomfield, Bedminster.

Adam Varoqua: Did you go to school in Kearny?

Guy Striano: I did. I went to St. Cecilia Grammar School and then I went to Kearny High School.

Adam Varoqua: And what was that like for you going to school there?

Guy Striano: Again, it was a small town. Everybody knew each other, very family, very familial, it was fun. I had a good time. It was a nice growing up. It was a nice growing up.

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]* When did you start St. Cecilia? When did you start going there?

Guy Striano: When I was about five.

Adam Varoqua: Five? Okay.

Guy Striano: No, kindergarten through eighth grade.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. So this was around 1964?

Guy Striano: Yeah, about that, yeah.

Adam Varoqua: With Kearny High School, that would be around—

Guy Striano: 1973.

Adam Varoqua: And what was your home life like?

Guy Striano: Mother, father, brother, typical. Father was a laborer. Mother stayed home with the kids until we get old enough and then she went to work.

Adam Varoqua: And do you recall any events or like transitions early on in your life on when you were in middle school, high school and all.

Guy Striano: Define transition.

Adam Varoqua: Sort of like any moving, anything that happened in the family, anything that—

Guy Striano: I knew there were deaths in the family, weddings, everything. Nothing that stands out as unique.

Adam Varoqua: So sort of like things in the ordinary almost.

Guy Striano: Pretty much, yeah. The run of the mill your average life spans.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. You mentioned how Kearny was a small town. What would you say was your—what was your childhood like there?

Guy Striano: Like anybody's childhood, you know. I mean it was, you ever watch, *That '70s Show*?

Adam Varoqua: Yeah.

Guy Striano: That's pretty much what it was like.

Adam Varoqua: Okay.

Guy Striano: You can relate to that, 'cause that's the best way to describe it, you know. We looked exactly like they all looked. We did things, we hung out, we played Manhunt. We played baseball, singles and homers, off the steps of your house.

You know we went down the shore in the summers and everything was you know- went to ShopRite, all things were normal. Like I said, nothing about my childhood stood out other than me.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. What do you mean by that?

Guy Striano: Well, I probably found out I was gay at a very early age. I was attracted— I was just telling Joe the story. My bodybuilder, cousin, Ray was watching. He lived upstairs.

He came out of the shower, with his tail, a towel wrapped around it. I went, “Oh my.” I didn't say those words. I knew something was up. No pun intended. You know what I mean, I knew I felt attracted. And I never looked back.

Adam Varoqua: So you knew you were gay from a very young age?

Guy Striano: Absolutely.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. You mentioned Kearny High School, St. Cecilia, was there any other school that you attended in that time period?

Guy Striano: No.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. And would you say you faced any challenges in your childhood at all?

Guy Striano: Well, knowing I was gay, I was not attracted to girls one little bit. I faked it for a little while 'cause I thought that's what you did. But I was actually quite attracted to some of my friends, you know what I mean?

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]*

Guy Striano: Like I hung around with these two brothers that I was madly attracted to, one of the other brothers you know. So I had my own little world going on, you know.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. How did you navigate through those challenges of like you know not um *[unintelligible 05:02]*?

Guy Striano: Well, I fooled around with some of the kids in the neighborhood. The whole answer, “Don't tell anybody.” They were quite willing, you know. Then I came out at 15, my first year in high school.

My art teacher kind of dragged me out. She asked me to—she wanted to talk to me about something. Never did I dream, she would have asked me that question. Her brother was gay. So she kind of had an idea, you know. We're friends till today.

Adam Varoqua: Oh, wow.

Guy Striano: Just spoke with her last night.

Adam Varoqua: How was that like for you coming out to her?

Guy Striano: How was it like? That was very scary, but very, kind of natural. It didn't bother me. I never worried what anybody would think of me ever in my life 'cause I don't define myself in who I sleep with.

I define myself in who I am as a person. And I'm a pretty darn good person. So that's how I reconcile anything that might cause other people maybe anxiousness, you know.

Adam Varoqua: You sounded like, you sound very brave when you were a child, just like being able to—

Guy Striano: Well, you know, it's either you go big or go home, you know. It's you, you're the only one you've got, right? So if you can't be honest with yourself, right, like Shakespeare said, "To thine own self be true."

Adam Varoqua: Absolutely. And you said you went to Kearny High School in 1973?

Guy Striano: Correct.

Adam Varoqua: And so you would graduate 1977?

Guy Striano: That is correct.

Adam Varoqua: And what did you do afterwards?

Guy Striano: What did I do afterwards?

Adam Varoqua: Yeah.

Guy Striano: I went into the city.

Adam Varoqua: New York City?

Guy Striano: New York City. I went to culinary school. I graduated culinary school in 1981.

Adam Varoqua: Which culinary school?

Guy Striano: It was called Peter Kumpf.

Adam Varoqua: Peter Kumpf

Guy Striano: It's now referred to as the French Culinary Institute.

Adam Varoqua: And where is that in the city?

Guy Striano: It was on the west side, West 53rd Street.

Adam Varoqua: And what did you do after graduating culinary?

Guy Striano: I bartended at nightclubs, during and after.

Adam Varoqua: How was that like for you, bartending?

Guy Striano: Bartending? It was cool. It was cool. I felt like a celebrity. I felt like a celebrity, I also bartended in several bars in the area. One called the Cactus Club, which was down on Fleming Avenue in the Ironbound. Another one was called Charlie's West in East Orange.

Adam Varoqua: Charlies West. And were these all gay clubs?

Guy Striano: All gay clubs.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. Are they still around?

Guy Striano: No. Long gone, as are most.

Adam Varoqua: What was that like for you? How did you find out about these places?

