Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Tim Sweeney, 2013
Tim Sweeney served on both the steering committee and then board of directors for Freedom to Marry from 2002 to 2013 and worked for both the Haas Jr. Fund and the Gill Foundation. Sweeney was born in 1954 in Billings, Montana, and raised in the nearby town of Laurel. Sweeney attended college at the University Montana and while at college and immediately afterwards engaged in environmental activism. He moved to San Francisco in 1977 and in 1978 was asked to join the “No on Prop 6” campaign by San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk. By the early 1980s he was living in New York City and over the next two decades took leadership roles in Lambda Legal and Education Fund, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and Empire State Pride Agenda. Between 2001 and 2007, Sweeney worked with the Haas Jr. Fund in San Francisco before moving to the Gill Foundation in Colorado. In this interview, Sweeney describes his decades working on behalf of LGBT health, law, and civil rights. He discusses the process of establishing Freedom to Marry and the roles that the organization played throughout its term. Sweeney also details the LGBT rights movement from the perspective of someone who spent a decade and a half working in key foundations that funded organizational activities.
Birth in 1954 in Billings, Montana — Childhood in Laurel and Billings — Fourth of seven children, large Irish Catholic family — Deep attachment to Montana’s natural beauty — Lawyer father, parents’ moderate politics, early awareness of anti-Catholic feeling — Progressive Catholic training — 1972 Montana passes a new, progressive constitution — Grassroots environmental activism inspired by elder brother; the North Central Power Study in 1971 — Public schooling and college at the University of Montana in Missoula — Family’s experience of the Vietnam War: eldest brother fought in Vietnam, second was a conscientious objector — Involvement in the church, interest in joining the priesthood — Identifying as a feminist in college, work to establish a women’s studies program — Identifying as gay, religious dissonance, breaking with the church in college — Early awareness of being gay, dearth of information about homosexuality — Studying European History — College graduation in 1976, environmental organizing with the Flathead Coalition — Success in Fernie, British Columbia: “So that was my first big organizing experience and I just loved it.” — Single issue activism vs. movement-based activism — Work on the 1976 election in Montana — Longing to leave Montana to be out and have a gay community — Older brother Mark moves to New York City with his boyfriend — Choosing San Francisco in a coin flip, 1977 move — First jobs, Starting Organizer’s Clearing House, later Community Jobs — Establishing a life in San Francisco, discovering neighborhoods, social venues, activism — Awareness of Anita Bryant and anti-gay laws — Offer from Harvey Milk and Harry Britt to be treasurer of the No on 6 campaign — Exhilarating campaign success, state audit of finances

1978 murder of Harvey Milk and George Moscone while Sweeney was in Washington, D.C. — Dan White’s trial and community devastation culminating in the White Night riots — 1979 move to Cambridge for partner to attend Harvard Business School — Work at Massachusetts Fair Share, gay activism, meeting Richard Burus, work with Gay Community News — Move to New York, becoming executive director at Lambda Legal — Five years expanding Lambda Legal — Early work on legal protections for gay relationships and families — HIV changed the discourse about lifelong committed partnerships — Personal experience of HIV/AIDS devastation during the 1980s and early 1990s — Work with Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) — Coping with constant tragedy — HIV forced a national conversation about sex, Surgeon General Koop’s 1988 brochure
— The Helms Amendment and political abandonment in the middle of the HIV/AIDS crisis — Meeting Evan Wolfson while fundraising for Lambda — Losing the Bowers (1986) case, incremental progress in the legal world as more judges and lawyers came out — Early domestic partnership ordinances — Evolution of personal support for marriage as a goal for the gay community — The switch from fighting sodomy laws and government intrusion to fighting for government recognition of relationships and securing benefits — Leaving GMHC in 1993 — Death of brother Mark from AIDS — Family rallies around ailing brother — Mark’s work in theater and the arts

Interview 2: March 10, 2016

Hour 1

1993 beginning as deputy director at Empire State Pride Agenda in Albany, NY — The New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network — Working with a Republican governor and senate — Passing a hate crimes law, a first for affirmative legislation — Learning about the health needs of the gay community — Introducing cultural competency — Developing and vetting systems and standards — Balancing appealing to legislators on a universal level with making a convincing case for the special requirements of the LGBT community — Resistance to defining and quantifying the LGBT community — Applying lessons from HIV work to coalition-building at Pride Agenda — Working with co-chair Carmen Vasquez — Learning to evaluate and prioritize programs, accountability — Supporting research from outside sources and conducting research in-house — The value of qualitative personal stories to illustrate statistics — Focus on incremental relationships recognitions: domestic partnership, civil unions — Confronting Eliot Spitzer about marriage — Staying present in the fight during DOMA, Hawaii, and Vermont defeats — 1999 lunch with Evan Wolfson to discuss freedom to marry as a campaign — The juggling act of movement-oriented work — Coming around to the idea of marriage — Marriage transformed the way straight people viewed the gay community: “I think for the first time they found it hard to say, ‘You’re the other.’” — 2001 meeting the staff of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund diversity and inclusiveness program — Some distinctions between the (c)(3) and (c)(4) work of the Haas Fund

Hour 2

2001 beginning as program officer at the Haas, Jr. Fund — Working with seasoned philanthropists and building the marriage campaign plan — Arriving at the $2.5 million over five years plan — Starting Civil Marriage Collaborative to partner with Freedom to Marry doing state-level work — Incremental goals and the 10-10-10-20 plan — Freedom to Marry’s origin as a fiscally sponsored project of the Astraea Foundation — Working with the advisory board chaired by Barb Cox — Early lessons learned: some states were more ready for marriage than others — Trial and error in framing the marriage argument — Overcoming internal limitations: “I think it took a lot for people to say, ‘I want to get married
because I’m in love with this man. I don’t think it has to be more than that.”” — The drive to make marriage an option for all, even those who wouldn’t choose it

Interview 3: April 28, 2016

Hour 1

More on work at Haas, Jr. Fund — The Fund’s collaborative approach to vetting and choosing partner organizations — Looking for markers of change: newspaper marriage announcements — Freedom to Marry as the “ultimate grassroots juggernaut” — After 2004 the movement gains momentum and the LGBT community begins to claim marriage for themselves — Looking to other social movements for models — Inspiration from HIV/AIDS activism and organizing — Evan Wolfson took lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: “It was this hugely heart-driven audacious dream.” — The LGBT community’s expanding sense of human rights, defining itself authentically — Polls about perception about shared values — The devastation of Prop 8 in California and realization that different messaging was needed — The Goodridge decision in 2003 and victory in Massachusetts — February 2004 San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom begins issuing marriage licenses — The Haas, Jr. Fund was unafraid of being out in front of the marriage issue, others in the movement were more cautious — More on the patience and long-term vision of the Haas, Jr. Fund — Levi Strauss Company’s 1982 HIV/AIDS corporate policy was the first in the nation — Developing the Let California Ring campaign — Psychological research, aiming the messaging at the emotional heart of marriage — Meeting the non-gay community where they were — The garden wedding ad’s success in Santa Barbara County, realization of the large scale funding needed for success

Hour 2

Figuring out the research needed to get the messaging right, hiring specialists — 2007 move to the Gill Foundation — Gill Foundation’s aligned philanthropy and political giving

Interview 4: May 2, 2016

Hour 1

Election night 2008: Prop 8 devastation and elation over Obama’s win — Return to Colorado — Disbelief and outrage over Prop 8 from LGBT and non-LGBT community — The Olson-Boies effort by the American Foundation for Equal Rights — Choosing and vetting legal organizations for Gill to fund — Bi-partisan work — Fundraising collaboration and strategy to support legal groups during the final years of the marriage fight — Working at the 30,000 foot level providing funding and space for people on the ground to do their work — Match-making partner organizations: the Collaborative, Movement Advancement Project, the Task Force, Williams Institute — Organizing meetings, connecting to other
movement conferences — Deciding which state level organizations for Gill to fund — Lessons learned, keeping funders engaged during a long campaign — Freedom to Marry’s instructional legacy — Following the oral arguments of the Supreme Court case — Realizing that the tide had shifted — Optimism in spite of religious freedom bill and backlash: “…this decision has been accepted by the vast majority of Americans without any questions.” — The marriage movement’s spillover and inspiration for other movements — Learning that the Obergefell decision had come down
Freedom to Marry Oral History Project

In the historically swift span of roughly twenty years, support for the freedom to marry for same-sex couples went from an idea a small portion of Americans agreed with to a cause supported by virtually all segments of the population. In 1996, when Gallup conducted its first poll on the question, a seemingly insurmountable 68% of Americans opposed the freedom to marry. In a historic reversal, fewer than twenty years later several polls found that over 60% of Americans had come to support the freedom to marry nationwide. The rapid increase in support mirrored the progress in securing the right to marry coast to coast. Before 2004, no state issued marriage licenses to same-sex couples. By spring 2015, thirty-seven states affirmed the freedom to marry for same-sex couples. The discriminatory federal Defense of Marriage Act, passed in 1996, denied legally married same-sex couples the federal protections and responsibilities afforded married different-sex couples—a double-standard cured when a core portion of the act was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013. Full victory came in June 2015 when, in Obergefell v. Hodges, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution’s guarantee of the fundamental right to marry applies equally to same-sex couples.

At the very center of the effort to change hearts and minds, prevail in the courts and legislatures, win at the ballot, and triumph at the Supreme Court was Freedom to Marry, the “sustained and affirmative” national campaign launched by Evan Wolfson in 2003. Freedom to Marry’s national strategy focused from the beginning on setting the stage for a nationwide victory at the Supreme Court. Working with national and state organizations and allied individuals and organizations, Freedom to Marry succeeded in building a critical mass of states where same-sex couples could marry and a critical mass of public support in favor of the freedom to marry.

This oral history project focuses on the pivotal role played by Freedom to Marry and their closest state and national organizational partners, as they drove the winning strategy and inspired, grew, and leveraged the work of a multitudinous movement.

The Oral History Center (OHC) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California Berkeley first engaged in conversations with Freedom to Marry in early 2015, anticipating the possible victory in the Supreme Court by June. Conversations with Freedom to Marry, represented by founder and president Evan Wolfson and chief operating officer Scott Davenport, resulted in a proposal by OHC to conduct a major oral history project documenting the work performed by, and the institutional history of, Freedom to Marry. From the beginning, all parties agreed the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project should document the specific history of Freedom to Marry placed within the larger, decades-long marriage movement. Some interviews delve back as far as the 1970s, when a few gay activists first went to court seeking the freedom to marry, and the 1980s, when Evan Wolfson wrote a path-breaking thesis on the freedom to marry, and “domestic partner” legislation first was introduced in a handful of American cities. Many interviews trace the beginnings of the modern freedom to marry movement to the 1990s. In 1993, the Supreme Court of Hawaii responded seriously to an ad hoc marriage lawsuit for the first time ever and suggested the potential validity of the lawsuit, arguing that the denial of marriage to same-sex couples might be sex discrimination. The world’s first-ever trial on the freedom to marry followed in 1996, with Wolfson as co-counsel, and culminated in the first-ever victory affirming same-sex couples’ freedom to marry. While Wolfson rallied the movement to work for
the freedom to marry, anti-gay forces in Washington, D.C. successfully enacted the so-called Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. The vast majority of the interviews, however, focus on the post-2003 era and the work specific to Freedom to Marry. Moreover, OHC and Freedom to Marry agreed that the essential work undertaken by individual and institutional partners of Freedom to Marry (such as the ACLU, GLAD, Lambda Legal, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Haas, Jr. Fund, and the Gill Foundation) should also be covered in the project. Once the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Obergefell in June 2015, the proposal was accepted and work began on the project.

After an initial period of further planning and discussions regarding who should be interviewed and for roughly how long, an initial list of interviewees was drafted and agreed upon. By December 2016, 23 interviews had been completed, totaling roughly 95 hours of recordings. Interviews lasted from two hours up to fourteen hours each. All interviews were recorded on video (except for one, which was audio-only) and all were transcribed in their entirety. Draft transcripts were reviewed first by OHC staff and then given to the interviewees for their review and approval. Most interviewees made only minimal edits to their transcripts and just a few seals or deletions of sensitive information were requested. Interviewee-approved transcripts were then reviewed by former Freedom to Marry staff to ensure that no sensitive information (about personnel matters or anonymous donors, for example) was revealed inadvertently. OHC next prepared final transcripts. Approved interview transcripts along with audio/video files have been cataloged and placed on deposit with The Bancroft Library. In addition, raw audio-files and completed transcripts have been placed on deposit with the Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives, the official repository for the Freedom to Marry organizational records.

The collected interviews tell a remarkable story of social change, the rate of which was rapid (although spanning more than four decades), and the reach profound. Historians of social justice and social movements, politics and policy, and law and jurisprudence will surely pore over the freedom to marry movement and Freedom to Marry’s role in that for explanations of how and why this change occurred, and how it could happen so rapidly and completely. Future generations will ask: What explains such a profound transformation of public opinion and law, particularly in an era where opinions seem more calcified than malleable? What strategies and mechanisms, people and organizations played the most important roles in changing the minds of so many people so profoundly in the span of less than a generation? Having witnessed and participated in this change, we—our generation—had an obligation to record the thoughts, ideas, debates, actions, strategies, setbacks, and successes of this movement in the most complete, thoughtful, and serious manner possible. Alongside the archived written documents and the media of the freedom to marry movement, this oral history project preserves those personal accounts so that future generations might gain insight into the true nature of change.

Martin Meeker
Charles B. Faulhaber Director
Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

December 2016
Freedom to Marry Oral History Project Interviews

Richard Carlbom, “Richard Carlbom on the Minnesota Campaign and Field Organizing at Freedom to Marry.”

Barbara Cox, “Barbara Cox on Marriage Law and the Governance of Freedom to Marry.”


Scott Davenport, “Scott Davenport on Administration and Operations at Freedom to Marry.”

Tyler Deaton, “Tyler Deaton on the New Hampshire Campaign and Securing Republican Support for the Freedom to Marry.”

Jo Deutsch, “Jo Deutsch and the Federal Campaign.”


James Esseks, “James Esseks on the Legal Strategy, the ACLU, and LGBT Legal Organizations.”

Kate Kendell, “Kate Kendell on the Legal Strategy, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and LGBT Legal Organizations.”

Harry Knox, “Harry Knox on the Early Years of Freedom to Marry.”


Matt McTighe, “Matt McTighe on the Marriage Campaigns in Massachusetts and Maine.”

Amy Mello, “Amy Mello and Field Organizing in Freedom to Marry.”

John Newsome, “John Newsome on And Marriage for All.”

Kevin Nix, “Kevin Nix on Media and Public Relations in the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Bill Smith, “Bill Smith on Political Operations in the Fight to Win the Freedom to Marry.”

Marc Solomon, “Marc Solomon on Politics and Political Organizing in the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Anne Stanback, “Anne Stanback on the Connecticut Campaign and Freedom to Marry’s Board of Directors.”

Cameron Tolle, “Cameron Tolle on the Digital Campaign at Freedom to Marry.”

Thomas Wheatley, “Thomas Wheatley on Field Organizing with Freedom to Marry.”

Evan Wolfson, “Evan Wolfson on the Leadership of the Freedom to Marry Movement.”

Thalia Zepatos, “Thalia Zepatos on Research and Messaging in Freedom to Marry.”
Interview 1: February 12, 2016

01-00:00:02
Meeker: Today is Friday, the 12th of February 2016. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Tim Sweeney at his home in San Francisco for the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project. Thank you for joining us today.

01-00:00:29
Sweeney: Thank you for asking.

01-00:00:30
Meeker: Of course. And the first question I ask in all interviews is: when and where you were born?

01-00:00:37
Sweeney: May 6, 1954 in Billings, Montana.

01-00:00:41
Meeker: And tell me a little bit about the world into which you were born.

01-00:00:44
Sweeney: Well, I was born and raised in a very small town named Laurel, which is outside the big city in Montana, which was Billings. In those days the big city, like Billings, had 65,000 people, so you can imagine how small Laurel was. Very, very small. I lived there for the first ten years of my life. It was a very typical, it was sort of a railroad, oil refinery, farming, and ranching community. My dad was an attorney in private practice. My mom was a former social worker and teacher who became a full-time parent and had seven kids. So I was number four of seven in a large Irish Catholic family. We were very close to our parish and our church. We spent a lot of time up in the mountains in the summer. We had a cabin that we rented up there so it was a very outdoor experience. And everybody knew everybody. It’s a very, very small town in the fifties and sixties.

We moved into the larger city of Billings, about fifteen miles away, when I was ten. That was a little more sophisticated. It had a bigger extreme of sort of wealth and business and just banks and like a downtown downtown, as much as existed in Montana. I didn’t really travel anywhere. We had too many kids to be schlepping around. So we were very Montana-centric and I just loved living there. I loved living in that beautiful country. If you’ve ever been there it’s very open and empty and gorgeous. I love to hike, I love to be outdoors. So all that very, very much spoke to me.

01-00:02:27
Meeker: The big sky.

01-00:02:29
Sweeney: The big sky country. You got it.
Meeker: You said your father was an attorney. What kind of law did he practice?

Sweeney: Just wills and estates and then did some banking and then worked for some ranchers on leasing. So it was a variety of things. It was, I think, a three or four person firm. Not large.

Meeker: Did you get any sense about politics at that point in time? In your upbringing, was there sort of a scale of sort of liberal to conservative that you would have—

Sweeney: Oh, it would have been probably just, in any sense of the word, a moderate Republican or Democrat sort of sense of it. I am a product of the generation that was aware of John Kennedy being a Catholic. He actually came to Billings during the campaign, touched down at the airport. It was a very big deal. My whole family went, we stood. We could barely see him but it was like a very moving and big event. And partly that reflects the history of anti-Catholicism which existed in that part of Montana, which came through the Ku Klux Klan partially resisting any of the folk—both my families worked on the railroad. That’s how they got to Montana. And as you may recall, the railroad also brought in African American staff. So it was a way of resisting immigrants and African Americans and so there was a definite hierarchy in my father’s day of sort of the Masonic order and the Protestants sort of running the town and the city and Catholics being questionable. And there are various incidents of anti-Catholicism stuff in my family’s history, which was just, I think, something that I was made aware of over time, particularly by my father. But on top of that, we were raised in a theology that was a little bit more of the theology of liberation, in post-Vatican II Catholicism. I definitely remember, probably in seventh and eighth grades, in my catechism classes even, us talking about the farm workers and Cesar Chavez and the need for us to sort of pay attention to people that have less. And that was partly because in the region of Montana where I’m from there was a large Mexican farm worker community that worked on sugar beets mostly. It was a whole set of colonias that were started back in the teens and twenties. So just that sense of being aware of those issues, including Martin Luther King, the civil rights. So I think that all is very much a part of my soul at some point.

And then that sort of morphed in the late sixties and early seventies for me personally. I definitely worked on the Equal Rights Amendment campaign. Montana had voted on a new constitution back when I was in high school. It was a very, very big deal because it was a progressive constitution and it passed by a couple thousand votes. And for a history government nerd like me, I was all about it. One of our neighbors actually was on the constitutional convention writing committee. He was a local teacher. I really admired him. The entire group of people that wrote the constitution were just average
Montanans. It was not stacked with industry, like powerful people. It was actually sort of normal everyday people, which is what made it kind of inspired.

The other piece to it was all the environmental Earth Day work that was going on. Montana in particular was targeted during the Nixon administration with something called the “North Central Power Study” [1971] I think was the official name of it. It was essentially recognizing that we were getting too dependent on oil and so the option was coal. And so go to the northern plains, strip mine all the coal, build the power plants. They’ve got the water. And then ship the electricity out to whoever needed it without nary a thought to what it does to the local people, the environment, whether that’s a smart thing in the long run, all of that. And that struck me as just outrageous. And so my older brother became very involved in the first sort of grassroots organizations to fight all that, founded them and built them over the region and throughout the west over the last thirty or forty years. And that’s where I did my first organizing, was basically challenging the energy companies and the coal companies around their policies to just come in and buy out land and push people off and then strip mine the coal. And believe me, they weren’t too concerned about reclamation or anything. And certainly weren’t concerned about building giant power plants and using all the water and then shipping all the electricity to God knows where. And it was very much a grassroots organizing strategy, very farmer, rancher coming in, very non-ideological because the local people were Republicans and Democrats, the way things used to be a little more partisan in the country but in like a Franklin Delano Roosevelt wheat farmer Democrat, because of the New Deal versus a Republican stockman rancher because they didn’t want government telling them what to do on grazing and on land or whatever. So you had this mix of people, all of whom shared this ethos about respecting the land, land stewardship, good use of water. Farming and ranching is a good living for the country, good for the economy. And then in come these companies that kind of, needless to say, basically tried to buy their way through everything. So it was a very important time for me personally because I just saw the power in ordinary people taking on huge multinational interests and trying to have a say in policy and the fate of the world.

Meeker: So now you went to University of Montana in Billings, correct?

Sweeney: No, in Missoula.

Meeker: Oh, in Missoula, that’s right. The University of Montana. But your education before that, elementary school and high school, did you go to public schools?

Sweeney: Yeah, all public schools.
Meeker: All public schools. There were no parochial schools there?

Sweeney: There were. There was one Catholic high school, which, interestingly enough, my parents both went to Catholic schools. My dad partly through some of his life, my mom through almost all of her life actually. But we just never really talked about it but I don’t really think they necessarily wanted us to go to Catholic school, and it might have been the cost, because putting seven kids through Catholic school wouldn’t have been cheap. On the other hand, I think there was also a little bit of maybe you don’t need that, whatever comes with that. We were very involved in the church and all that stuff, so maybe we got enough. But yes, I’m a total public school guy.

Meeker: Can you tell me about your siblings. You said you were four of seven. What’s the age range?

Sweeney: There’s about an eighteen-year spread from my oldest brother to my youngest brother. We had five boys and two girls. I’m the fourth. So we had four boys, then two girls, and then another boy. So I’m right in the middle.

Meeker: You had said your oldest brother had done some environmental work and that was your first foray into social justice kind of work.

Sweeney: My oldest brother actually was a veteran of the Vietnam War. He was there. And that was a very important experience for my family. He used to send us these tapes back from Vietnam that we would listen to with his wife. They were very, very moving, very troubling, very scary. So thank God he came back. So that was a big deal. But my next oldest brother actually was a conscientious objector. He did not want to go to the war. He was very much involved in the anti-war movement. I was probably the last class that actually got draft cards. Like I got a draft card. And in those days, it’s very hard for people to remember this, it was very frightening. People were dying in Vietnam and we didn’t quite understand why and what for and what a waste it was. And you would get this number and you had to be like, “What is your number?” I guess just hard for people to imagine what that used to be like. You got it, unless you had a deferment or something, or you sort of challenged it like my older brother did, to say like, “I’m not sure I want to do this.” So there would be that tension. But I raise that because, for me, watching that tension in my family, it was very, very interesting. Because we’re all close. Watching my parents juggle having that in a family and supporting kids no matter sort of where they ended up I think was an important lesson for me probably later on in my life about the capacity for my parents to have a bigger heart about where people’s lives take them, and even though you don’t understand it, you got to sort of stay close to them and stay with them. And
the Vietnam War protests and stuff, in those days the things you do is wear a black armband to school. Some schools wouldn’t let you do it. It was like a real political statement. And it sounds maybe a little silly or something now. It wasn’t. Doing that was an action. We were at the end of high school. We were young kids but we really wanted to say like we think the war has got to end. Of course, very opposed to Richard Nixon and all that stuff. But it was a very politicized era for a young kid going from high school into college. So if you sort of layer on the earlier civil rights, the Vietnam War, and then the environmental stuff, it was a rich stew of like being engaged broadly, not just what later became the central focus of my life, around LGBT, but sort of progressive values generally.

Meeker: Did you have any interest in joining the clergy or entering the ministry?

Sweeney: Oh, I certainly did. Yeah. In fact, I think I still have it. In first grade I wrote on an essay or something when they ask this question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I wrote, “I want to be a priest.” I was very attached to the Catholic Church. We had a lot of priests and nuns in our life. They lived like half-a-block away from us. They were always over for dinner. Our priest, Father Maher played poker in my dad’s poker club. And he was just wonderful—in a small town like that. And, of course, I was an altar boy until I was, whatever, tenth grade, I guess. You just know these people. You do the spaghetti dinners, you do the rummage sales. My family was extremely involved and all my brothers were altar boys. It’s just what you do.

And we had a lot of clergy that would come from Ireland to America. They were exporting clergy in those days to sort of fill the clergy gap we didn’t have here. And so we would have these young Irish nuns and priests that would come in and we would host them and talk with them. Of course, that was enchanting to me because they came from a different world. And then we had them stay with us at our cabin up in the mountains, which, of course, for them was like paradise because it’s way up. It’s a really, really beautiful place up in the Beartooth Mountains. They call it Little Switzerland. It’s very, very beautiful. Great hiking and fishing and stuff. So they would all sort of be in the ultimate big sky country. So it was a nice way to be around that world. And so I didn’t think of it as separate or odd. It was very much a part of—as an option. I think you probably know this, for very large Irish Catholic families it’s very typical to say like there’ll be a priest and a nun somewhere in this.

Meeker: Yes. My uncle said I was going to be the priest. I said, “Really?” [laughter]

Sweeney: That changed, right?
Meeker: Yeah. Was there a point at which you started to experience some dissonance between what you thought was good and right and then maybe what the broader church was saying about things?

Sweeney: Yeah, not until later. Two things started to dawn on me. I always said when I was being interviewed by my faculty committee before I graduated from the University of Montana, they were like, “What was the most important class you took?” and I said, “Oh, history of women.” Now, these were, of course, all men, all white, all straight. But anyhoo. And mostly they were surprised I didn’t say some environmental thing or something more of what I was known to be doing already. And I said, “That completely rocked my world.” And they were like, “Why?” And I said, “Well, for the first time I was like who writes history?” And so as a gay person, which I was just then coming to terms with my sexuality, I was completely like no wonder there’s no gay history. It was like, “Who controls?” It was just one of those wakeup smack ‘guess what?’ kind of things. And we had been involved at the university in establishing a women’s studies program and it was a very contentious battle to do it. We had to push the faculty senate to vote for it. We were rallying around one particular professor, Maxine van de Wetering, who I just thought was like a goddess. I just thought she was so brilliant and sort of rocked my world so much. She wasn’t the only one but one of them. It was part of the times. It was like this feminist—I called myself a feminist.

And that’s where the dissonance with the church started. And I did find many of the nuns to be some of the more inspired, grounded people from the church that I worked with and watched them. And also some of the orders that were not associated with the church but sort of doing in community stuff or refugee stuff or what have you. And that sort of resonated for me versus the hierarchy that seemed to me to be like—and, of course, once you figured out like how come men get to decide everything about lives. What do they know? It’s the whole patriarchy thing. So that started to get deconstructed. And I really realized part of that was about my sexual orientation and my resentment about their attitudes towards sex and their denial about it and their homophobia. By the end of college I’d completely detached from the church. It was just like this isn’t going to work because the door was closed on any sort of gender or sexuality discussion and I found that very, very frustrating. And it included things that are like the lack of any discussion of contraception. It was like, “Look, we’re sexual now.” All the kids around me, everybody was starting to have sex and you’re like, “And your answer to that is what?” And it’s just, “Can’t talk about it.”

Meeker: Can you tell me about the process of coming to an understanding of your own sexual identity?
I knew I was attracted to men since, about, I was six years old. I can name the guy that still rocks my world in my head. Bobby Olson. Just this wonderful man with Vitalis in his dark black hair and he wore beautiful suntan pants and cool penny loafer shoes. He was a very handsome guy. And I knew his sister. She was my friend in my class. But I would go to see her to see him. And it was like what is this about? And it just sort of stayed up in my head. Just like, “Hmm.” So basically then through my junior high and high school phase, I just had all kinds of boy crushes on all kinds of young men who were either gay or straight, mostly straight, and it would be these agonizing falling in love with guys that, either when I would say something to them real about like what this means, that we’re queer, it would be like that ended that. Or one guy smacked me right in the face when I said it. And I was like, “I guess that’s not happening.” And I didn’t know any gay people. I didn’t know there were any gay people in Montana. I just thought the only way gay people existed were in cities like San Francisco or New York, were the only two that I knew of, to be honest with you. Seventy-two to ‘76 in Montana, there started to be a little bit, mostly around the edges of the feminist movement, more women coming out as lesbian, and then occasionally a gay man coming out. Would be like, “Oh, wow, what’s that?” Mostly in the university town of Missoula where I was, where you’d see just a little edge of it.

Do you recall how you first gained access to knowledge about homosexuality?
There was a word and there was—

In those days, people also listened to radio more. So you’d turn on the radio and listen to it and maybe you’d get some station out of Santa Barbara or something, where all of a sudden they would make some joke about queers and you’d be like, “Oh. What was that?” kind of thing. But other than that absolutely nothing. I did access at the end of my college years sort of Our Bodies Ourselves, other sort of feminist tracts that I related to in terms of just there’s another way.

I was thinking the other day about this interview. Do you remember—oh, damn, what is the name of that book? Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex, I think it was called, by—Masters and Johnson. They were like famous. I think that might be the name of it. Anyway, my parents had that book and when I found out they had that book my jaw just dropped because we did not
talk about sex in my house. And I looked through it. Oh, if you ever look back on what they said about homosexuality, it is pathetic. Not condemnation but, boy, not so great either. So I was a little bit like, oh, well, at least it’s in this book, which I knew was a bestseller, although I knew it was controversial. So you would get these little glimpses of like, “Well, there’s got to be more out there somewhere.” But I just didn’t know how to access it. So I just basically stayed in the closet. I was experimenting sexually, mostly anonymously or with another young man my age and then we just wouldn’t know what to do with it. We’d have sex and then be like, “What is this supposed to be?” We didn’t have a name for it. We didn’t know how to process it. So we would just drift away from each other or pretend it didn’t happen. For me it was a very lonely place to be and sort of dead end.

01-00:25:05
Meeker: You studied European history, correct, at the University of Montana?

01-00:25:09
Sweeney: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:25:11
Meeker: What was your entree into that? Did you hope to pursue that in some fashion, say, in graduate school?

01-00:25:18
Sweeney: I think it was a bit of a default. I’ve always loved history. I like politics. I love reading. And there were some fantastic professors, particularly professors that did some ancient Greek and ancient Roman stuff and then medieval. And they were just like wonderful erudite men that I just thought were so—to me it was like another world that’s out there that I could access. I do think that the presence of overt homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome and other cultures, I was desperately looking for that. Like, okay, I know I’m here. I know there’s got to be other people. Like sort of what happened? Well, in other cultures it was like celebrated and acknowledged and where did it all go? So I think that also increased my interest in it.

01-00:26:12
Meeker: Did you get any answers in your studies?

01-00:26:14
Sweeney: A little bit. Part of it was I had a strong sense of myself. I had confidence in myself. So you’d read these condemnations of gay people and homosexuality and it’d be like what are they talking about? That’s where I think some of this sort of feminist women’s history stuff, it’s like they’re not asking us. None of us are writing it. It’s them talking about us. They don’t know what they’re talking about. So I was always like no, look at this. You’re like denying all this historical record here like it didn’t exist and it does exist. That kind of irrational stuff which, of course, I’m still dealing with in the world. It’s never going to go away. It was very frustrating to me. But it made me kind of want to dig in deeper and sort of shed light on what I just thought as kind of an
ignorant discussion. And I think the early victories we had on women’s history and stuff really gave me confidence we could do it and that there would be like consciousness raising across the country. People just like saying, “Oh, let me think anew about all of this.” And so I think that gave me hope.

01-00:27:37
Meeker: You graduated college in ’75, ’76?