Guy Striano: Well, I used to go to them and I got to know the bar manager at Charlie's West, Tony Primatera. He has since passed many, many years ago, but he called me up out of the blue. He says, "Hey, I have a spot. You wanna work?" I'm like, "Sure."

And with Cactus Club, the same thing, they thought I was somebody else. I resemble another guy named Mark Cohen and Dan the owner thought I was Mark and he hired me. I said, "You

do know I'm not Mark.” He goes, “Yeah, I know. I figured it out.”
But I still worked there for a couple of years.

Adam Varoqua: And what was that experience like for you?

Guy Striano: Very cool. We had straight male strippers. That was hot!

Adam Varoqua: *[Laughter]* Cactus club, Charlie's West. What were the other—
Were there other clubs you worked in?

Guy Striano: Yeah, in New York City, Limelight, Palladium. Limelight's in the
church on Sixth Avenue and Sixth, Palladium was on 14th Street,
in Union Square [coughs].

Adam Varoqua: I know you mentioned the Cactus Clubs in the Ironbound, you
know, what was your earliest memory of Newark?

Guy Striano: When I was living on Wilson Avenue as a little boy.

Adam Varoqua: How, what was that like for you living there first?

Guy Striano: Well, I was young so I really didn't have much realization of where
it was or what it was, but you know, just as a little kid, just being a
little kid, playing outside and having friends and you know, things
like that.

Adam Varoqua: And with Cactus Club, was there another club in Newark that you
worked in or?

Guy Striano: Not in Newark, there was only that one. There was another one
called Murphy's as well.

Adam Varoqua: Murphy's, okay.

Guy Striano: But I didn't work there. It was directly across the street.

Adam Varoqua: I see. Okay. So his was also in the Ironbound.

Guy Striano: Correct, right across the street.

Adam Varoqua: Did you go to Murphy's at all?

Guy Striano: I did not.

Adam Varoqua: Okay.

Guy Striano: It was for men of color at the time.

Adam Varoqua: I see.

Guy Striano: It was very, it was an African American club.

Adam Varoqua: What do you say—what was sort of like the community within the Cactus Club? Was it white?

Guy Striano: It was all white, all Italian. Very few Latinos, very few African Americans. It was basically all the gay Italian guys from North Newark. You know what I mean, the Sal's and the Vinnie's, things like that. It almost felt like a gay Italian social club, to be perfectly honest.

Adam Varoqua: Oh really?

Guy Striano: 'Cause we have the regulars lined up every Saturday and Friday nights you know.

Adam Varoqua: How would you characterize them? How would you characterize that, a sense of community then?

Guy Striano: I would think so, big time. Yeah. I played softball for the Big Apple softball league. A few of us bartenders we you know, played softball in the city. So you know, we were more community oriented.

Adam Varoqua: And How did you hear about Big Apple softball?

Guy Striano: One of the guys that I bartended with, his boyfriend was a bartender at the Monster. And Brian and oh my God, what's his last name? Brian O'Sullivan, and John Vulture. John was a part of the team as well. So they asked me if I wanted to join.

Adam Varoqua: Is that team still around?

Guy Striano: It probably has been not new, not in the same incarnation that it was back in the mid 80's.

Adam Varoqua: Yeah. When did you start working at Cactus Club? In the 80s—

Guy Striano: It was like the late 80's.

Adam Varoqua: I know you said you also worked in Charlie's West.

Guy Striano: Correct. Well, that was the big— it was the early, mid 80s.

Adam Varoqua: Mid 80's? Okay. Were you sort of bartending in multiple places at once?

Guy Striano: Yeah, exactly what I did, two nights here, a night here.

Adam Varoqua: What was a night at the Cactus Club like? Walk us through, like how would it be? How would it work?

Guy Striano: Well, it was a very long, narrow club with the dance floor at the back. It was, you know, the music started at nine people started to—like think of piano man, same, pretty much the same thing.

You know, the regular crowd, they were all there. This one talk to that one. They dance, they drank, they danced. The boys came out did their bar chop dancing, you know, stuff like that.

Adam Varoqua: What was on Charlie's West like?

Guy Striano: That was a little bigger of a club. It had more live acts there. Like Madonna performed there, Divine performed there and it was dancing. It was a very sort of a younger, hipper crowd let's say, and two bars. Then they built a piano bar after that, so you had your choice.

Adam Varoqua: How would you, how long did Cactus Club last?

Guy Striano: It lasted probably five, six years.

Adam Varoqua: Did you work there like?

Guy Striano: No, I didn't work there the whole time. I worked there for two, almost three years.

Adam Varoqua: Three years, okay. How long for Charlie's West?

Guy Striano: About three years.

Adam Varoqua: With these clubs that you're working in, like, what were sort of like, the observations you were making about the people coming into those clubs?

Guy Striano: Well, at the time, you just wanted to get laid to be perfectly honest with you. So you picked up the hottest guy in the room, and you tried to get him. You said that was really the front of it. And there

were other things we did too, but you know, that was part of it, it was very sexual, very sexual.

Adam Varoqua: I know you said before that you were working there, mid to late 80's in both clubs. Were you living in Newark or were you still living in Kearny?

Guy Striano: I was actually living at the time in Bellville.

Adam Varoqua: And how long did you live there for?

Guy Striano: Bellville? Five years.

Adam Varoqua: Was this like right after you got out of culinary school?

Guy Striano: Pretty much about, yeah, about that same time though.

Adam Varoqua: So probably like early 80's on—

Guy Striano: Yeah, thereabouts. And then I moved into New York City, I opened up a restaurant in Tribeca, it was called Montrachet. I worked with Chefs David Bouley and Craig Shelton.

Adam Varoqua: And do you remember the years for this? I'm guessing early 90's or so.

Guy Striano: The late 80's, early 90's.

Adam Varoqua: What was that experience like?