01-00:27:43
Sweeney: Seventy-six. Yeah. And my last couple of years I basically did organizing on environmental issues up in northwestern Montana. Started something called the Flathead Coalition, which was fighting a strip mine proposal for a tributary, the Flathead River, up around Glacier National Park, and it was interesting because it was actually based in Canada but would have affected the US. So my first public hearing I helped organize was in Fernie, British Columbia. We had 500 people show up, believe it or not, on like the middle of the weeknight and we just rocked the place. People were like, “What’s up with this?” And it was a combination of sort of people wanting to protect Glacier National Park and the Flathead River and then farmers and then ranchers, then Native Americans. It was really cool. I had been somewhat trained by my older brother and then other organizers that he hooked me up with in Missoula. And like any organizer you basically just try to help people find their voice on something and then sort of point them towards the target of power that you need to sort of say like, “Engage me, talk to me.” But the fact that all those people showed up. It was packed and everybody was kind of shocked. I hadn’t done a lot of public hearing stuff before. I’d done a little bit but not like this. And these people were like mad and like really demanding and, of course, I’m a nice middle child. I was thinking, “This is getting a little bit out of control.” But the organizers that were teaching me were like, “This is great.” Well, he said, “No, this is what needs to happen to move the political system.” And I was like, “My God, okay.” I kind of knew that but I didn’t really know it and dah-dah-da.

And then the next day I remember I drove home, a long ride home that night to Missoula. They came and woke me up the next morning and they came and they threw the local paper down and like the headline was like, “Hearing Packed. Raucous hearing on dah-dah-dah.” And I went, “Oh, God, shit.” And I was more like, “Uh-oh.” And they were like, “No, this is exactly what you want to have happen.” And I was like, “Really?” And they’re like, “We’re going to take you out for breakfast. You don’t get it.” I didn’t understand power and organizing and dynamics and press. I don’t know. I guess I thought we were going to somehow approach these multinational companies and somehow talk them into being environmentalists. That’s so not going to happen. So that was my first big organizing experience and I just loved it. It was what I’ve done ever since essentially, because it was just connecting people and doing an analysis and raising up voices and then doing a vision and sort of pointing in a direction. I’m happy to say about thirty-plus years
later they finally killed that proposal for good. And the lesson there is that’s how long this stuff takes. I always used to think we’re going to do this and we’re going to win this election and we’re going to pass this piece of—like it was all going to be quick. And I learned early on that’s why you have social movements, because you need to build for generations. The battles, sometimes you win but a lot of times you lose and you just need to kind of reengage. So it was good to know that.

Meeker: It’s also interesting the way in which you were talking about this particular effort. Embedded within it is a whole tension of the way in which you bring about social change, and that is if you’re working on a single issue it’s a lot easier to bring a whole diversity of people around. So you’ve got the environmentalists and you’ve got the people who are the national park preservationists.

Sweeney: Yeah, or farmers who don’t want their water stolen.

Meeker: And so that’s one way of doing it, your kind of single issue, “We’ve got to stop this one thing.” But if you said, “We need to start an environmental movement,” you’re going to lose at least half of those people, definitely the farmers and the ranchers.

Sweeney: Potentially.

Meeker: They’re might say, “I don’t want to be part of an environmental movement.” So there’s this tension between sort of movement change and sort of single issue change.

Sweeney: Well, or you dig down and realize that the core of many things is really getting clear on values and that framing really matters. The people I dealt with would not call themselves environmentalists. They would call themselves conservationists. And conservationist is a different thing for many people. It’s literally like, to use an example, is if you’re maybe perhaps a conservative Christian you actually believe in this notion of sort of stewardship and that God has sort of appointed you to own a piece of land and your job actually is to care for it and then pass it on. So there are elements of that versus other ways you talk about it. So I learned a lot in those days about everything from the economics, how you do economic analysis to get some people there. In other words you go the tourism bureau and you say, “Do you really want them to do this strip mine, to pollute this river? Your entire economy locally here is based on people wanting to see this gorgeous land. Are you just going to sit by and let this happen?” Native American cultures. Everyone had a take on why this proposal was not a good proposal. So you had to just manage all that in a
coalition. But you’re right. The way you came around it in the end was do you want to stop the permit that they want to give to Rio Tinto Zinc or whoever it was to do this strip mine? And you can say yes or no to that and it doesn’t imply you believe in everything else that’s around earth day or something. And it doesn’t imply anything about Native American rights and it doesn’t imply anything about like how that farmer uses his land next to the river or whatever, how they manage a national park. But it does teach you really smart tactical lessons, too, about how you basically mess with power.

Meeker: When did you move to San Francisco?

Sweeney: So one other little interregnum before I moved was I graduated from college, didn’t really know what I was going to do. It was ’76, there’s an election, and my older brother said, “Why don’t you come to work? We’re going to start a essentially a PAC, the first PAC in Montana, progressive PAC, and it’s going to be the League of Conservation Voters, but we’re also going to sort of do it in concert with AFL-CIO, the Farmer’s Union N.O.W., and other progressive forces.” Mind you this is Montana. There was probably, at the outside, 700,000 people in the state in those days. So progressive organizers knew each other. It wasn’t that big of a community. So I went to work for that campaign those four months up until the election. We did, I think, about twenty-three or twenty-seven house and senate races and it was retail politics, driving around ranch to ranch, farmer to farmer, small town to town.

Meeker: When you say house and senate you’re talking about Montana State House?

Sweeney: Montana state house and senate. And in those races that’s 3,000 votes or whatever. It isn’t big—and it was relatively unsophisticated. I remember talking to candidates and things, like, “Let’s do a brochure?” and they’d be like, “Really? A brochure?” You were upping the game of what used to be a pretty elemental type of democracy. It was really fun. It was really interesting. You can imagine the cast of characters we dealt with, everybody from a beekeeper to you name it. It was great. We won actually a majority of those races that night. But we also were doing Jimmy Carter which, of course, needless to say went down. He didn’t do so well in Montana.

Meeker: Well, this is also the first major election post-Watergate.

Sweeney: Post-Watergate. You got it. It was a really interesting and fun thing. So I finished that. And like happens for many campaign people—and I had taken the LSATs because I thought I was going to go to law school. Kind of like I guess that’s what one does next. Well, I did pick up my LSAT scores but I said, “Well, I’m not going to apply to law school because I’m too busy doing
this campaign.” Of course, as anybody would have told me, “What are you going to do after the campaign is over?” and I was like, “I don’t know. I assume I’ll get a job from one of these groups or something.” Well, that didn’t happen. Just laughing because a very funny period of my life. I became a waiter. Well, actually, the salad boy and then a waiter in Billings, mainly because I just literally needed money in my pocket. The great thing about waiting tables is you get those cash tips and you’ve always got twenty-two dollars in your right pocket. But I decided to save it up and I just thought, “You want to know what? I’m done with being in Montana, not being openly gay, not knowing any gay people.” And, actually, what I wanted to do was apply my organizing skills to gay work. Like I just knew I could do it but I just didn’t know where and it certainly wasn’t going to be in Montana. And I got zero encouragement from any of my progressive friends about like, “So could I be kind of an openly gay?” and the answer was like, “Well, you could…” Because it just wasn’t done, right? So anyway, I flipped a coin in a bar one night and it was heads New York, tails San Francisco. The little edge to the story here is my older brother Mark, so you’re now down to number three, above me, had left Missoula. He’s two years older than I am. We were like this our whole life. He ran away from college, took his tuition check, moved with his boyfriend to Oberlin College and then to New York and ended up living in New York for the rest of his life and came out. So I had that kind of possibility and beacon about where a person could go and all that. And I finally actually got to go out on my own. No, that’s not true. It wasn’t until later that I’d do that. No, no, that’s right. Maybe my freshman year of college, in the summer, I’d saved up enough money and I went on my own trip. It was the first time I ever traveled on my own away from my family. And I went to New York to visit my brother. I actually went to Washington, DC. My older brother was working in lobbying then. I went there and then I went to New York and visited my brother Mark in his like cold water roach infested flat in what was then not a glamorous SoHo. It was not glamorous in the least. And met like all these gay people and I was just completely flabbergasted because they were way out there. This was like an actor/theater kind of crowd, very, very sexual, very swinging, very—

01-00:40:15
Meeker: Well, that’s the downtown scene, right?

01-00:40:18
Sweeney: It was everything. Everything you’ve ever heard about. Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe. That was this scene.

01-00:40:23
Meeker: Did you have any exposure to that when you were there?

01-00:40:25
Sweeney: No, no, no, no. Some of them did. So they would tell me these stories and I would just be like—and I didn’t even know who half those people were. What did I know? So I left that trip just like, “Wow, that’s a possibility.” But, of
course, it scared me to death because I was like, “Whoa, wait a minute. What is all this?” But that said, I was always very, very close to my older brother. So anyway, coin flip, tails, moved to San Francisco. Totally helped by the fact that one of my friends from high school happened to be driving her car down here to go to Stanford Law School.

Meeker: You had never been to San Francisco before?

Sweeney: I’d been to Seattle. I’d been to Seattle once.

Meeker: And you didn’t know anyone other than your friend who was going to attend school?

Sweeney: Driving down here and then we brought another one of my friends from high school, all of us close since junior high. This guy is still my oldest and best friend. And we came down here and it was just like heaven for me. It’s a good thing I came here as opposed to New York, I think, because I found New York really intimidating from an urban density thing. It was so big and busy and loud. I’m from Montana. I was like, “Whoa, what is all this?” This was so much more human scale and kind of green and kind of low rise. And it felt dense. And, of course, you can imagine the racial diversity and ethnic diversity. I was just like, “Wow, what is that?” But I loved it.

Meeker: Well, they called it the Castro Village at the time, right?

Sweeney: Well, my gay San Francisco is actually Polk Street.

Meeker: Polk Street.

Sweeney: Well, I worked at the Wharf selling hot dogs and lemonade because that’s what you did. I didn’t have any money. I came down here probably with about $425. So I needed like cash. I just literally opened up a newspaper and saw an ad. I like went and went to work like that day. It was a ridiculous job but at least I had money to eat. Lived with my friends actually right up here on Guerrero and 23rd [Street]. And then they left. She went to law school, he went off to grad school at Claremont or something. So I was by myself and I ended up getting a job through a foundation person that had met me in Montana during my organizing days at something called the Youth Project. It was essentially a sort of sixties organizing, young people organizing foundation. They support all kinds of organizing efforts all over the country. Set up by a bunch of the liberal foundations back east. And they had a San Francisco office. They had supported some of the environmental work that my
older brother was doing in Montana and I just happened to meet one of them when they were on a site visit and they said, “Well, if you’re ever in San Francisco you should look us up.” And, of course, I was like, “Yeah, right.” Well, I did and so they were thinking of starting an organizing and internship newsletter for young people to encourage them to come in to organizing work, progressive organizing work. And so they had this kind of thought on their head about maybe that would be a good service to do. So I said, “Well, let me tell you something.” So I gave them my rap on I was their ideal person they were aiming at. I started doing organizing in college, I was effective, I was a leader. And then I thought my only option was law school. I win political campaigns. Like most political campaign people, the end of it you’re just kind of let go. And so I was like we need to build a pipeline to show people there’s a career and some place to go. So anyway, I ended up starting something called Organizer’s Clearing House, which became Community Jobs. And it lasted for decades. It was this whole place where you could go and find a job in progressive organizing or get an internship. It was national, dah-dah-dah. I just loved doing it because it really resonated for me personally because it was like we’ve got to tell young people that there’s other options than just getting an MBA, which, of course, I thought was like—

Meeker: So this was like a clearinghouse, produced a newsletter?

Sweeney: Produced a big newsletter. We actually did in those days paper. I had all the lists for PIRG or an ACORN or Citizen Action or any of those type of organizations, which were all over the country and very vibrant and still are. But it felt like we needed to like get young people’s attention to say, “You actually can do this for a living and a life. Like don’t let social movement work become something that they do. It’s something you can do.” So I’m very, very proud of what happened and that’s actually the newsletter where Barack Obama found his community organizing job in Chicago. So, of course, we always claim that one, the big one.

Meeker: You gave Obama his first job.

Sweeney: Yeah. What can you say? He found it in Community Jobs. We’re happy about that.

Meeker: Was this set up as a 501(c)(3)?

Sweeney: 501(c)(3). It was a project. It went out on its own finally. Yeah, it lasted for many, many years actually. But I cite that because it kind of gave me a platform to be here, to afford to live in the city. So that was like ’77. So by the summer of ’77 I’m established here. I’m doing work that’s meaningful and
important to me and it’s still social change work. I meet my first boyfriend and that, of course, rocked my world and changed my life and we were together for twenty-eight years, so it was like a whole thing.

01-00:46:44
Meeker: What about your social life? Were you going out to bars and clubs at the same time?

01-00:46:47
Sweeney: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I met my boyfriend at the original Stud. I say that because—

01-00:46:55
Meeker: On Folsom?

01-00:46:57
Sweeney: They picked it up and moved it to the new Stud [Harrison Street], which is amazing to me. And I loved the Stud in those days because it was very cheap, it had theme music, like Motown nights. You could get a cold beer for like a buck. They were very good about gay and straight people, too. Some of the gay bars were like no no no, you all had to be like a certain type. This was very fluid and fun. Yeah. And like I was telling you, our life in those days was more Polk Street. I lived downtown. I lived on Nob Hill, actually. So we would go down there and go to Oil Can Harry’s or Busby’s or Club Mocambo and all that stuff was more where we hung out. That’s where my first Halloween parade was when I was on Polk Street, which, of course, I thought was like the bee’s knees. But then I sort of discovered Castro and it was like, oh, a whole other and it felt sort of newer and fresher. As you know, parts of Polk in those days were pretty dicey but that was kind of what it was.

01-00:48:04
Meeker: It’s pretty amazing. If you think about it today, the Castro has become very integrated. But at that point in time you had three major neighborhoods of San Francisco substantially gay. You had the Polk.

01-00:48:20
Sweeney: The Tenderloin.

01-00:48:21
Meeker: Well, the Polk, I think it sort of bled into the Tenderloin.

01-00:48:25
Sweeney: Tenderloin, yeah.

01-00:48:26
Meeker: South of Market, which was a different scene, not kind of like a daytime hangout scene but more of like a nighttime scene—and then the Castro. The city must have seemed really gay compared to where you had been before, right?
Sweeney: Well, totally gay. And you can imagine, places like Hamburger Mary’s to me were like what is not to love about this. Any of it was so refreshing and so gay. But like joyous happy gay, let alone the sex, let alone the kind of pride people felt. So for me it was just like, oh, God, I knew this was out there. I knew I was right, that I’m not some deviant whatever person. Then I had this boyfriend/lover that rocked my world. This was even the best part and this is what kind of launched me on the rest of my career. Two things I remember. I lived on Bush and Powell downtown. And I remember hearing chanting one night. It was after Anita Bryant. It might have been after Briggs announced he was going to do something here or she announced something. Anyway, there was this march of gays that came and ended up in Union Square. And I ran down the street and sort of joined into this, which I’d never done before, sort of a gay march, public, bullhorns and people chanting and signs. Hundreds and hundreds of people. And I was just like wow.

And, of course, I was completely freaked out about Anita Bryant and all of her ridiculous stuff and I was political enough to know this is a big problem. And as you may recall, we had Miami and Topeka and St. Paul and Eugene. There was a series of these terrible, essentially just bullying of community, ballot initiatives to kind of put us in our place. So I was like this is not good. I’d gotten involved enough in the community that we started a gay lobby in Sacramento, which probably tells you everything you need to know about where I thought—I thought you could actually go to Sacramento and pass laws and change things. It was called California Human Rights Advocates. Steve Budeau executive director. I was the Bay Area co-chair with this straight woman named Mim something. And it was very cool. Like we were doing classic lobbying advocacy. I got very involved here in Carol Ruth Silver’s—even having district supervisors was a big thing, because I worked on hers because—

Meeker: You were in her district?

Sweeney: I guess originally I might have been in her district and then I moved downtown. So I was in that mix of politics and advocacy. And then Harvey Milk and Harry Britt contacted me. Because I would go to Castro and hang out because I just thought everything on the Castro was like great, including all the bars and cafes and stuff. And they said, “Are you that new kid in town who’s done political campaigns?” And I was like, “Yes.” “And you work at a foundation?” I was like, “Well, I work for a foundation but I’m running this project.” And they were like, “Well, so you must understand money and fundraising.” And I was like, “Yes,” “And you work at a foundation?” I was like, “Well, I work for a foundation but I’m running this project.” And they were like, “Well, you must understand money and fundraising.” And I was like, “Yes,” “I’ve fundraised. I don’t know if I’d take it that far.” “Would you be the treasurer of our No on 6 campaign?” And I was like, “No, I’m twenty-three years old. I just moved here. I don’t know anything about urban stuff, California, I’ve never done a ballot—like no.” “You’ve got to come to a meeting tonight.” And I was like, “No.” “You’ve
got to come to a meeting tonight.” Well, of course I went to the meeting and agreed to do it and it totally changed my life because, A, I could contribute something meaningful. Meaning literally I had these red and blue ledger books where I would write in, “Tim Sweeney, twenty-five dollars cash, address.” I did all the filing in Sacramento with the elections commission. Of course I was perfect about it because I was so nervous I was going to get it wrong and we’re all going to get arrested or whatever. There’s a postscript to that, by the way.

But what it allowed me to do is sit in on campaign meetings and for me it was unbelievable. It would be like labor and like Latino organizing group and the African American Democratic Party and it was like all these people doing something I was familiar with, the complete grassroots campaign. And my precinct that I worked on was in Chinatown and North Beach and I was twinned with a straight Chinese American woman. We had our door-to-door list and we went. We knew where everybody was, how they were going to vote, if they’d voted. We harassed the bejesus out of these people and we turned out unbelievable numbers. And, as you know, we won that campaign. And we started out very far down in the polls and we completely flipped it. And it was just, for me, A, this huge learning experience. B, it was like exposure to Gwen Craig and Bill Kraus. Dick Pabich, the pollster. They were just these campaign operatives. Almost all of them were openly gay. Harvey and his crowd. It was just like wow. And he was elected openly gay. It was just being in the center point of what felt like the gay universe. Like we are going to change the world and we can do it and we’re going to do it from here and it’s going to go like everywhere. So it was this really just amazingly positive experience. Very coalition oriented. I remember Sally Gearhart got up the night we won and said—I’ll never forget this line—she said, “We’re so proud to be here and there’s one big lesson we’ve learned, which is we’ve got friends.” You really felt like, maybe to an earlier thing we were talking about, you really can change hearts and minds. Like one thing we need to know is it just isn’t on us. That it’s like we’ve got to let people in to say, “Of course openly gay people should teach in the public school system. Like what are you talking about?” It was a very, very wonderful experience for me.

And then our books all got questioned or investigated by—I think it was Deukmejian that kind of prompted it. And so I had to sit through an audit of all of our books. And I remember saying to Harvey I practically had an ulcer over it because I was so worried that one mistake was going to taint. Like, “They shouldn’t have won or they only won through illegal means,” or whatever. And, of course, there were like two things they found where it was like I should have written check versus cash or whatever. And this is hundreds of thousands. So they were like, “You’re fine.” And they actually did it in my apartment on Buena Vista West and I just sat there for like hours with them thinking like I didn’t know. And then, of course, it ended up being a big like shrug.
Meeker: These were state officials?

Sweeney: State officials. And Harvey said like, “Oh, I told you not to worry about that.” Of course I was like, “You told me not to worry? What?” But he was right. He said, “Did you make any mistakes?” And I said, “No, I tried not to but I don’t know. It was a lot of—” All you did was entry, entry, entry, and then you filled these forms out. I don’t know. I was just so nervous about how mean the opposition was and shocked by some of the campaign stuff I saw and the lies. It’s all like, “Wow, these people are really creepy. Good thing I found out early.” I finished that and just thought, “We are totally going to change the world.” Because we won big that night. We didn’t just beat them. It wasn’t a landslide but we really flipped those numbers.

Meeker: When you have this impressive victory after having gone door-to-door in Chinatown, after having met with your coalition of supporters, did you start to develop any sense of what a successful message was, what you needed to communicate about gay people so that the fear and the hate or whatever would be tamed?

Sweeney: Well, I would probably say in those days what I remember the most was kind of the, well, they’re going to come for the gays in the public school system but who’s next? So the kind of first they came for the—that was like out there. This thing was—

Meeker: Harkening back to Nazis.

Sweeney: Nazis. This thing was very vague. So it kind of was like, “Well, are you saying openly gay people? Gay people? People who believe in gay people?” It was the whole way you can look at the unintended consequences and like who’s all caught in this dragnet of who you’re not going to let—”And are there topics? We can’t talk about homosexuality to all?” So that whole not sure I want to go that far kind of thing was big. Remember Ronald Reagan came out against this thing. When we did the door-to-door work, Archbishop Quinn, I believe that was his name, we had a quote from him. And I’m not sure he came out against it but it definitely gave you pause about whether this was a good idea. And, believe me, we used that in North Beach and the Catholic boy would use it in North Beach. I guess I would say this. I don’t think we did a campaign that was pro-gay as much as it was just kind of an anti-intrusion. I’m not sure we sort of nailed it on like a gay message. I wouldn’t say we completely avoided that but I think we were very aware of how you talked about other concerns about it. And Briggs, of course, was his own worst enemy. He was terrible. And I will say one other thing. Harvey also taught that humor is so disarming and so motivating and that people
actually respond to joy and positivity. He was the epitome of joy, positivity, and made fun of himself. He was just this wonderful presence. People were attracted to that versus this dour—Briggs was terrible on the debates.

And we also did all the connection of like, okay, so Briggs wants to do this to gays in the public school system. What else does he want to do? And I don’t need to tell you, you can hook them to so many sexist and other bad policies that I think you can taint. Like your enemy is my enemy kind of thing. That was the mix more I learned than anything else. Yeah.

Meeker: 
And, of course, as this story continues you have this joyous victory. A month or so later all hell breaks loose.

Sweeney: Yeah. Remember we were doing the March on Washington? And I was going back for a Youth Project staff meeting and there was going to be a meeting in Washington of gay groups to say like how are we going to deal with the impact on Washington, DC itself and hosting and housing what we were hoping were going to be hundreds of thousands of people coming to this march. And so I was supposed to go to that meeting and Harvey asked me to go basically to say, “San Francisco will help you in this. We will raise money.” Like don’t back away from just sort of logistical nightmare cost. Like we can do this together. So I was intending to go to the meeting that night and then when I landed at National Airport I was paged when I got off the plane. I picked up the phone and the staff at the Youth Project told me, “Well, your friend Harvey and the mayor were murdered this morning.” And I was just like, “What?” And, of course, I wanted to be home so badly but I had to stay for the staff meeting. People were really like, “Oh, my God, I’m so sorry,” just sort of in shock. I went to the Tabard Inn where I was staying and it was on the television. It was just horrible. And I don’t remember a lot about this because I think I was kind of reeling the whole night. I ended up going to the meeting and saying, “We have to do this now more than ever and we’ll help you.” And as you know it went forward. I don’t remember a lot about that meeting just because people were very emotional and confused and outraged. Then I ended up going to the DC City Council. I was dragged there. And they like passed a resolution kind of like condemning the killing or whatever, honoring, and they asked me to testify. And by that point I was just like done emotionally. I was just so upset because it was kind of seeping in. Just like what do you mean he crawled through a window? It was like just point blank assassination. Everything about it was so operatic. You’re like are you kidding me? So anyway, I came back here.

All I remember about this day is then when the trial came and we were all like—you probably remember this. They were doing all that bullshit about who could be on the jury. You were just like, “Oh, my God, this is not going in a good direction.” And all the homophobia that existed in the legal system
was just there for display and then, of course, the outcome of like he had one too many Twinkies and too much sugar and poor Dan White. They basically made him into a victim. And the night of the riots was just so depressing and horrible. I was so disappointed in the entire system. You were just like how could this happen? How could this be? I totally got the anger. At that point I was living on Buena Vista West and I came down the Castro, tried to be like one of the peacekeepers, Holly Near singing peace songs and stuff. I was so sympathetic to the people that were rioting because, believe you me, I wanted to throw—it was so outrageous about what they said about our worth and all of that.

What’s interesting about it for me, Martin, is I don’t know what I would have done if I would have stayed here. Because I was just rocked that this city would allow that trial to happen. Including the murder of a straight allied mayor. So what does that say about how deep of a change we’ve actually made in this city? Look, I knew there were right-wing supervisors. It wasn’t like I was foolish about the city or the constituency, the kind that Dan White represented. But I just was completely shaken. Because we’d had this huge victory. The night we won No on 6, like when you looked on the stage, the union showed up, the mayor came out. It was like we’d kind of arrived. I remember Harvey telling me that. He was like, “You know that the most important asset we have out of this is this mailing list we have. This thing is like power.” I kind of knew that but I was young enough to be like kind of, “What does that mean?” “It means everything. We’ve got like an army out here.” They mean non-gay people now. And stuff really wasn’t moving in Sacramento. We had bills introduced and whatever but it wasn’t like it was as dynamic as it's gotten now.

So the postscript there is my partner got accepted to Harvard Business School and we made this big like life choice of like moving to Cambridge together and all that. So I ended up leaving San Francisco at a really difficult time. But I often ponder if I’d stayed would I have sort of stayed in the middle of it in a different way out here than what I ended up doing when I went to the East Coast.

01-01:06:32
Meeker: So that was 1979 you moved?

01-01:06:36
Sweeney: Yeah.

01-01:06:38
Meeker: Really an end of a chapter in your life.

01-01:06:41
Sweeney: Oh, it completely was. Completely was. We lived in married student housing, believe it or not, in Harvard. A whole other story. Kind of surreptitiously. And my husband goes to Harvard Business School so he was there sixteen hours a
day, three cases a night. You sort of never see your partner when they’re in the things except on Saturday nights. But he and a group of people started Alternative Executive Lifestyles. It was the first gay club at the Harvard Business School and we had these socials that we hosted. And actually one of them even wrote a case study for the class. And then they met with the Harvard administration—

Meeker: What was the gay study based on?

Sweeney: I think it was about an openly gay person in the workplace and what do you do and how do you handle it and stuff. A lesbian did it, I think. I just want to point out. And then I remember them meeting with the recruitment people at Harvard. Do you remember this? There was a whole, I don’t know, probably ten years’ worth of people organizing, particularly at the highest level colleges about their recruitment departments on campus having non-discrimination policies and asking businesses that came on to say that they would hire openly gay people. It was the beginning of the whole move that way and that was going on at Harvard, I remember, at that time. But I was working at Massachusetts Fair Share, which was a citizen action organizing group statewide. Did mostly insurance and healthcare access and redlining and city services and taxes and stuff. I was their administrative director. Met some really, really wonderful people. My gay activism in those days was I got hooked up with the *Gay Community News* and did their first direct mail campaign. [laughter] I laugh about that because you can imagine the elemental nature of some of this stuff compared to what we do now. But that’s where I met Richard Burns and other really wonderful incredible—

Meeker: I’m not familiar with that name. I don’t know the Boston scene from that period of time.

Sweeney: Oh, really? Oh, my God. One of the most vibrant, most important, most seminal hubs of thinking and organizing and activism period. And *Gay Community News* was a revelation. Had a point of view, was progressive. It was just this incredible paper. So I remember just thinking like if we had these papers all over the country and dah-dah-dah. And it was social. It was what was political. And it was like a collective. You can imagine it was like so of a different time and era. One demonstration we did in those days, I still have a picture of us, my friend Richard Burns and I. Do you remember the Al Pacino leather movie, the cop?

Meeker: Oh, *Cruising*?
Cruising. Ban Cruising, smash Windows. Windows was the like bad lesbian phobic movie. Cruising, as you know, was the bad gay phobic movie. You had this big demonstration. Not big demonstration. There weren’t very many of us at all. We had these like placards and signs outside of some movie theater in Back Bay Boston. It was like February. We’re like ten below zero and having this demonstration. [laughter] But yeah. It was a good period for me. It was only a couple years. Business school doesn’t last that long. And then Jay decided to move to New York. He got a job in New York and my older gay brother was there. I really, really wanted to work in the gay movement. I was like, “Okay, I can get hired by these things to be a treasurer on a campaign or be co-chair of a lobbying group or be administrative director of a community organizing group. I can do this in the gay community somewhere.”

So when I went to New York one of the people that I’d worked with on Community Jobs was the co-chair of the Lambda Legal Board and said we should just come to brunch at his house. I went and had brunch and he said, “We’re looking for an executive director at Lambda.” I said, “You are?” I said, “Well, I’m not a lawyer.” And he said, “Well, neither am I.” He was the co-chair of the board. And said, “I don’t think that’d be a bad thing.” I said, “Well, I don’t either. I totally could build the organization. We could hire the lawyers and let them do what they want to do.”

Meeker: Had it been a volunteer organization or a very small budget?

Sweeney: No, they had, I believe, two paid executive directors. Bill Thom and a group of people started it. It was its own first case. Do you remember? We had to prove that there was a reason to have a gay nonprofit. Which is always amusing to me but there you go. That shows where we were coming from. So Barbara Levy worked there, I think.

Meeker: Oh, you mean in tax law you had to prove there was a legitimate—

Sweeney: Reason.

Meeker: Interesting. I didn’t know this history.

Sweeney: Yeah, that’s really interesting. It’s fascinating that that was its own first like, “Yeah, you should give us a 501(c)(3).” And you can imagine somebody at the IRS said like, “What’s the charitable benefit of this?” You’re like, “Oh, come on.” But there you go. So I think Barbara Levy had been there a year maybe. And then there was this interim guy, didn’t last a couple months. Ed
somebody. And then Roz Richter was hired. Roz was like, “I want to do litigation on the law. I’m a lawyer. I didn’t want to be the executive director.” So they immediately kind of turned and said, “Okay, let’s like really try to make this into an organization.” So much to my surprise they actually hired me. It was a hilarious interview. There might have been a few non-lawyers but it was like fourteen lawyers in a semicircle. The office was at the ACLU, national office in Manhattan. And I was like sitting in front of them in a chair and it was like whoa. But they got it because I just said, “Look, here’s the deal. You have nothing to lose by hiring me. I’ll do communications, I’ll do fundraising, I’ll get us an office.” And Roz—because that’s really what she wants to do. She does not want to do membership development. Trust me. So that’s what we did. And then we built the organization over five years plus. And it was fantastic. It was like the perfect job for me.

01-01:13:57
Meeker: Can you talk about the expansion of the organization? You went from where to where during that period of time?

01-01:14:05
Sweeney: Well, I know this because, believe me, I used to keep the checking account. We started with $1,300 in the bank. Oh, God, Martin, if you only knew in those days. I would like find you as a donor and beg you for fifty dollars. Be like, “If we don’t get fifty more dollars we’re not going to be able to pay the ACLU the $327 rent bill.” Rosalyn and I would hope we’d have enough money to pay ourselves, which in those days, I was paid $13,000 a year as the executive director. So I think probably our budget initially was probably about maybe $90,000 or something like that on a good day and then we built it up to like five to six hundred thousand by the time I left. And we ended up with a legal director, another lawyer, like an administrative person, and then we started a public education position because I always thought that was one of the missing—and press.

01-01:15:11
Meeker: So five or six FTE by the time you wrapped up?

01-01:15:14
Sweeney: FTEs. And then we did all this board development. We built out the pro bono lawyers, which if we hadn’t had them we wouldn’t have been able to do anything. In those days there were like no openly gay partners at firms. For people to even imagine what it was like—I remember one of our cases was the Onofre case we had in the Supreme Court. There was this big gay mafia in the paralegal community that worked the night shifts in all the big law firms and they would volunteer for Lambda and then we would go into the law firm at night and bind all the Supreme Court briefs and stuff. In those days were these big massive things. We just didn’t have the ability to do stuff like that, so we had to kind of sneak in, use all these machines, and then sneak out before the partners came in the morning. [laughter] But it was great because we got it
done. Anything to get it done. And we started a donor system and all that kind of stuff.

There was GLAD up in Boston, Gay Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, National Gay Rights Advocates out here in San Francisco at that point. Custody Action for Lesbian Mothers down in Philadelphia and then Lambda, National Center for Lesbian Rights here, and then the ACLU was doing some, too. So that was kind of the cluster that’s pretty much stayed the same. CALM went away and then NGRA went away but the other groups are around, still doing their work. And we started the legal roundtable to sort of try to coordinate our work.