Guy Striano: That was cool. That was really cool. That was really, really cool. That night, we got three stars from Brian Miller from the New York Times. The phone was literally running off the hook.

You heard things like, "No, I'm so sorry, Mr. Cronkite. We cannot take you and your family tonight." Or, "Oh I'm sorry, Mr. Kissinger. We know you'll be in town, but if we have anything, we'll let you know."

Adam Varoqua: That's really awesome.

Guy Striano: It was really crazy, crazy. Calvin Klein used to come in all the time and Tommy Hilfiger, and Halston and all those people.

Adam Varoqua: So this was a popular.

Guy Striano: This was extremely, very popular.

Adam Varoqua: Oh my God. What was it always like that?

Guy Striano: Well, you have to earn your stars, right? So once you earn your stars, and it's an automatic income boost, you know, so people wanna go there. They always wanna go to the best place. They always wanna be the A-listers, right?

Adam Varoqua: How would you describe the Tribeca community?

Guy Striano: At the time, it wasn't anything like it is now. It was very— it was sort of on the peripheral. It was a burgeoning community up and coming, you know. It was probably at the start of the gentrification. I mean, the Odeon was still there, which was a really cool hip, downtown type restaurant.

Adam Varoqua: Odeon?

Guy Striano: O-D-E-O-N.

Adam Varoqua: I know you mentioned gentrification just now. What do you mean by gentrification?

Guy Striano: Exactly what—Okay, starting to turn the corner. The area was starting to become the it place. Like downtown Newark is starting to try to maneuver it's place again.

Adam Varoqua: Going back to Newark. So going back to the Cactus Club, what did you find appealing about working here?

Guy Striano: Working there or here?

Adam Varoqua: Working there in Newark.

Guy Striano: There. The money was really good. It was fun. Again, it was very sexually charged you know. Went out with my first Portuguese guy, he was cute.

Adam Varoqua: What I'm noticing from the Cactus Club was sort of like this sense of community being—

Guy Striano: It was.

Adam Varoqua: When you were working in Newark at the Cactus Club, did you find anything difficult, frustrating at all?

Guy Striano: Parking [laughter]. Really, nothing, just stands out, you know.

Adam Varoqua: And you know, having worked there and having also lived in the area in Bellville and Kearny what places in Newark do you associate with the LGBTQ people?

Guy Striano: They're pretty much all gone, you know. There was Rah-Rah's in East Orange, as well as Charlie's West. There was Murphy's, there was the Cactus Club. There were various other little sort of down low bars along Broad Street. Paradisio was a disco on Broad Street.

Adam Varoqua: This was on Broad Street?

Guy Striano: On Broad Street yea. It was in the Newark Symphony Hall, that building. And they had sort of a gay crowd too. It was like our version of Paradise Garage if you've ever heard of that.

Adam Varoqua: I haven't.

Guy Striano: There's your homework.

Adam Varoqua: What's paradise—

Guy Striano: Paradise Garage was an actual bus terminal in the West Village. And it turned into a nightclub, dancing nightclub and DJ was Larry Levan and he introduced the house music sound to the city. And it was all very sort of after hours, you know.

Adam Varoqua: You mentioned a few places in Newark, one of these place is Rah-Rah's in East Orange. How did you hear about that?

Guy Striano: I didn't work there. I just knew about it. I mean, it was just word of mouth, you know.

Adam Varoqua: What'd you say, word of mouth in these clubs and these bars.

Guy Striano: People would talked about, "Oh we went to Rah-Rah's last night." You overhear that. So it's all word of mouth. Don't forget that there was really no huge publications back then. Everything was word of mouth.

Adam Varoqua: I'm guessing then the vibe then was to really like trust people?

Guy Striano: Of course, and create your own community because you didn't have one outside of there. You were still somewhere people were completely closeted, and would only go out to those places. They led a completely different life outside the doors.

I used to, when I bartended at Cactus Club, being our location was so close to Newark Airport. We used to get a lot of businessmen who are married with kids. They came out to get some, pretty much, you know.

Adam Varoqua: Did you notice that frequently?

Guy Striano: Quite frequently.

Adam Varoqua: I'm sort of like noticing the different demographics with these clubs. With Cactus Club, people like from North Newark and businessmen, with Charlie's West like more, kind of like the younger crowd.

Guy Striano: Younger, right. Very well, cool dressed, if it was the fad they'd have it on things like that. Like Cavaricci and things like that.

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]* I know you brought up, you used to own and manage your own restaurant in Tribeca?

Guy Striano: No, I didn't own it. I worked there.

Adam Varoqua: Oh, you worked there, oh I apologize.

Guy Striano: I wish I owned it, geez.

Adam Varoqua: What if anything happened afterwards?

Guy Striano: After? What do you mean?

Adam Varoqua: After working there?

Guy Striano: Oh, I worked in other various places, you know, in New Jersey, predominantly because I had it with the city. I got a little burned out.

Adam Varoqua: What made, was your breaking point in the city?

Guy Striano: Just after a while, it just was the hours, the commute, things like that.

Adam Varoqua: Were you commuting from Bellville at the time?

Guy Striano: I was commuting from Belleville, Kearny, no, Bloomfield.

Adam Varoqua: Bloomfield okay. Where did you end up working back in New Jersey?

Guy Striano: I ended up working in various restaurants, the Highland Pavilion. Marriott's, I managed the Marriott in Newark Airport, uh, you know, various other places.

Adam Varoqua: And what were those experience like for you in contrast to bartending before?

Guy Striano: Well, when you're a waiter, you're a bartender you're a whole bunch of stuff. You know, you wear a lot of hats. It never really was different, it was just a different environment. You still knew how to do what you did, yeah. It was nothing really strangely odd.

Adam Varoqua: So the skills you learned, were kind of like transferable?

Guy Striano: Of course. Yes. Once you wait a table, it's how you wait a table.

Adam Varoqua: I know you mentioned before that you came out as gay, when you're 15.

Guy Striano: Right.

Adam Varoqua: You would describe your sexual orientation as gay then?

Guy Striano: Yes and no *[laughter]*.

Adam Varoqua: And I know you said you became aware of that aspect of yourself at a young age.

Guy Striano: Very.

Adam Varoqua: I'm guessing like Middle School even younger than that?

Guy Striano: Oh, even go even younger than that, probably five or six.

Adam Varoqua: How did you first learn about the existence of LGBTQ people?

Guy Striano: My Art teacher in high school, her brother was out, and he was doing the scene. And she questioned me. I told her, honestly. So

then she said, “Okay, I'm gonna call my brother, and he's gonna help you sort of transition.” Mark did, and he took me to my first bar.

Adam Varoqua: Oh wow, and this was when you were 15 then?

Guy Striano: When I was 15. I know, very sketchy. I was almost—I was about 16 at the time, so this didn't happen until about a year later.

Adam Varoqua: And did he take you to a local bar?

Guy Striano: He took me to a bar in the West Village it was called 12 West.

Adam Varoqua: Is it still around?

Guy Striano: No.

Adam Varoqua: What was that um, what was that first clubbing experience?

Guy Striano: Uh, a little odd. I never slept with men kissed before, but I did then. That was very interesting.

Adam Varoqua: And how did other people in your life become aware of your sexuality?

Guy Striano: I told them. I told them. Or I slept with them. I guess you're good. You're right.

Adam Varoqua: When you were growing up, was, what role, if any, did religion play in your life?

Guy Striano: I'm an atheist, so very, well, obviously through the years that develops, but in the beginning, I was raised Roman Catholic. I went to a Catholic Grammar School and then I started to question, you know, the God thing, you know.

Adam Varoqua: And how would you say this role of religion played in your life?

Guy Striano: It didn't, it didn't play at all. Not one little bit. I never caught into the idea of a fantasy man in the sky with robes and going, “No, no, no, yes, yes, yes, we'll kill you, but we won't kill you.”, you know.

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]* How has being gay me made your life different from the way it would be if you did not have this identity?

Guy Striano: Geez, it's been so long, you know, and obviously, you didn't have kids, you didn't get married until only recently. You partied and you vacationed in predominantly gay areas. You know, you carved out a niche for yourself. Friends became your family, things like that.

Adam Varoqua: Would you say your family was accepting of you?

Guy Striano: Not at first, not at first, it took them a little while to come to terms.

Adam Varoqua: And where did you personally find community was it in Kearny, in Newark, or?

Guy Striano: It was mostly anywhere that I worked, from there you made friends and then it just went on from there.

Adam Varoqua: Would you say like, you know, how has your perception of being gay changed over time? If there wasn't any change?

Guy Striano: I don't know. It's just was always who I was so I didn't really decipher, I didn't delve into it, you know. I didn't do a psychological profile on myself, you know. At times, I wish I wasn't, at times I'm glad I was and you know most gay people go through that questioning stage in your life.

You know you see other people that you might've been friendly with have their traditional nuclear families and you know, grandchildren and children and then all of a sudden they've said, "Well, you know, what? You could adopt kids, you could have kids if you want." It's like, "Oh wow. You're right, I can. I can find a woman who wants to have a baby, or I could adopt a child. I still have maternal, and paternal strings."

That doesn't stop on who you sleep with. You know you still are a human first, right? That's, I think, the biggest problem people have, are realizing that it's just a preference. I don't go around skipping with a dress on. I'm not feminine. I'm masculine. I've always been.

Do I have my moments? Of course I do, we all do, you know, but it never really changed my perception on who I was. I just needed to change the people around me into perceiving me one way, you know, realizing that I'm not some, you know, messed up psychologically damaged human with no soul, you know and that being a gay atheist is even worse. They think you're sitting in a pentagram, you know, listening to Alistair Crowley, you know, so.

Adam Varoqua: [laughter] Would you um, I know you identify as an atheist, how is that like, that shaped your perception of identity?

Guy Striano: Well, I mean, look, whatever you believe in, that's what you believe in. I will never ever, ever admonish that. But on the other hand, allow me to believe that I don't believe in what you believe in. You know what I mean? It's turn around [*unintelligible 26:03*].

Adam Varoqua: Makes sense.

Guy Striano: Don't make me out to be the bad guy just 'cause I don't believe in God. I mean, if I could sit there and sort of lay it out on the table scientifically, you'll probably go, "Yea well maybe he's right." I'm not looking for that, but I could do it if I really wanted to, you know. Like they say Jesus is coming again? When would he be coming? I don't know, maybe the Holocaust would have been a good enough reason to reappear. Maybe, 9/11? I don't know, yeah, so. So that's all those things I think about and I read and I'm like, "How do you believe that? How do you believe that nonsense?!"

I mean, good for you that you believe it. Everybody needs something to attach themselves to as a force bigger than themselves. But it doesn't make sense to me at all. It makes no sense to me at all. None of it makes sense.

Adam Varoqua: And when would you say you started questioning religion?

Guy Striano: Probably early high school. I live by, I live by a few things. Be kind, have integrity, and always do to someone else what you'd like done to yourself. And I think that's pretty much what people mistake as being Christian, you know. [*Clears throat*]. Pardon.

Adam Varoqua: Oh, you're good. What would you say you like best about being gay? If there was like an aspect you found to be more likeable?

Guy Striano: I don't know if there is a particular anything. I don't know, maybe because I'm a little more creative than the most. Maybe I'm a little bit more emotional than maybe a straight guy.