And then the cases went from can gay students gather at a public university? Can you imagine? We had to fight for that ability to do that. It was sodomy law challenges. It was a lot of stopping police harassment. There were custody cases. There were early employment discrimination cases. There were family recognition cases, which sort of gets us into the marriage part of all this. But in our case, for instance, when we knew that we weren’t going to win any marriage cases because the courts had already sort of swatted that out of the way in the late seventies, we tried things like gay adult adoption. It was like anything to protect a relationship, right? Never forget that.

I would be interested in talking more about this sort of universe of legal work around recognizing gay families or providing some legal protections to gay families because obviously that’s very much related to the marriage history. When did these things first start to come in and from your vantage at Lambda what was the process by which attorneys, and I imagine you played some role in it, think about what are the best ways to protect gay families but maybe even before that, recognizing that gay people were forming into family units?

I think it’s been a little overshadowed by the marriage victory and the marriage possibility now, which is fantastic. But remember, in those days the idea of like domestic partnership and civil union, it wasn’t there. But I think the older people got the more you sort of recognized how the system was like rigged against us and certainly didn’t support single people. Led mostly by lesbians but it became more and more gay men. People had kids and it was like, “Okay, what’s my legal relationship to this kid?” So the child custody stuff was at Lambda from the get-go. In fact, Abby Rubenfeld, who became our second legal director after Roz left, she was known for doing child custody stuff in Tennessee. And I remember in hiring her I looked for that because it was like this is really, really, really important. And it was so appalling to me knowing that the parental relationship wasn’t recognized. It was like oh my God. That’s so core.
The couple relationship, on the other hand, was a lot more fluid. We would do these education seminars and brochures on like, “Okay, you two can set up this type of a contract and this type of a contract.” It was all that kind of basically sort of white male privilege if you have a good lawyer ability to set up some contracts between people to protect yourself. Well, as you know, that works to a certain extent. Even then it worked to a certain extent. But it’s really out of the reach of the vast majority of people. And it’s really complicated and it’s really expensive and sometimes they aren’t even recognized. You can set it up but that doesn’t mean the institution had to recognize that.

So I remember doing early kind of couple legal workshops and public education and they would be so tortured because we lacked a vocabulary. You would look in the law and be not quite sure. But there were lawyers that were obviously helping to protect people. Wills. Power of attorney. Different ways you could help make health decisions. And then along comes HIV and, bam, like that changed everything.

Meeker: Well, it’s interesting, when you talk about these sort of jerry-rigged, if you will, legal arrangements between same-sex couples. Yes, there is the question around health and power of attorney and the Sharon Kowalski case, right, I mean, that kind of stuff.

Sweeney: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Meeker: But a lot of it does have to do with protection of resources within the gay family unit.

Sweeney: Sure. Absolutely.

Meeker: Were you hearing much conversation about recognition of love and commitment and those kinds of ways of talking about relationships, too?

Sweeney: Sure, sure. Except people would lead with the more financial benefit stuff because we were so, I think, inured to our own pain and lack of ability to say publicly, “You want to know why I want this? Because I love this guy.” Like that wasn’t a good enough reason. We had to say, "Well, if he dies, his social security death benefit may allow me to stay in our rental unit." So you had to go down to some level like that. Which is real, God knows. But when I reflect on it now I really realized we were so afraid that the other claim, the kind of the heart, moral claim, was going to be simply dismissed. But why was that? Well, sodomy laws still all over the place. We'd just been declared not mentally ill about, what, ten years before. The way the world works, they
knew that, I believe, that the deepest pain they inflict on us to deny our love. They know that keeps us less than. And so the ability for us to say, "No, we want it all. We want a whole life just like you want. And, by the way, we know in your life you will say the most important thing you did as one of your events in your life is fall in love. Well, so do we, and we want everything that goes with that." And that was a hard thing to own, because I can assure you all the pollsters were probably straight in those days. Would say, "Oh, no, you raise that and you're going to start talking about sex. Love equals sex to them and you know when we talk about sex that's that deviant sex." And so the whole like how do we own sexuality. Remember doing the sodomy law challenges. All that stuff was just a lot of work. And we did a lot of work on that in those days. This was a sexual liberation movement. It wasn't like it wasn't there.

And so I think what happened is, particularly when HIV came in, first of all you had to talk about sex. It wasn't an option not to. And then number two, the whole way the system disrespected and punished and was great pain for people around recognition of relationships and caring, however that was formed, was just shocking. You would hear stories of like families swooping in at the end of a person's life and shoving a lifetime partner out of the way and taking the assets or saying, "No, this is where this person's going to be buried, not there. No, you can't come to a funeral." Or, "It's our decision about end—" and you would just be like, "What did you just say about the value of that relationship?" And the answer was doesn't matter, doesn't exist, don't recognize it. And it was just like really. Because what we showed the world in the caretaking part of HIV was our full humanity. And so you saw the world say like wow. So here's the deal, these two guys, because a lot of times it was two men, but not exclusively. But I think for a lot of people it was men doing end of life care. Men don't do end of life care pretty much anywhere in society, so when you saw men having to do it, men doing it well and lovingly and dedicating their whole being to it, I think that really made people think, "Well, you know what? There's a moral center there that I respect. In fact, I even admire it. In fact, I'm not even sure I could do that like you just did it."

So I think that example of a community saying like, "This is what we're about. This is what our love is about. This is what our relationships are about, regardless of what we say it is, "lover, partner, boyfriend," all those words we had to use for all those years. Not husband, not wife, whatever. I think that that really, really caused a cultural ah-ha that we have come back in marriage to tap into. Because it was like an opening for people to say, "Hmm. I thought this is what gay people were. I thought this was what they even wanted," which wasn't a very pretty picture, by the way. It was shallow, silly, whatever. It was not deep and certainly not a set of lifetime values. I think we started to show a different set of a lifetime experience and values. And I think we are now building off that awakening among non-gay Americans and practically among ourselves. It's not like we knew we could do this either.
Meeker: Where were you with this at this time? You had already moved across country to follow your partner. Did you two ever talk about any kind of formal recognition, commitment ceremony?

Sweeney: Occasionally we would. We started going to a few in the eighties. There's a certain pride and swagger that comes with saying like, "We don't need to follow all your stupid rules and we're going to do it on our own. And since you absolutely don't support any of it anyways, what do we care what you think?" And so there was a certain amount of being able to create fresh how you wanted the world to be. So I think we were more in that frame of mind. Obviously we stayed together for twenty-eight years. Sort of privately, between the two of us, we called each other husbands but not really to the world. And migrated to the word partner. I always didn't like that word very much because being from a sort of a legal background and working at Lambda, I was always like partner sounds so business, so law firm. It was like whatever. But I got it. Significant other. We used all these dopey words over the years. But what rocked me was my own—

Meeker: Long-time companion.

Sweeney: Yeah, long-time companion. I did use the word companion for a while. Actually, still companion is not a bad word in my mind. But for me it was more seeing HIV come into my life. And literally like my older brother became HIV positive. I was surrounded by it. I lost numerous board members from Lambda. We did the first HIV discrimination case, successful HIV discrimination case in the country. I was very, very involved with that with Joseph Sonnadend, Michael Callen, and others, and lived through the hysteria of those times. And believe me, that's the word that you would use. Did the first HIV/AIDS hearing in Congress. I was there through all that. And it was riveting. It was wrenching. It was horrible because it sort of slowly, over the next—basically from sort of '82-83 to when I left GMHC in '93, were ten years of a lot of death and dying and grief because there were no interventions that really could change the course of the disease until after that. And just saw hundreds and hundreds of people die. Lot of board members. Lot of my previous executive directors at GMHC, board chairs, they all just died.

Meeker: Did you develop a way of coping with that? I think that for people, certainly my generation, I did not experience that. I obviously know people who died from AIDS but it wasn't that apocalypse. How did you develop strategies for coping? I think that people just don't understand the intensity of it.

Sweeney: Yeah. When people are like dying around you, you just do what you need to do to get by. And so you think of yourself as maybe like, okay, I work in a
hospital triage unit and every night somebody comes in with a car wreck or a gunfire or a knife wound or whatever and you just work through it. Or I would think of sort of being in a war that was sort of undeclared by the larger society but we were fighting it every single day. I just really sort of dug down deep and thought, "I'll be goddamned if this thing's going to be the end of us." It was a virus. We can beat this virus. And the thing that was so frustrating to me is the virus was smarter than human beings. It didn't discriminate but all these stupid human beings were like, "Oh, the Haitians and the gays." It's just like, "Oh, my God. We are so stupid as a species." But I had believed, because I saw it every single day, in the capacity of human beings to speak to their better angels and rise and do these—" The buddy system at GMHC just floored me in what it said about—a person, volunteer, come in and say, "Okay, I want to be a buddy." "All right. Well, here's a client that we have. They live on Ninety-Second Street. His name is Bill. You're going up there. This is what we know about Bill. We'll tell Bill you're coming. And go." So you don't know the person. You don't know their race. You might know their sex. You don't know much about their life. You know they've got HIV. And you'd go up there or you'd go to their hospital room and say, "How are you doing?" or whatever. You enter their life at this incredibly vulnerable moment. They just put it on the line. Now, some of them knew some of them because it was kinship networks that were getting sick. But many others were not. And thousands of people. Not just a few. Thousands. And then the staff that came to work at GMHC was like simply unbelievable. They worked their hearts out and were creative, innovative, loving, scared, furious, raging. They were trying to at least put them into something, like we got to turn this thing around.

You have to sort of honor like what's in front of you. So whenever we lost a staff person, a board member, whatever, we would always take the time to do like a grieving circle. And we had dozens of those. Because it was like this was a life that was to be cherished and honored and remembered. It's like when we brought the [AIDS Memorial] Quilt in the first time. You know how that changed the world. People look at that quilt. It was the most important thing we could do. These are individual lives that have touched all around them and you're not just going to say it doesn't matter, I didn't know, or they shouldn't have or that's because they're gay or they took drugs. It was like what difference does that make. So I just felt like we somehow were going to slowly but surely turn all of us. And I honestly think we changed the course of the pandemic. I really do. I really feel like we amazed ourselves, amazed the world that even something as heinous as this can be turned around.

Meeker: I wouldn't say likely, I would say it's evident that you changed the course of gay life and gay culture at the same time.

Sweeney: Yeah, we did. You know, Martin, when I just look on those years, I just think about everything from being in front of the Association for a Better New York,
ABNY, it's kind of a chamber of commerce of New York City. And the *New York Post* hosted a debate and it was me, Ed Koch, and Stephen Joseph, who was the health commissioner then. And it was right in the beginning of HIV and should the city close the bathhouses and all that kind of hysteria stuff. Of course I argued against the closure of the bathhouses. And just as you said, it was like this is the center of gay culture. The problem we've got here is you weren't thinking that you don't give us any other place to gather. You criticize us for bars. We're not even safe on the streets. None of you supported a community center. It was the whole like you're not even getting the analysis of the community that you're now trying to like go after. And Stephen Joseph was trying to do his public health thing. And Koch. You can imagine how crazy that was given his own personal conflicts. He finally got up at one point and he said, "Latex, latex, latex. All we talk about is latex." Because, of course, we were talking a lot about condoms. And in those days no one even used the word condom on TV. It was like you just didn't talk about it. But some of us were talking about it. Kind of like, "I can't believe this is what we have to talk about." It was like, well, whatever. The day when he walked off that stage, that's when he had his heart attack. I have often thought we just got too close to the bone here. Like we're delving in deep on homosexual sex and the passing of body fluids and you could just see there was the establishment of New York going like, "I can't believe we're talking about this." It was like, "Well, we have to." So whether you want to or not, as Surgeon General Koop said, you've got to deal with it. The time was so interesting because they could imagine the resistance. Then, of course, the right wing has gone crazy about talking about anything. But there was Surgeon General Koop on the *Today Show* putting out his little brochure.

01-01:38:23  Meeker: I remember receiving that brochure. I remember seeing reports about it and then it actually arrived in the mail. I was in high school. That was important.

01-01:38:36  Sweeney: It was really important. All of it. We realized we were just kind of reintroducing ourselves anew and then going to the place they didn't want to go to, which is sex. It was like, "What is unprotected sex? What is sodomy? What is oral sex? What is a condom? How do you use it?" All that stuff. And then you get into the needles and drugs. All of it was just, "Oh, my God, are you really going to make us talk about this?" And it was like, "Yeah, yeah we are." You think about all of that mix and you think about sort of the blowback from Jesse Helms and just the deep, deep homophobia. And he attacked GMHC and had us investigated and lied about us using federal funds and passed the Helms Amendment. You talk about a lesson for me. I think two senators voted with us on that. Two. We were completely abandoned politically and I was right in the middle of it. And I remember just thinking, "Really? This is leadership? These cowards?" Just being appalled that on the facts, the facts meant nothing. They were totally twisted by our opposition. Just the big lie held. We sent out videos and comic books. They saw them in
the Senate cloakroom. So like, "Yeah, this is exactly what we're doing. And you want to call it raunchy? You can call it whatever you want. I know it's reaching the men I need to reach and I don't really care what you think. You are not the intended audience. And no, we didn't spend any federal funds on this and so no, you're not going to stop us." But that didn't matter. You live through stuff like that. And then, of course, we litigated it, we challenged that later because no matter when you're knocked down you get back up and say like not right.

But we just lived through all that. On the other hand you live through the first AIDS Walk or the first display of the quilt, when it was like the other side of humanity shows up. Tens of thousands of people raising five million dollars or 200,000 people visiting the pier in New York. You just were like we can shift this. There's another way you allow that leadership to show itself and we'll shape where this all goes.

01-01:41:15
Meeker: Can we back up a little bit to your time at Lambda, apropos of the Freedom to Marry work. I think Evan met you when you came to Harvard Law School during that period of time?

01-01:41:32
Sweeney: Yeah. One of the ways you raised money in those days is law schools had something called public interest law foundations, their PILFs. And they would do these grants of money and stuff. We wanted to get some for Lambda's work. And so we would go speak at these better endowed law schools that had larger monies. So NYU, Harvard, and others. So we did this kind of tour and Roz and I were essentially the Mutt and Jeff of LGBT legal work and education and organizing. And Evan says that we came to Harvard and we were like the first people that he saw that said like you could actually do this professionally and build an organization. He was like, "You work in a movement." So thank God for that.

And then sure enough, when I was at Lambda, as part of our pro bono attorney group, he came in with a bunch of his other pals, all of whom ended up doing a lot of volunteer work for Lambda over the years. I remember the minute I met him, just immediately [finger snap], the brains, the humor, the analysis. He was just like a serious go-getter even then. God only knows what he worked on for us. We used to farm out these different projects, some big, some small, some just legal referral help, some analysis.

01-01:43:05
Meeker: Yeah, we've talked about some of that. I know one of the big things that he worked on with you was the Bowers case.

01-01:43:12
Sweeney: Yes.
Meeker: Which must have also been a pretty difficult period to go through, I guess.

Sweeney: It was terrible. And it was when I was leaving Lambda to go to GMHC. In those days we'd win some and we'd lose more. And then that was one of our big bets, was we were going to finally take down nationally sodomy and we learned a really hard lesson that, no, that wasn't—and I'm sure you've read the transcripts, the decisions from the court. I'll never get over Justice White's language that he used. It was so like in a Judeo-Christian society, it was just blatant old-fashioned religiously based homophobia. And I was like, "Boy, do we have a lot of work to do." Like really? The answer was like yeah. It was like, wow, like separation of church and state. All of it was like does the constitution mean nothing. But we went back and got rid of it many years later. But other times we won gay student rights cases, we won the HIV cases. We were winning some child custody stuff. We were winning enough to show that there was a there there. More and more judges were being appointed that were openly gay. Marcy Kahn and Bill Thom and other people. We had more partners coming out of law firms. It wasn't just the law. It was actually the legal establishment and trying to get into the American Bar Association passing a resolution. There were these lavender law conferences that were very important. And then Tom Stoddard was teaching sexual orientation in the law at NYU Law School. It was really like let's get in there. In twenty years this is going to be totally different. And it's true that it worked. And we were being smarter about public education. It wasn't just sort of realizing great, we won a case but does anybody know about it? Do lawyers know? Were we educating lawyers about what to do about it? Does our own community even know what to do? It was all that kind of like that isn’t enough.

Meeker: How can you defend the case, as well?

Sweeney: Well, and then once the legislature then said, "Oh, well, that may be in the court but we're going to pass this law," and then even worse, "Let's stick it on the ballot and really bash these people down." So all the kind of larger movement strategy of like what's the dynamic for holding the win and then building off it. We were learning some really, really tough lessons. And same thing happened when I was at GMHC about how do you pass the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Ryan White CARE Act or any of those myriad of things we passed in Albany on a state level. You really had to think long and hard about building a broader base, a broader coalition, anticipate the reaction, blunt it, all that kind of stuff. It became sort of a rite of passage then about where you make your bets and how you plan.
Meeker: When Evan first started coming to work as a volunteer litigator for Lambda, did he talk to you about his ideas as far as marriage? He wrote that kind of now famous law school paper.

Sweeney: I'm sure he probably did. I'm not sure I remember it because I probably would have thought it was like so pie in the sky, it was crazy. We were beginning to get in those days the sort of idea of domestic partnership, was starting to get some currency.

Meeker: Do you recall where that came from?

Sweeney: I don't. I think the first domestic partnership ordinance, as I recall, was in Wisconsin. I think it was in Madison. Big surprise. And it kind of started to spread. I remember San Francisco had a vote out. It started to become like a thing. So I probably was all about that, I'm sure, because particularly if I was wearing my legislative hat, that would have been much more obtainable in those days than marriage. And you started with domestic partnership registries. We'd just go to a city and say like Tim and Jay are—you'd hope that that would somehow start protections And then it would be registered but then you got X if you were registered from the city, whatever. So it sort of built out to something more—

Meeker: A very incremental approach.

Sweeney: Very incremental. And, again, I think there's that tension in the community about could we actually build an alternative relationship, recognition structure from scratch. And I think for many of us it got to the point of like why are we doing that?

Meeker: When did you get to that point?

Sweeney: Oh, I would say probably about the mid-nineties. Probably after I left GMHC and when I was at the Pride Agenda. I sort of looked down the road and thought to myself, "Okay, this is how I thought it was going to work. We're going to stop the violence by using hate crime stuff and sort of focus on that and at least get safety going. Then we're going to do non-discrimination stuff, so at least people can have a job and maybe get an apartment to rent. Then we're going to go into the relationship recognition stuff." I was more concerned about custody recognition and parental stuff because I just found that to be so horrific, that if anything ever happened between a parent and a child, I just thought like, oh, my God, that's like the worst. Then sort of couples recognition, which in my mind would have been the domestic
partnership. I forgot to mention, of course, getting rid of all the sodomy laws and all that other stuff down here. And that was kind of the step up the stairs that I thought we should do sort of politically, that would sort of build, each one sort of opening people up more and more. HIV kind of messed with that a lot because of course we had to go into healthcare access and end of life and tons of other sort of more social service safety net stuff.

Meeker: Drug testing.

Sweeney: Drug testing. And then Medicaid. Look, here's the other thing, is sort of the class race stuff just got sort of ripped off, because it was like, okay, even if you get all this, it doesn't benefit any of these people. Be like, oh, my God, really. And we had to sort of go from getting government out of our lives, quit persecuting us with sodomy laws and police entrapment, to we need government all over our lives. Like we need the entire government social safety net here. We need it to fund research. We need it to be prevention funding. We need it to give us our care. So that whole like [whishing sound] was really challenging because a lot of people in the community were like still sort of stuck in those sort of what I would call a kind of libertarian zone of like no government and it's like that's not going to work when it comes to getting healthcare. Like we can't do it on our own backs, all that kind of stuff.

And that's when I started hearing from Evan about, "Why are you going for domestic partnership, let alone sort of civil unions, started in Vermont at some point, when you should just be going for marriage?" Like that's not enough. Evan and I were constantly having this sort of incremental battle around this.

Meeker: Well, this would have happened, then, in the context of you heading up Empire Pride Agenda, correct?

Sweeney: Yeah, I was actually the deputy there. I was never the executive director.

Meeker: I don't know how much you want to talk about this. I know we've already referenced it but I know that you wrapped up at Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1993. Your brother passed away shortly thereafter. And I know that you were very close. I just wanted to give you an opportunity to pay tribute to him.

Sweeney: In my family we were kind of raised two-by-two, because that's what you do in a large family. You like sort of twin them up and hope they take care of themselves.

Meeker: How interesting. What about the seventh one?
Sweeney: Yeah, well, he was lucky. We were all gone. He had a little more attention. So my brother and I had shared a bedroom until we both went to high school, or graduated from high school. So we were like in each other's lives forever. We both slowly but surely realized we had a lot more in common than others because we were gay. And we were very, very close after he came out and after I came out. And one of the reasons I moved to New York is I wanted to be near him. We lived about eight blocks apart from Hudson to up Greenwich Street. But we were just as thick as thieves. Shared a great sense of humor together, a lot of stuff that we cared about in the arts, et cetera. I'm sure part of my drive to work on HIV was my hope that somehow we could do something to save my brother. He unfortunately died about a year before there was any intervention. And it was just devastating to me. But what it did was also keep me grounded in my entire HIV work about what a person with HIV actually is experiencing on a daily basis, what worked, what doesn’t work, what these experimental drugs were, how does the city AIDS services actually help a person, what does GMHC do for a person in the legal department? How are they treated at work? How are they treated by their dating and the world? How do they feel about sex? And all of it was this real and present thing in my life, that as a person who is HIV negative I just didn't know. And it was really enlightening.

He deteriorated over time. I had to have him institutionalized a couple of times because he was having psychiatric issues. My younger sister ended up moving to New York, who also came out as a lesbian, and helped me take care of him. And my partner Jay, who was incredibly generous and loving in his care of my brother. So we sort of formed a little care team around him along with a couple of his friends. And then my parents kind of started to own the fact that their son had HIV and AIDS and was dying and that was very meaningful and moving. They ended up, in their hometown of Billings, started something called AIDS Spirit, which is an HIV group. Sorry, this is a hard part. Through their Catholic church. It was this capacity to grow and to own it and to love. They wanted to save their son. It didn't work.

My siblings all rallied. It was very, very important. He was an inspiration. He was funny. He was a fighter. Worked a lot, until he was disabled. Really fought with his union to get what he deserved from the union when they were kind of getting weak.

Meeker: You said you were both interested in the arts. What'd you guys both—

Sweeney: He worked for Joseph Papp for many years at the Public Theater and so did like that, those productions. *Chorus Line*, you name it, he was there. And so for me, of course, that was like—who didn’t want to see Meryl Streep or Al Pacino or Kevin Kline or anybody in any of these productions. They did all the summer work, summer stuff at the Delacorte in Central Park. They just did
some really, really cutting edge incredible stuff at the Public Theater. And I always could get in because my brother would help me get in. And I would see the backstage stuff and he worked in the props and design department. So I could go across the street and look at all that. I loved that world of theater. There's a lot of gay people in there, as you know, really fun, imaginative people. So we did a lot of that, and music and art together. And he then later got into more video and film. So it would even be funnier because I could go on sets, Woody Allen's, what was it called, Silvercup Studio I guess out in Queens. I would go out there and they'd be doing a movie. He did actually a famous PBS kids TV show up on the Upper East Side, up on like Lower Harlem and the studio up there. So I'd get to go and see all these. Or they'd be doing like a live shoot on a street in New York and he'd call me up and say, "You've got to come over here. You'll just like die over what this is about." You know, all the silliness of that world, but as well as the art and the creativity and all that. Yeah, I still have right up there—might notice that little Oscar up there?

01-01:57:57
Meeker: Oh, yeah.

01-01:57:57
Sweeney: The funny story about that is he did a film in New Jersey with Olympia Dukakis and they filmed at her house. And, as you know, she had an Oscar but they put it away for fear that it might disappear during the filming. And that was the fake thing they put in its place. And what I didn't know about a lot of movie and commercial video stuff is when it's done, they buy all this like stuff, and basically like give it away. So my brother called me up and said, "You want a new set of towels?" And he was like a buyer for a lot of that stuff, so he knew where to go in New York for everything. Like you name it, he would know where to buy it. And in New York, it's like unbelievable what you can buy there. So we would just laugh because it was like furniture, clothing, whatever. And a lot of times they would just like donate it or give it away and I would think, God, no wonder these productions cost so much money. [laughter] But anyway, the one thing I have of all that, I got the Oscar in the end. It's one of my favorite.

01-01:59:04
Meeker: Well, I think that that's a good note to end on today. Next time we meet we'll start talking about Empire Proud Agenda and I can get into your work at Haas and work with Freedom to Marry. Is that good?

01-01:59:16
Sweeney: Cool. You bet.

01-01:59:17
Meeker: Thank you very much.
Interview 2: March 10, 2016

Today is Thursday, the 10th of March 2016. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Tim Sweeney for the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project, and we are here at his home in San Francisco. Last time we wrapped up talking about your work in New York, particularly for Gay Men’s Health Crisis. And I know that you wrapped up there, I think it was in 1993, and then shortly thereafter you started as, I think, deputy director at the Empire State Pride Agenda.

Sweeney: Right.

Meeker: Can you tell me what this organization is and what kind of work they do?

Sweeney: Sure. It is the statewide LGBT advocacy organization in New York. It started to work basically on organizing and advocacy for the entire state of New York, up in Albany in the state legislature. I actually helped to build the Empire State Pride Agenda Foundation, which was the (c)(3) side of it, as opposed to (c)(4) political or PAC. And my work consisted of public education around a set of issues like nondiscrimination, hate crimes, domestic partnership. And then probably the single biggest project or new project that I brought to the Pride Agenda was that a group of us who had come out of the HIV world sort of noticed that there was a whole set of non-HIV health and mental health needs of the LGBT community that weren’t being addressed and needed to be, and to do those programs we needed to raise government funds in order to build the programs. And so we started the New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network. I think it ended up with about forty different organizations from across the state. It was a whole range of issues from youth programming to substance abuse services to adoption to family supports to non-HIV health issues, mental health issues. And what we did is we basically put together kind of an LGBT people’s budget and took it up to Albany and said, “All right, you have responded to a certain degree on HIV in ways that were really amazing. And New York State did. They had the AIDS Institute and other things that were quite groundbreaking at the time. And so we said, “What about all these other issues that frankly need attention in order to address the full range of the LGBT community?”

And we ended up getting the first state funding for LGBT work in a Republican governor’s budget, I like to point out, in what’s called the executive budget. And then obviously worked both the houses. It goes to the Assembly and the Senate in New York, to increase that funding. And what was great is we had community organizations actually design their own programs and that’s what we kind of put together in this, you can imagine, sort of pithy document calling for huge amounts of money. Because when you
start from zero it’s like what do we need to answer it? It was like we need tens of millions of dollars. And so over time we actually did get significant amounts of money. In fact, it’s still going. It’s still going after all these years. And it was really great because it helped energize and reach a whole other level of LGBT community members who sort of didn’t relate to legislation, to the civil rights issues. That just sort of wasn’t what they wanted to work on. Their more immediate needs was trying to get an elevator in a community center so disabled members could get up to the second floor, that kind of thing. And then we, of course, used and energized and organized those people, though, to really press Albany on policy issues, not just on funding issues.

But I’ll tell you the thing that I thought was the most interesting about it is we had a Republican senate in New York at the time, Republican governor. And one of the things that I thought was interesting about the health and human services network is by going into a Republican or conservative legislator who maybe didn’t have a lot of experience with LGBT people or just was conservative politically and said, “I don’t understand it and I’m not going to help you on nondiscrimination or hate crimes,” or whatever. But they were, for instance, on a mental health committee or a substance abuse committee. You would put a person in front of them that said, “I’m talking to you about substance abuse. I’m talking to you about mental health. If you can set aside the LGB or T for a minute, talk to me about someone who needs a program to help them stay sober, who needs a program to help them with mental health issues to avoid suicide.” Things where you just saw people say, “Well, I can relate to you on a human level about stuff like that and I think I can help you or support you in that endeavor.” Don’t interpret that to mean—and then they would take it to the extreme. It was like you were sort of opening their heart and starting a journey with them that I think over time has just made us—particularly in Albany at the time, it helped get us out of a box where some legislators would see us in the hallway or see us at lobby day or whatever, at a press conference, and just be like, “Whoa, I know what these people want.” It would be this really sort of narrow agenda they couldn’t buy into. But then when they’d say, “Actually, I just had this amazing conversation with them about adoption or foster care and that’s something I care about. I have it in my family.” You just break down these barriers. So it was a really interesting way to sort of just expand connection politically and sort of culturally in New York State.

And we worked on repeal of the sodomy law, which we were successful in, the passage of an LGBT hate crimes law. And it was the first law in New York where it was an affirmative gay and lesbian law. So that was like, as in all things political, it’s like a big breakthrough. And a Republican governor signed it and the sky didn’t fall in. It wasn’t the end of the world.

02-00:06:32
Meeker: When you say affirmative, what do you mean by that?
Sweeney: It wasn’t that long ago, to be honest with you, but there was no other law on the book in New York that actually said sexual orientation, gender identity, anything in a positive way. It just didn’t exist. I think some people forget how recent—

Meeker: As a protected rather than a subject category?

Sweeney: Yeah. How recent in many states this legal affirmation of our community and protection of our community has been. It seems preposterous now. And in any political system that’s a big lift for when somebody says, “You’re really going to start this.” Because they know the minute you do one issue for a community, it’s not like we’re going to go away. And so it’s a big political victory when you get the sort of body politic to sort of exhale. You’re like, “Okay. We’re doing this.” And in this case it was a Republican senate and a Republican governor. And so I remember being at the signing of the hate crimes bill. You can kind of sense a bit of a discomfort. The governor’s people were all like, “[mumbling], what does this mean and don’t misinterpret this.” And the conservatives are mad and the gay community’s kind of skeptical. It’s that whole way in which a system opens itself up and actually tries to change and adapt and own a different way of doing business. Those kind of victories were important. But I thought the funding stuff was equally important because I think part of what’s always frustrated me about our movement is we pay taxes but we get very little back in terms of directed taxpayer dollars to support our own community. We basically have to raise it off our own back and that’s always frustrated me because it’s like other communities don’t tolerate that, why should we. So this was an attempt to kind of change that frame.

Meeker: What was the process by which you came to an understanding that there was this whole constellation of community needs? Do you have a sense of how you came to understand that and recognize that they kind of formed into this constellation around health and human services?

Sweeney: Well, I think a lot of it came out of, obviously, the work I did on HIV over the years, where all of the issues were begged, from housing to healthcare access to mental health to substance abuse treatment and all of it. You just sort of saw how whole systems literally didn’t know our community existed, didn’t want to count us, didn’t know culturally, organizationally how to serve us. So we just had a whole range of ways in which we had to kind of basically integrate ourselves into a system or frankly set up parallel systems because the existing one was just not going to go there, wouldn’t go there. Or we’d sue them to say like, “Open up this nursing home,” or “Treat us this certain way.” And the more you saw that, at least the more I saw it and experienced it, you
just realized we’re so much like so many vulnerable Americans in what the health system does or doesn’t do, how it pays for things, the limits of Medicaid. All of it. Kind of like the way it shortchanges mental health issues. You just sort of saw how all that played out in society and then how it played out in the whole LGBT community. So what we essentially did was try to address in these hopelessly optimistic documents kind of every single aspect we could think of. And said there’s no dumb demand. There’s no question not worth asking. There was so little data. This would have been, what, ’95 maybe? So little data on who we are and our needs. We just knew people didn’t want to ask. Because the problem is every time you ask the question you’re going to have to deal with the answer. And in this case it would have been more services, more training, more cultural competence, all that that was kind of ignored.

Meeker: Cultural competence is actually a term that I’ve been thinking about as you’ve been talking about this, because I think about this point of time, if you look at the history of medical services in the United States, it’s something that they’re talking about, that healthcare systems are finally starting to bring in translators and interpreters. They’re starting to recognize that women from some backgrounds won’t work with a male gynecologist. Those kinds of very basic things that are cultural barriers to care and services. And I imagine in the LGBT community there’s a lot of learning that needs to happen before you can actually go and ask for the funding and try to teach legislators and professionals about what cultural competency in the LGBT community actually means.