Maybe I'll allow my tears to flow when they flow, you know. And I just came out of a huge grieving year. My mom passed away today, a year ago, and I took care of her for the better part of 10 years, you know, 24/7. So you lose that, you lose part of yourself. You lose the ability to take care of someone. And I'm a nurturer, I like to take care of somebody, I like to be there for someone and then when you lose that you kinda lose everything about you.

And then you have to readjust everything again to one person. I now, at the very beginning, like going to sleep, I'd have to put a box fan on in my bedroom, so I could hear white noise. Now, I'm glad for the peace and quiet. It transitions very quickly, but it takes a good year or maybe even more, you know.

Adam Varoqua: Sort of that aspect of changing over time, right?

Guy Striano: Right.

Adam Varoqua: I know you mentioned that you used to work in Newark on mid 80's, late 80's. How would you say Newark has changed?

Guy Striano: Well, it's changed markedly for the better, obviously, 'cause you know, they're trying to turn it around again for the 50th year. Back in the 80's, it was a hole, I mean, it was horrible. In fact, in front of the Cactus Club was owned by an ex-cop. We had Newark cops in front of the building.

Adam Varoqua: In front Cactus Club?

Guy Striano: Yes.

Adam Varoqua: So Cactus Club was owned by the police.

Guy Striano: It was owned by one—

Adam Varoqua: One police.

Guy Striano: His name was Dan Russo.

Adam Varoqua: You mentioned that Newark was a hole. What do you mean by hole?

Guy Striano: A hole, it was a pigsty. It was a riot filled, nasty ghetto. How does that fit?

Adam Varoqua: Were there riots happening that time?

Guy Striano: 1969 were the riots. [*The Newark Riots were in 1967.*] And it's been trying to come back ever since.

Adam Varoqua: What do you remember about the riots?

Guy Striano: Very little. I was only 10 years old. I do remember one of my teachers in school had to take time off to move out of the area, or to another town because of that.

Adam Varoqua: From the riots in 1969 [1967], and you working in the Cactus Club, mid 80's, late 80's. What did you notice, changes in Newark? What was sort of the environment or atmosphere like?

Guy Striano: Well, no black people were allowed in the bar.

Adam Varoqua: Really?

Guy Striano: Yeah, very few. One or two guys, but they had to be vetted in a sense. You know what I mean?

Adam Varoqua: Mm-hmm.

Guy Striano: So you came, you were talking about an older Italian guy ex -cop work through the riots, saw what happened, saw the damage that was occurred, and he was just basically racist. But you never questioned him. Maybe he had a reason, who knows? People will have reasons for everything, you know.

Adam Varoqua: And so like, the community coming into Cactus Club was predominantly white.

Guy Striano: Predominantly white, yes.

Adam Varoqua: Did that change over the last few years?

Guy Striano: Very little bit. Very little bit here and there and nothing major, nothing noticeable basically.

Adam Varoqua: Yeah, I know you mentioned that the owner was a cop and the cops would be outside, what was that dynamic? Like the police community and the LGBTQ community?

Guy Striano: They were actually very cool. They were very, very cool.

Adam Varoqua: Would you say accepting, tolerant?

Guy Striano: Oh, absolutely, yeah. They never had a, never heard a crass word from anybody, you know.

Adam Varoqua: Did that change—

Guy Striano: I used to have a t shirt that read, “If you call me a faggot, I’ll call you an ambulance.”

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]*

Guy Striano: So that kinda, you know, you saw that, you went, “Oh, okay.” You know?

Adam Varoqua: Hmm.

Guy Striano: I’m not exactly a small person, so I could physically take care of myself. I let people know that, you know, so.

Adam Varoqua: I understand that.

Guy Striano: You gotta kinda, you gotta put it out there.

Adam Varoqua: Did you notice any changes in terms of police attitude through the LGBTQ community Newark over the past few years or?

Guy Striano: I don’t know. I’m not involved in that community here that much anymore, but now doing this I might be. You know I probably will be a little bit more involved, so.

Adam Varoqua: After working at that restaurant in Tribeca, coming back here working out throughout the state, what are you doing right now?

Guy Striano: Right now I Uber. I’d be hopefully getting back into the swing of things. I have, kind of a second interview with a firm next Tuesday in fact.

Adam Varoqua: How long have you been Ubering for?

Guy Striano: About two and a half, three years? I did it so I could take care of my mother. I was more, I would be able to be there if I had to be. I didn’t have to go in if I didn’t want to, you know, so it was very autonomous.

Adam Varoqua: And how has that experience been like for you?

Guy Striano: Uber is not bad actually. I met a lot of interesting people, you know. A lot of nice people, a lot of very cool—I’ve met some sports stars, some actors, actresses, you know. It’s been pretty cool. And I’m a talker, so there’s nothing—I talked to dead wood basically.

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]* Do you Uber in and around Newark or?

Guy Striano: Yeah. Oh, yeah all the time. Well, I live in Kearny, so that's sort of like the vantage point. Whether it's a train station path, NJIT, Rutgers, I come here 90 times a week, you know.

Adam Varoqua: You mentioned how Murphy's was right across the street from on Cactus Club. Was there like any, what was sort of that dynamic between Cactus Club and Murphy's?

Guy Striano: Honestly I don't think there was anything unless they wanted the borrow ice or something. We're very friendly. We weren't outwardly you know, being separatists, but there was a separatist feel, you know. You didn't go to a black bar and the black guys didn't come to the white bar.

Adam Varoqua: Was it almost segregated in a way?

Guy Striano: To a point, yeah.

Adam Varoqua: It was more of a social segregation?

Guy Striano: Mm-hmm. A social segregation, very well put.

Adam Varoqua: What was that like for you to just witness that?

Guy Striano: No, it didn't matter to me. I was making money so I really didn't care. You know it was, I didn't need the drama, you know so, leave it where it is.

Adam Varoqua: Working in Newark, interacting with members of the LGBTQ community here, have you noticed any changes over the past few years in regards to the LGBTQ community here now in Newark?

Guy Striano: Well, it's a lot more visible, a lot more visible, a lot less closeted, um, more freeing. It's not unusual to see a gay flag in a window, as it used to be. In fact, I'll never forget my friend *[laughter]*. My friend had a restaurant on Ferry Street about 15 years ago. And I worked there for him for a little while and I put a gay pride sticker on his window. He's like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "We got money too baby! We got money too, in fact we got more money than most everybody!" Brand loyal. I said, "You got a gay community, or you get a gay clientele. They'll come back and come back and come back and spend their money, but don't fuck with them, because they'll never come back again.", you know.

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]* Have you ever had that experience before?

Guy Striano: No, no, no. Well, no, no, no. No, mm-hmm.

Adam Varoqua: Establishment every restaurant you've worked in, all accepting?

Guy Striano: Oh, of course. Yeah. I was gay and I was out in every single one of them. Never had a reason not to be.

Adam Varoqua: Where is um, I know you said Cactus Club was in the Ironbound?

Guy Striano: Correct.

Adam Varoqua: What has over taken that spot?

Guy Striano: Nothing. It was a restaurant and then it closed and now it's just this ugly, orange, painted wall, like building, it's horrible. Cactus Club was very classy.

Adam Varoqua: Would you say you're still like connected to the community here in a way?

Guy Striano: Oh, yeah, of course. Oh, yeah. Well, I'm doing this aren't I? Right?

Adam Varoqua: In what ways would you say you're connected here?

Guy Striano: People know who I am. They knew where I worked. They know my history. The gal that turned me on to this was very interested in my story. She goes, "God, you've got a lot to say!" I said, "Eh, generally", you know. My connection is the past, which unfortunately, most everyone's connection at a certain age of your life. I'm 60 years old now, okay. I've been out for 45 years. I've done a shitload of stuff in 45 years. Some good, some bad, some indifferent, but I'd like to think that I made a difference in the community, by being a person of integrity, honesty, humor. I like to think that people, if they knew me, and know me now, consider me a very good and dynamic person. My fears are very little. The only fear that I have is do I have 30 more years left chronologically, you know.

Adam Varoqua: That's definitely understandable.

Guy Striano: You know what I mean? Because when you lose a parent at 92 or 93 years old, you're omnipotence comes into play, and you wonder, "How will I be at 90?" You know, 'cause even at 60, I'm

feeling some aches and pains and things, you know. Did that? Wait, wait, did you lower the toilet seat? You know, things like that. The old man groan and things, you know. Your knee starts hurting for no reason, for no reason, didn't do anything, you know. So being a gay man in the 70's, 80's, 90's, the 2000s [sighs].

Adam Varoqua: Static in a way?

Guy Striano: You know, yeah. I was in a long term relationship and we lived out in Bedminster, which is down by Far Hills, Basking Ridge.

Adam Varoqua: This was early 2000's?

Guy Striano: This was started in 1989. And it ended in 2005.

Adam Varoqua: So Bedminster, that's South Jersey?

Guy Striano: No, Western.

Adam Varoqua: Western Jersey, okay.

Guy Striano: It's by Basking Ridge. You know, Morristown?

Adam Varoqua: Yes I do.

Guy Striano: South of Morristown. About 15 minutes. They call it the Wealth Belt. Very, very, very affluent. The Forbes, Jacqueline Mars Vogel, she's the CEO of Mars Wrigley. Woody Johnson, Johnson, & Johnson family, so yeah. DeLorean, Jacqueline Onassis at one time. I used to see John Kennedy Jr. riding his bike. God was he hot! Oh, my God! He was one of those people that you'd go, "He was handsome. He was striking."

Adam Varoqua: This was between 1989, early 2000s.

Guy Striano: Correct.

Adam Varoqua: Oh, wow. And how was the LGBTQ community there?

Guy Striano: Well, there really wasn't a big presence because it was a small town. Again, I worked at a country club. I was the GM of the country club in Basking Ridge.

Adam Varoqua: What was the country club?

Guy Striano: Basking Ridge Country Club.

Adam Varoqua: Basking Ridge Country Club?

Guy Striano: [Laughter] BRCC. It's right next to the AT&T Corporate Center. Everybody knew me. Everybody knew I was out. Everybody knew who my husband was, or my boyfriend, my lover, or whatever you want to call him. That's another thing. I don't know if I can get the word husband out of my mouth and not snicker. You know what I mean?

Adam Varoqua: Mm-hmm.

Guy Striano: My mate, my partner, my this, my that, you know? Yeah, everybody knew me, never made a difference to anyone. I was included in everything. You know, I was never the, "He's a gay guy." There's never any of that, never, ever, ever.

Adam Varoqua: So it was like, you were out, everyone was accepting then.

Guy Striano: If they weren't they never said anything derogatory, so I'll leave it at that.

Adam Varoqua: And what years were you working here?

Guy Striano: 1991 to 2000.

Adam Varoqua: So this was kind of around the same time you were working also in Tribeca in the early '90s?

Guy Striano: Yes. It was right at the very end of that and then I started there.

Adam Varoqua: You were working multiple jobs?

Guy Striano: I did yes. I was—what did they call me? I'm a Jamaican. The funny thing is about Jamaicans they're like, "You only have 14 jobs?" They work, they have like multiple jobs.

Adam Varoqua: So you went to the Culinary Institute in New York?

Guy Striano: Mm-hmm. Peter Kumpf.

Adam Varoqua: Peter Kumpf.