Sweeney: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I think that’s the hard part about social movements. Frankly, in some ways the advocacy is the easier part. The ask, the demand, the analysis, all of which has to happen and is totally valid and I’m not dismissing that it’s—I don’t mean easy. I just mean like that’s the first stage. The second stage is when someone actually says, “Okay, I hear you. So what would a cultural competency program in aging look like for LGBT seniors? Like can I ask them whether they’re gay? Is that okay? Is gay the right word?” And then just the whole like, “What’s the set of issues that would be different for an LGBT person in my system or my home than for non-gay?” And literally asking out of not homophobia but ignorance and owning that and saying, “I want to help, so help me.” And I don’t need to tell you, that’s a whole other set of skills and thinking and ways in which you then push systems and go back and train and train again and train again. Even though once you’ve trained you may have to then step back and say, “So how’s it going?” Six months, a year later, and say, “What’s kind of sticking? What’s not sticking? What’s new for you? What’s come up?” You do the whole standards of care. You have all kinds of ways in which you hold systems accountable. But that’s a whole other level of work and frankly requires not only a different set of skills but even a different approach. You can only do so
much sort of banging at the door and so much hardcore advocacy with people before they’re just exhausted by it. It’s like, “Look, I’m trying to change my system, too.” This isn’t easy. I’m trying to get my staff to understand this. We get a lot of trainings. Much as I want to help the LGBT community I’ve got other non-English speaking communities, immigrant communities, the difference between men and women, whatever the issues are that they’re trying to get someone to be a good social worker or caretaker. It’s a lot to put in people’s head and then say like, “Well, don’t forget about me,” or “Mine’s the most important.” It’s like well, frankly, in many people’s lives it’s all intersectional so you’ve kind of got to lift the whole thing. It’s always interesting to me to watch how much we sort of push legislatures and political systems and then sort of care systems and then have to figure out the sort of accountability mechanism over time and then iterate with it, because it doesn’t stay in place, you know what I mean. And whether that’s law enforcement or health or mental health or what have you, it’s a very big sort of swath of skills and abilities and strategies that people have to, I think, be very flexible with their approach.

02-00:14:24
Meeker: Was it the network that took on a lot of this process kind of work?

02-00:14:29
Sweeney: Yeah. The network took on a lot of the development of the proposals. And obviously, to your point, we would have to kind of, as a group, vet things to make sure they were sort of baked and cooked enough, that it wasn’t just sort of somebody’s dream but it was actually somebody who knew something about serving youth or having an adoption service or someone who knew about treatment on demand or harm reduction. These things are very complicated. We, of course, were a little defensive because we wanted to make sure whatever we put forward really was kind of grounded in public health or science or professional standards. All that. Every time you do that, you challenge a system, you want to make sure you really know the system and that you can sort of take them on, head-on, point-by-point, and not all of a sudden get caught with, “Oh, you’re right. Maybe that’s the wrong critique.” Or, “Oh, we didn’t know that.” You get a little defensive and nervous about that but nonetheless you barrel ahead and ask anyways. And then once the money started to flow, of course, that’s a whole other set of skills. Because if you’re a nonprofit that’s never gotten government money before and all of a sudden you find out, “Oh, my contract officer is my new best friend in my life,” it’s very, very, very complicated. So we did a lot of sort of cultural competency training of nonprofits to say, “Are you really ready for this?” And what was interesting is we would have many nonprofits who thought they were ready, then after, once we did our kind of walk through on the financial reporting systems, all the governance, the transparency, all that you’d need to do, you had groups that would say, “We get this. We’re not set up for this. We want to support it but I’m not sure we’re going to want to take a government
contract. We’re just not there sort of infrastructure-wise or evolution-wise.” So we had to do a lot of that.

And then there’s a whole other set of advocacy you do, is once you get a system, a health department, mental health services, whatever, substance abuse services, with a flow of money, you’ve got all the sort of contracting issues that happen with, well, people send in their vouchers and they’ve been sitting on the vouchers for three months because the state budget is stuck and now they can’t pay their employees and that’s like a huge problem. Or just the reporting mechanism. It’s like wait a minute, this is just really onerous. It’s all that piece of work.

Meeker: Bureaucracies.

Sweeney: Yeah. And it’s mostly all necessary and real and we’re not going to get special dispensation not to do it just because we’re new to it. It’s like this is what sort of working the system means. So it opened up, as you can tell, tons of other work to be done that was very different than the sort of classic advocacy legislation and litigation.

Meeker: When you’re communicating and trying to introduce these ideas, whether it’s to the state legislature or to state providers of mental healthcare services—you had mentioned the universal aspects of it. “We want to make sure the citizens of our state have a chance to recover if they’re substance abusers and they want to get out of that. We want to make sure that people have access to mental health care if they’re feeling suicidal.” That’s kind of a universal thing but there’s also like kind of, I guess, sort of a quasi-ethnic appeal. That what we have here is an LGBT community that, by implication, might be similar to an ethnic immigrant community or even an African American community in the sense that there’s some cohesiveness to it, that they have different cultural norms, that there’s maybe different residential patterns, places they live, services they should be provided. Different kinds of services that maybe are more important in that community than others. Did you try to talk and—

Sweeney: We did do that. I think where that ends up is, I guess to your point, any time you sort of challenge a system on behalf of, in this case, an identity based community, sexual orientation or gender identity, you then sort of, I think, have to reach people through what I call sort of the universal appeal end state of equal opportunity, everyone sort of deserves housing and healthcare and building a family and pursuing a career. All of that. But then the analysis is but what’s kind of the structural racism, the structural sexism, in this case the structural homophobia that kind of happens as a person tries to access education or healthcare or build a family or participate in a community? And then what are the barriers then that we have to sort of systematically remove
in order to achieve sort of an equal state of opportunity? And I think that’s the
art form, is bringing up for someone, “Look, you may think I don’t understand
what’s the safe school problem for a kid. Everybody’s against bullying.” And
you’re like, “Well, that’s true generically. Let me walk you through how that
sort of happens for a gay/lesbian/bisexual or transgender kid in junior high.
And let me sort of walk through why we need an enhanced set of laws and
policies that help protect that kid. And also let me walk you through the
research that GLSEN or the GSA network or some of those organizations
have done that shows what actually ameliorates the problem. So we bring to
you solutions, not just kids get bullied in school and gay kids get bullied far
more than others.” It’s like, “Okay, and so what can we do about that?” And
so, again, I think for a lot of people they’re surprised by more of the structural
analysis, whether it’s race or gender, as you say, immigrant citizen status or in
this case homophobia, transphobia. It’s like, “I didn’t know it sort of—”
What’s the word? That’s sort of how it played out in the lives of people. And
many times I think it’s somewhat unintended. They just simply say like, “Oh,
I didn’t understand the form I put in front of you, there was like no place for
you to actually honestly declare the state of your relationship because it says
husband and wife and that’s not what you are.” It’s just all that unconscious
bias that then you sort of patiently get the system to be like, “Okay, so what
about if we said spouse?” or whatever, try to change stuff. What’s hard is
when people kind of resist the structural analysis and barriers. Like they kind
of say, “I’m not sure I believe that that’s true.” Or they kind of say, “Oh,
you’re exaggerating that.”

And the challenge there, I think for the LGBT community, in my experience
is we don’t have a lot of data because honestly there’s been literally I think a
very conscious attempt to not research our community because they knew
once the data was there, whether it’s the violence, the mental health issues, the
health access issues, all of it was going to be like, “Wow, this discrimination
stuff is real and we’ve got to address it.” So one of the most pernicious aspects
of being a minority in this society is that people sort of want to stay ignorant
and want to not acknowledge and define a problem because then they’re going
to feel compelled to address it. So they just kind of do that, “I don’t have any
gay people in my district.” And you’d be like, “You don’t have any gay
people in your house district at all? Wow.” And, of course, then they sit back
and say like, “So give me a number.” And it’s like, “Well, how many gay
people are in Binghamton?” We know they’re there. I can show them thirty-
five. I can take them to a house meeting or a meeting in a church basement
and show them some. So it’s frustrating to be like caught in that kind of prove
the problem when you just want to say like, “Wow, if you only knew what our
hotlines hear on a daily basis or what we hear in community meetings.” So it’s
that whole effort to do research, get data, define issues. I also don’t need to
tell you that’s not easy work to do. If you want to do it with validity, with
rigor, you really want to understand the scope of the problem. Not just you’re
sort of aware of it, you know of, but you don’t know just how many gay men
suffer from depression. I’m not really sure. I don’t want to overstate the
problem but I damn well know there’s a problem there. So it’s like you work
to define it and get the professional associations to acknowledge it and then
you make the system respond. But it’s a whole other layer of the work that I
think the community’s been doing over the last forty, fifty years. We’ve gone
a long way from where we used to be, but even yet you still have government
not owning its responsibility and counting us in research. We’ve kind of
moved a lot of the federal government under the Obama administration but a
hell of a lot more could get done. And then when you look at what should
happen in states and cities, we’re not near where we need to be either.

Meeker: Or where things might happen a year from now.

Sweeney: Yeah. That’s a whole other—let’s hope.

Meeker: But let’s not talk about that. Just a point of clarification. You were working
for Empire State Pride Agenda but part of your duty was organizing or
working within the network, correct?

Sweeney: Yeah, yeah. I was co-chair with a woman named Carmen Vasquez. Carmen
was the head of the public policy program at the New York City LGBT
Community Center and so she and Richard Burns, her boss, who was head of
the community center and Matt Foreman, who was my boss at the Pride
Agenda, and then numerous other providers—I mean, people had been sort of
thinking about this, I think sort of watching how the HIV organizations, which
when I was at GMHC, we started the New York City AIDS Coalition. We had
the New York State HIV Coalition. We had lots of similar models but it was
very disease specific. And, believe me, we did housing and mental health. It
was a very all-hands-in.

But when I stepped away from my HIV frontline work and sort of just saw
how much of this model could be applied writ-large to LGBT health and
human service concerns, there were already community center people wanting
to do more of it, family oriented programs, youth oriented programs. They
were kind of all over the state, in Rochester, in Ithaca, in Buffalo, and
Binghamton, et cetera. It was like an idea whose time had come. And what
was great about the Pride Agenda was we just sort of made it a hub to bring
all these people together and also a hub of organizing where the Pride Agenda
wasn’t going to get money out of this. It wasn’t like we were building the
Pride Agenda. We were actually building the infrastructure in the broader
community, which we knew we would then later engage towards Pride
Agenda ends. But it wasn’t like the Pride Agenda was going in and saying,
“We need $500,000 for the foundation.” It was like, “No, no, no. This has
actually got to go to this community center and this youth program and this
adoption service.” It was more that. And we obviously also, what’s the word,
sort of dovetailed all of our work with the existing HIV requests, which were very prominent and very well organized. So we kind of all were in together, knowing that you really can’t separate a lot of these programs.

So in some ways, in terms of organizing, it was incredibly generous on the part of the Pride Agenda Foundation in the sense that they just sort of helped house and administer a coalition, which, again, is its own set of skills. Someone’s got to keep the notes, keep the meetings going, sort of drive the vision and engage the members. Carmen was a fantastic co-chair and she’s grounded. That’s the art form. She’s grounded in a community center, was doing amazing things on dozens of programs for LGBT people. So you always want to have these programs be real in that clients are telling you how it’s working/not working. You don’t want policy analysts up there that are a little bit removed. That isn’t an accountability mechanism. But that said, you couldn’t have just the community center in New York City say this is how it is. You needed to reflect upstate, rural, just the whole range of stuff. And people were really engaged because, as you can probably imagine, people who do health and human service work are very passionate about their program. So given the opportunity to step-up and say, “Tell me about a youth program in Long Island, tell me about an adoption service you’re trying to set-up in upstate New York, people like go. And it was wonderful to tap into that vision and energy and passion.

02-00:28:49
Meeker: As somebody who was working as a conduit for funding, it sounds like, did you start to develop a particular methodology for sorting between the high priority and the highly functioning projects and maybe those that were less so?

02-00:29:06
Sweeney: Well, yeah. Again, you’re touched with the art of compromise on all this. Because you don’t know. Let’s say you end up with the governor putting two point five million or three million dollars in his budget and we’ve asked them for seventy-five million or whatever. And so you go like, “Okay, well, here’s the deal. We’ve got X-amount of money in a state health department budget and these are kind of the parameters for what it can be used for. So let’s try to make the parameters be as sort of ecumenical as possible so that any one of our programs might be able to get a planning grant or might be able to do some data or research or might be able to hire their first sort of social worker or what have you.” So we tried to basically get the most generous interpretation of how money could be spent because we were starting from such a paucity. It’s like these wonderful community centers spread across New York State, they all deserved more. And, frankly, it was like just basically give them a general support grant to keep the doors open or hire an executive director to help sort of build the space out and build the programming and build the board. And we had more luck with state agencies that had experience in HIV because they sort of knew the LGBT program and so the whole way in which you structure an RFP or got something out of it
was like, “Oh, we’ve done some engagement with the LGBT program but you’re talking about non-HIV.” So you know some HIV mental health stuff. Now make it go bigger. Or substance abuse treatment. Make it go bigger. So that’s where you saw sort of the uptake go. Because it’s one thing for the governor or the legislature to say, “Here’s the money.” I don’t need to tell you, then you’ve got to go into the bureaucracy and say like, “Okay, you’re the person in charge of this program in Albany or New York City or Rochester and now I need you to work with us on how your staff is actually going to help make the decisions about who gets the money and how it’s looked at.”

02-00:31:12  Meeker: I think what I was getting at, and you started to address it, and that is as your career goes on you move over more to the foundation side of things, which my understanding, developed programs and then making sure that there are good mostly nonprofits to executive on those programs. So you’re going to have to do a lot of evaluation, both upfront, is this program set up to accomplish this, and then, too, if they apply for more funding, how well did they do with it to begin with.

02-00:31:42  Sweeney: Right. That’s right.

02-00:32:44  Meeker: At this point in time did you start to develop those kinds of tools and sensibilities?

02-00:31:48  Sweeney: Well, I had started to do that obviously at Gay Men’s Health Crisis because we had to justify our funding, which was significant. I think over a third of our budget was mostly city and state dollars and it went for everything from mental health programs to legal services to social work programs and ombudsmen programs. So I’d sort of been through the wringer, as it were, on how you evaluate and keep track of client satisfaction and progression and all that work. And the vagaries of government money and what it means and what it doesn’t mean. And when you have like an amazing contract officer who’s like really a partner in helping you solve problems. Because the hardest part about this is this is hard work. There’s a reason it’s in the nonprofit sector. It’s very hard work. So there’s no magic here about how you do this. And particularly when you’re basically innovating and inventing programs that a community’s never had before. You’ve got to be very entrepreneurial and wide open about like, okay, what would this program look like? We’ve got the funding, we can hire the staff. Even like, who do you hire? There aren’t masters programs that help—maybe there are, maybe there aren’t. There aren’t many, not in those days. So what does it look like? And I enjoyed that because, to me, not only is it responsible in terms of if you’re getting taxpayers dollars you have to justify your use of them. It’s a privilege to get those, not a right. Secondly, you do want to know, honestly, if someone comes with an issue and a problem, are you actually helping them with what they
brought to you? It’s an accountability mechanism to your own people. You just don’t sit back and say, “Oh, we have this great buddy program.” “Well, why do you think it’s great? How many people did you serve? Do you actually ask them for an evaluation? Do you have open forums where they can come and give you feedback about, ‘We like this but we don’t like that?’” Or whatever. It’s the whole way you have to really take the temperature on like how you’re doing. And I think that takes a lot of listening skills and patience and willingness to hear hard critiques that you can’t personalize because usually people, when they bring them, are saying like, “I’m so angry. I thought you were going to help me with this and it’s not.” You’re trying to say, like, “Okay, but what isn’t working here?” And if we did this tweak or that tweak or moved it this way or brought in this other person, is that going to get us to more stable housing for you, whatever the issue was?