Guy Striano: K-U-M-P-F.

Adam Varoqua: K-U-M—

Guy Striano: Kumpf!

Adam Varoqua: Yes.

Guy Striano: Kumpf. *[laughter]*.

Adam Varoqua: What was that like for you?

Guy Striano: Fun, a lot of fun. I have a passion, so I was perfecting my passion. You know, so it's, when you do something that you love, it doesn't feel like you're doing anything. It doesn't feel like it's work or a lesson, you know.

Adam Varoqua: Would you say the, because you're sort of in and around the community still, are there new places you would associate with the LGBTQ community here?

Guy Striano: In what respects?

Adam Varoqua: Any new clubs, bars—?

Guy Striano: There were no new clubs or any new bars? There's nothing. It's all gone. Feathers is still in River edge, you know, that's been there forever. Then there's, of course, you know, like I say, Asbury Park, you know. But there's nothing around here anymore. It used to be tons and tons of places.

Adam Varoqua: How many places would you say?

Guy Striano: At least a dozen or so.

Adam Varoqua: A dozen?

Guy Striano: Oh yeah, a lot of them.

Adam Varoqua: I'm guessing that they were like pretty popular?

Guy Striano: Very. We have to remember the gay community back then was very closeted into its own self, not given any specific rights. Now we can be us, completely 100 percent, which is to me, good and bad. It's a progress, but yet, I like to go with where there's other gay guys and gay women. Who know, we know our lives. We don't have to apologize. We don't have to explain to anybody, you know what I mean, things like that.

When I saw, remember the—I don't know, you've probably never saw it, but when Ellen came out on her show, Ellen DeGeneres, had a sitcom and the last year she was debating whether she was gonna come out or not. And she did. She came out to Laura Dern. *[coughs]* And that just changed everything for everybody, that changed the game. She became sort of a patron saint of gay rights. Things like that. I'm shocked you don't know this.

Adam Varoqua: In what ways did it like change the game for *[crosstalk 00:42:58]*?

Guy Striano: It had— gay people became perceived differently. We became, well we were perceived as perhaps damaged or diseased or psychologically impaired, but now it started to take a turn that, “Guess what, you know, all those people that you thought were gay? Yeah, they are!” You know, Rock Hudson? And you know who Liberace was??

Guy Striano: Mm-hmm.

Adam Varoqua: Pianist?

Guy Striano: Very good concert pianist, but he was very bedazzled. Everything he had on him was rhinestones. And he would come out like this, “Oh, you like it?”

Adam Varoqua: *[laughter]*

Guy Striano: Not anyone ever figured out that this man was gay? He was so stereotypical, it hurt, you know. He opened his mouth and Coach purses fell out. You know what I mean, so, that was a joke. He was so gay, he opened his mouth and a Coach purse fell out. Okay, I had to tell you that slowly. *[laughter]*

Adam Varoqua: Don't worry about it. *[laughter]*

Guy Striano: That's okay don't worry about it. *[laughter]*

Adam Varoqua: So a dozen palces in Newark? Like dozen clubs, dozen bars?

Guy Striano: Oh, there were places all over the place. And if they weren't specifically gay, they were down low, you know.

Adam Varoqua: What were some of the, do you know, do you remember any of the down low places?

Guy Striano: No, I really don't, they're probably, let's see. There was a bar on Broad Street called the M&R. I think, I don't know if you wanna quote me on that 'cause I might be completely wrong. But there were like I said, there were some corner bars that had a gay clientele that it wasn't unusual to go in and see several gay people hanging out at the bar, you know, so.

Adam Varoqua: Dozen clubs, dozen bars, were the people going into these clubs and bars, were they interacting with sort of like, people go into different bars and clubs on every week. If there was a certain—

Guy Striano: Was there a night for each club?

Adam Varoqua: In a way, yeah.

Guy Striano: Yeah, there was actually. Monday night you went to Feathers. Tuesday night, there was no place. You went to Casablanca down in Kennilworth. And then Wednesday night you went to Charlie's West because it was dollar night. Thursday night went to Cactus Club because it was dollar night there. Friday and Saturday was a tossup, you usually went to the city, you know. There was like a calendar of places to be in certain times. Sunday you went to maybe Twilo for tea dance. Do you know what a tea dance is?

Adam Varoqua: No, I don't.

Guy Striano: You don't know what a tea dance is? Okay. Tea dance—that's okay. You've heard of Fire Island, right?

Adam Varoqua: Oh, what is Fire Island?

Guy Striano: You've never heard of Fire Island! You need to get out though, but you're young. That's okay. You'll find out. Fire Island is a little coastal town off the southern tip of Long Island. It's part of the Robert Moses State Park. Okay, then there's two particular sections called Cherry Grove, and the Pines. Cherry Grove is more women, lesbians, family, but there are bars and clubs there as well. And then the Pines is—every good looking man you're ever gonna see your life is in a speedo. So its like, you don't know where to look. And that became the summer place for a lot of gay folks. You know, they had houses on the beach, shares, rentals, things like that.

Adam Varoqua: How often did you go there?

Guy Striano: A lot. [laughter] Quite a lot. That's up until even last summer. I was there probably every summer for about 20 years. Not the whole summer, some yes. Sometimes I did, but most of the times it was a weekend, a here and a day and a there. I'd go help my friend who was a chef. I would go help him with parties and then I met let's see, I met Cher, Bette Midler. You know who these people are right?

Adam Varoqua: Mm-hmm.

Guy Striano: Okay. I met Kelly Ripa and Mark Consuelos, things like that, you know. They filmed *The Normal Heart* in my friend Kevin's house on the beach.

Adam Varoqua: The normal heart is that a—?

Guy Striano: That was a movie.

Adam Varoqua: Movie?

Guy Striano: With, what's his name? Matt Bomer. Yeah.

Adam Varoqua: Going back to Newark, what was sort of your perspective, early on when you started working there interacting with the LGBTQ community?

Guy Striano: Be a little more specific, source perspective?

Adam Varoqua: In terms of anything you notice, in terms of how people interacted with each other.

Guy Striano: We were all different but the same. Within, that became the bond. You didn't have to know anybody. You just knew that, "Hey, you're gay, I'm gay." We have the same desires, the same thoughts, the same attraction.

I often said to people, they would ask me, "Well, do you ever sleep with a woman?" I'm like, "Did you ever sleep with a man?" You know like, "Why would you ask me that question?" I would tell them, "I feel exactly for a man as you do for a woman. Exactly, same desires, same thoughts, same perverted attitude", you know, things like that. You have to, sometimes you got to beat people over the head with the obviousness of the question you just asked, you know, so.

Adam Varoqua: Would do you say that bond has changed over the years or it has that still—?

Guy Striano: Well, don't forget too, when the AIDS epidemic happened, thousands and thousands and thousands of our colleagues died. That has changed the landscape immensely. So a lot of the people that I knew back then are not there. You know, I've been very fortunate. I was very healthy and safe, and I still am. So you know, I could probably rattle off 100 names who have passed.

Adam Varoqua: Wow. What was that like for you to live through that?

Guy Striano: That was devastating, 'cause every other week, somebody else died.

Adam Varoqua: Were these people that you knew?

Guy Striano: I knew them professionally, personally, or I dated them. It was from every other angle.

Adam Varoqua: Would you say like in and around Newark thing?

Guy Striano: Yeah, most of them. Yeah, were local folks. Yeah.

Adam Varoqua: How did you notice these—

Guy Striano: Yeah, just real quick, okay. I know this is Queer Newark, but don't forget too, the other towns and surrounding areas, needed what it was, you know what I mean, it was like a cosmos of everything. You know maybe it was centered here, maybe it was centered there, which is why I bring other places into the conversation. It didn't just happen here. It was happening all around us as well. So you didn't just go to a bar in Newark, you went to the city. You see what I mean?

Adam Varoqua: Mm-hmm.

Guy Striano: So yeah, it involved other things at other places.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. Sort of like that connectedness between different regions of—

Guy Striano: Pretty much. Yes, of course. Yes.

Adam Varoqua: With um, so none of these clubs and bars that used to be in Newark, they're not here any longer?

Guy Striano: No, they're not. No.

Adam Varoqua: And they used to be like spread around Newark?

Guy Striano: Mmm-hmm

Adam Varoqua: Were they like concentrated in a certain area 'cause I know—?

Guy Striano: Ahh, no. No. No, no.

Adam Varoqua: I know Murphy's, Cactus Club, that was in the Ironbound?

Guy Striano: That was in the Ironbound. Ferry and Fleming. Or as—

Adam Varoqua: Ferry and Fleming?

Guy Striano: Or as we called it Fairy and Fleming. Get it fairy? Well.

Adam Varoqua: *[Laughter]* And there were also places on Broad Street?

Guy Striano: Yeah, they were like regular bars, not nightclubs, but Paradisio was a nightclub.

Adam Varoqua: Okay.

Guy Striano: It was a dancing place. *[Clears throat]* Excuse me.

Adam Varoqua: I'm sorry, did you work at Paradisio?

Guy Striano: I did not.

Adam Varoqua: Okay. How did you hear about that place?

Guy Striano: That was 'cause everybody knew about it. It was common knowledge. *[Clears throat]* Excuse me. Could we wrap this up in a few minutes if you could?

Adam Varoqua: Oh, sure, sure.

Guy Striano: I appreciate that.

Adam Varoqua: Yeah, I know we talked about some of the changes in Newark happening. What are some other changes that you've noticed over the past few years?

Guy Striano: In Newark?

Adam Varoqua: Yeah.

Guy Striano: Well, I mean, the landscape has gotten remarkably different. It's starting to look like a city again, which will obviously in turn bring people in maybe from the community. You know, it would be nice to be able to have a lounge somewhere, you know, to go to. It would be nice to have a gay friendly restaurant, like the ones in the city. I would like to see, one of my favorite restaurants is Elmo in Chelsea. I would like to see something like that here. You know and I think the Halsey, Bank Street area is probably very right for something like that, you know. I think as it becomes more habitable, it might attract a financial gain by attracting somebody to open something like that up. I would love to do it, but I just don't have the backing, you know.

Adam Varoqua: You would say this is sort of like good things to happen?

Guy Striano: I think so, like Asbury Park. You know of Asbury Park, right?

Adam Varoqua: Mm-hmm.

Guy Striano: Good. Same basic thing happened, it went through riots, race riots. The town was a hole for many, many, many years and only now is it really gonna be cool to spend a weekend there, you know. Built up a beautiful boutique hotel. They have—the Paradise is down there, you know, in the Emperor's hotel, bars and restaurants and cool places to go, so yeah.

Adam Varoqua: I know earlier in our chat, you mentioned gentrification, would you say is more of a positive effect, negative effect?

Guy Striano: Oh, big time. Well, gentrification is only positive. When you gentrify something, you improve it, you know. But of course, in a city, such as Newark, in order to come back, I guess for a lack of a better phrase, you need to have everybody who wants to live there. Black, white, purple, gay, straight, orange, doesn't matter. Everybody's got to want to live here. So if you don't attract everyone, you're never gonna get off the ground again, you know, so.

Adam Varoqua: Alright and this is Adam Varoqua from the Queer Newark Oral History Project with Guy Striano, on February 29th, 2020 and signing off.

Guy Striano: Thank you.

[End of Audio]