02-00:34:38
Meeker: I’d like to ask you about the research component, kind of going back to it. You had mentioned that you needed to have data and the data simply didn’t exist. Did you start working with and supporting researchers at this point in time?

02-00:34:52
Sweeney: Well, we did. We kind of poached off a lot of the folks that had started to do research on HIV and AIDS because there was some data obviously there, particularly around men who have sex with men in New York. But other people were beginning to do some early research. It wasn’t very well developed. Sort of differently placed. Columbia’s School of Public Health or NYU or what have you. And so that was helpful. We did sort of early community study stuff but it was sort of surveys and stuff that would probably not have the rigor that most scientists would want. On the other hand, as you know, when you start from nothing you can say, “Well, listen, we had 500 people take this survey. You can argue about which 500 it was. When 30 percent of them have experienced discrimination at work, that tells you something.” Or 40 percent of them were not out at work because they thought they would suffer. That gives you some sense of the discrimination that’s out there at work, what have you. Or hate crime statistics, what have you. What we tried to do is also build off of municipal gains in like New York City or Rochester or Ithaca or Buffalo. And like an agency in New York City would have already started to look at hate crime statistics or crime statistics and what the LGBT piece of that might be, so we could use it in Albany to say, “Look, you may not know this but the number of hate crimes in New York City, this was the piece of that that was L, G, B, or T” and do some extrapolations then of like this isn’t going to be limited just to New York City. That may be the case in Rochester or Buffalo or wherever if people actually ever kept those statistics, which they don’t in those other places. So it was kind of just a slow accumulation of, I guess you would almost call it low-hanging fruit that we could find wherever we could find it. And then obviously it deepened over time.
Were you finding that these sort of qualitative personal stories were more or less effective than the population data that you were coming with or the crime statistics around hate crimes?

Well, that’s an interesting question. I think in advocacy we do a mistake, which is I totally understand that in the end you need data to ground your argument. On the other hand, you never get people’s attention, nor do you move them to action if you also don’t speak to their heart. If you don’t give them something in their head that goes from, “Oh, 60 percent of LGBT people in Colorado are not out to their physician,” I can tell you that, and you can be like, “Huh.” Now, if you’re non-gay you may think, “What difference does that make?” or “Do you really have to share with your physician your sex life?” You don’t know what it means. But then if you tell three personal stories, right, where all of a sudden someone realizes this lack of information with your physician resulted in this healthcare disaster for someone and you think, “Oh, my God, why didn’t you tell your physician?” It’s like, “Well, because I didn’t feel safe or comfortable in doing it. And they also made it very clear they wouldn’t know anything about it,” or “I did it once and they immediately shut me out and said, ‘I don’t deal with you people. You need to go to another physician.’” And you need to tell like multiple stories. It gives like color commentary for someone to go from kind of a thought to like a perspective. It’s like, “Oh, that’s why we need to have cultural competency training around this.” Or why we need a law on the books that says someone can’t discriminate against you in healthcare access because they just don’t like you or don’t understand you. That’s the journey part of when you’re working with a non-LGBT person. You have to kind of analyze them and say, “Are you more of a head or a heart person? And then when I get you in your heart but you’re still going to come back with a head thing, what have I got to get you?” Or if I’ve got you in your head but I can just tell you you’re still like, “That’s not good. That doesn’t sound good. So what’s your point?” How do you engage and move someone to kind of action?

Also at this point in time, ’94 to 2000, this is when marriage really becomes, over a short period of time, a front burner issue for the gay and lesbian community. You have what’s happening in Hawaii rolling out. You have the Defense of Marriage Act passed in 1996. And then you start to have some statewide initiatives. I think California, Prop 22 was in 2000, so at the end of this. What did you think when this issue starts to hit the national kind of political stage?

Well, my perspective in those days was pretty much still New York State based. I was definitely of the school of incremental stages of recognition of LGBT relationships. So whether that was going to be domestic partnerships or when the concept of civil unions came along. Registries with cities. We used
to do these things like you could register with New York City your relationship. And then by registering with New York City with your relationship you would then, if you were a city employee, be able to get X and X for your partner. And then beyond that you went to full domestic partnership for gay or non-gay couples, right. Then we went to this notion of what a civil union was even more. And you sort of basically tried to get the benefits of full recognition of marriage sort of along the way but never sort of own marriage for fear that was sort of too far out there. And I’ll tell you, sort of watching someone like Mayor Giuliani in New York own what we got passed there and stand in front of a group of people—this is an example of the head and heart thing, right. This was domestic partnership. I don’t think it was civil unions then in New York. I don’t remember these days.

I think it was domestic partner.

I think it was domestic partnership. He had first responders up with him, firemen and policemen. And he said, “If they ever got killed in the line of duty I would damn well want to make sure their partner was respected and honored.” It was all kind of from where you enter a conversation. In that case he clearly, and I think he did, really believe in these firemen and firewomen and police folks who really, every single day, risked their lives for the general public. And he sort of believed in that ethic and I think he believed that if they had a partner that helped them do that work every day, that that was worthy of respect. You come at it from that angle and maybe in his heart there was some way that he got over whatever the larger homophobia in the world was. And so we would try to build on that. Right? At some level, once that starts to happen, you’re like, “Okay, if you’re good with sort of—” which I am, too, “the wife of a firewoman getting these protections and benefits, why would you stop there? What about the larger set of relationships?” So we then started sort of adopting the marriage language and pushing at that point Attorney General Eliot Spitzer and others, where we would basically go in and say to them, “We want to get the same recognition for our relationships as anyone.” And as you can imagine, the resistance was fierce, even among our closest friends.

Martin, I’ll never forget one meeting I had with the attorney general in those days. He’s a very, very, very smart guy. Had openly LGBT people on his staff, terrific people. And he knew LGBT people. This is a sophisticated guy, right. And so I remember just sitting down, sitting across from him. So we start the conversation. I’d be, “Okay, let me just say something before we get into it.” Because this is where you get so frustrated. “Not for a minute do you think I’m going to sit here and let you say that your relationship to your wife is any different than my relationship to my partner of, at that point, twenty-two years. There’s no difference. Same set of love, responsibility. So do not tell me
you’re going to set up some parallel system. That’s not okay. We’re talking about equality here and we’re talking about marriage.”

This is one thing that Evan and many of his colleagues taught a lot of us, is you don’t say gay marriage. It’s like it’s marriage. Just like you have a marriage, I have a marriage. Same set of opportunities, challenges, all that. And so I think as more of us started sort of putting that out there, what was interesting, and Evan talks a lot about this, it was almost like these building blocks of then the fall back became like, “Well, I don’t think I can go there but I can understand domestic partnerships.” And they used to say never on domestic partnerships. Then the fall back became civil unions. “Well, as long as you don’t call it marriage I can give you da-da-da-da.” So as in any social movement, you just have to sometimes put the stake in the ground and say this is what we want. This is where we’re going to go and you kind of force the system to come your way. And I certainly was slower in that than many in terms of I just think tactically we kept sort of going towards the ultimate goal. But I definitely was a big promoter of let’s get this domestic partnership thing and call it a victory, let’s get civil union, call it a victory. Whatever the sort of incremental step was of family recognition, I was like go for it, even though it was never kind of the full thing.

Meeker: How did Spitzer respond to that, when you were—

Sweeney: Well, it was always interesting, particularly with very smart worldly people who I don’t think were necessarily homophobic. It became the political argument. “Well, I’m just not sure we’re ready for it.” The body politic. You need to change more of the public’s mind. My experience with a lot of systems is they kind of lecture you at some point about how it’s your job to make me do this. Okay. Right. So then what you say back is, “You’re damned right and we are going to make you do it. So I’ll take you up on your challenge. So we’re going to harass you and force you and push you and make you do it.” And that’s true. That’s kind of what a system is set up to do. What was interesting is how many people, at some point then, when they say, “Make me do it,” and then you watch them and you can see them kind of open up a little bit. They change their position and try to do it, particularly if they’re an elected official, in a way that has some consistency and rigor about how they do what they do. But it was a really fascinating set of dynamics to watch. Because you have to remember, New York State, we were definitely affected by Vermont and all the stuff that was going on in Vermont, because for upstate New York Vermont is not that far away and so Howard Dean and all that stuff that was going on up there. Massachusetts, another neighboring state. New Jersey. There was a lot of stuff going on, certainly in New England, but also in the Mid-Atlantic region that I think, in some ways then—New York sort of fashions itself as this great liberal center of progressive policy. And they’d be like, “You are so behind. Like get going. Catch up. Go.” And it
always changes with who’s the governor, who’s the attorney general, who’s in charge of all the legs—you’ve got all that sort of political makeup of how you move the body politic, as it were.

Meeker: In the nineties it looked like there was going to be some movement toward marriage for same-sex couples but at every turn there was a serious roadblock put up. In Hawaii you have that good supreme court decision and then I think it was the state legislature votes to change the playing field so that then the supreme court comes back and says they can’t implement their previous decision. I think that’s how it worked. Vermont, again, the supreme court comes out and says, “You need to do something for equality.”

Sweeney: So the system says.

Meeker: And then they come up with civil unions, right.

Sweeney: Civil unions, right.

Meeker: And then, of course, DOMA, which is signed by a Democratic president. I don’t know what the vote was but there weren’t a lot of people voting on our side. I know you talked about an incremental approach but at the time did you think that this was ever going to happen?

Sweeney: There were moments obviously when we got completely slapped down. You would just say like wow. You really feel like, God, do these people really hate us this much? Are they really that homophobic? I don’t need to remind you, we had very few votes on our side on DOMA. And many of us worked to elect Bill Clinton, like very, very hard. And this is what we got? But let me also say that one of the things that I learned—

Meeker: At the same time he was engaging in some monkey business of his own. [laughter]

Sweeney: I don’t go there. The thing you learn in life is the—

Meeker: Just as a footnote.

Sweeney: The absurdity of all of this. Eliot Spitzer. But I guess what I want to say, from a movement perspective, is one of the things that I learned in HIV is—because, remember, we had the Helms Amendment, similar situation. Bogus piece of
legislation. Totally homophobic. It was the bullying of the gay community and almost nobody stood with us. It was appalling. And yet you just realize your job in those situations is to witness that, call it out for what it is, and then go right back at it. Find the Center for Constitutional Rights and the ACLU and say, “Let’s sue these people and bring this law down. It’s wrong.” And so to me you can’t let that message that you’re not worth it get into your system. You need to remember where it comes from and you need to say there’s no way I’m going to accept this. Because it’s part of how they diminish you as a person in a community, in a movement. And you just say back, “Wrong. We just haven’t convinced you yet and, believe me, we’re coming back at you.” So I’d sort of been through a lot of that with HIV. Just horrible, horrible homophobic, xenophobic, racist stuff. You look at systems and think, “Wow.” If you own it too much it’s soul destroying. And I think that’s their intention. Like, “I’m going to say stuff that’s going to hurt you so bad you’re just going to sort of shrink and go away.” Instead if you come back and say, “Absolutely wrong. I don’t accept any of that. That’s totally wrong analysis. You know it, I know it. So we’re not going to let you have that power over us.” And I think that’s kind of what happened with DOMA. There was so no there there on the other side, which frankly, didn’t ever really come out till the Prop 8 trial in California. Thank God a judge finally made the other side say like there’s no there there. How is this harming all these heterosexual marriages? The answer was, “Uh, we can’t come up with any examples.” Like thank you for saying that. Now let’s move on. But look how many years later that was. And thank God we had those lawyers and that court case and all that to kind of sort of expose in the way that the system sometimes says like, “Oh, like the lights go on.” We knew that for years and yet there are just times when the system, if you work it right, kind of does the big ah-ha, like the big exposé.

It’s like when Vermont, after civil unions happened and Howard Dean at some point said like whatever. Remember it was like they got civil unions and take back Vermont. Vermont values. They like really went back. The legislature flipped. And yet like three years later Howard Dean was like people are kind of over it because this great social revolution really didn’t affect non-LGBT people all that much in their daily lives. Frankly what it did is it helped a whole bunch of other people, LGBT people, and their broader families be safer and happier and healthier. So once the sky doesn’t fall in you get a little bit like can we move on? And it kind of feels like that’s where we are now with marriage, where we keep saying, like, how does my marriage impact you? What are you talking about? And then I think as the people kind of get used to it and actually see the joy and the benefit of it, they sort of grudgingly go on a journey.

02-00:54:19
Meeker: They get amnesia.
Yeah. They kind of forget. But that’s what generosity is about. That’s what forgiveness is about. Like we’ve all done it. You didn’t know something, you learn something, and then you kind of go like, “Wow, I can’t believe I ever thought that. How come I didn’t understand my privilege? How come I didn’t understand where I came from or this other that I never knew and now I know?” It’s like, well, once you do it, maybe gracefully acknowledge that and then frankly be supportive in a more overt way.

In our pre-interview you mentioned I think what you described as kind of a famous or infamous lunch you had with Evan and you placed it perhaps around the fall of 1999. Can you kind of set this up for me? Even like if you remember where you had this lunch.

Yeah. Oh, gosh. Believe it or not, it’s no longer there anymore, somewhere on the west side of Manhattan. Yeah. Evan will probably remember it. So what happened is my partner at the time was being transferred back out to San Francisco. Had an option to do that. And since we had met here I was really excited to come back here. I always liked the Bay Area and San Francisco. His family was out here. So we made a decision to move back to the Bay Area. I told the Pride Agenda. And in that process of that move and sort of getting ready, as usual, you can imagine, given my work history at Lambda, GMHC, and the Pride Agenda, people are like, “Well, what are you going to do next? What are you going to do next?” And I didn’t really know because I hadn’t lived in San Francisco for a very long time. So I was like, “I don’t really know. Thinking about it. Wonder what would be fun.”

I had known Evan, and had known Evan up to that point for years. Worked with him at Lambda when he was a pro bono attorney, cooperating attorney. Worked with him when I was at the Pride Agenda. And so we had lunch one day. If it comes to me, I’ll tell you. It was one of the early groovy French restaurants right down two blocks from the Pride Agenda office. And we were just talking out loud about where the movements going, sort of where California was, issues. And, of course, as you can imagine Evan said, “Here’s the next play I want to do on marriage. Here’s what would be good to do to make it into a national campaign.” He was still at Lambda in those days. But I think feeling the constraints of Lambda, that Lambda as a legal defense and education fund maybe wasn’t going to be a campaign oriented organization unless it really changed its mission and the way it did its work. And so we sort of talked about why the LGBT movement didn’t have sort of issue focused campaigns that sort of drew all the elements together and then sort of pushed something forward in a more concerted way, including funders as well as nonprofit organizations. And so we talked about that. I remember one of the things that we jointly said to each other was, “Boy, you could try a campaign like that but you’d really need someone to come in with some significant
money to kind of launch it because it would be so challenging to the existing way in which the movement works and it would be disruptive and it would be very, very focused and people would probably resist it because not everybody thinks marriage is either, A, the right answer or, B, their priority for sure. But if we sort of proved the concept maybe it could really move that.

Well, so flash forward. The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr., fund was—

Meeker: Could I actually ask you to pause for a second?

Sweeney: Yeah.

Meeker: This whole concept of starting as a campaign. It was never, “I’m going to start a 501(c)(3) and we are going to be the HRC of marriage or something and we’re going to be the advocacy organization for marriage that will move on.” It was a campaign. There’s a beginning, there’s a middle, and there’s an end. And campaigns are usually pretty singularly focused on one issue. It’s getting a person elected, it’s getting a referendum passed or overturned. Where did this idea of a campaign come from? Do you know?

Sweeney: It definitely wasn’t mine. It was definitely Evan’s idea. Look, I had built or run or was very significant in three major LGBT organizations, three different kinds, a legal defense fund, a prevention care and advocacy organization HIV, a statewide LGBT organization. I had been very, very involved in lots of organization building and coalition building within the sort of existing LGBT movement. But I also recognized the limitations of all of them, about when we could sort of really push or drive stuff home. Because I had participated in the limitations you have when you’re running an organization. You’ve got that organization imperative versus a movement imperative. And it’s this constant tension where you’re trying to be movement oriented but you’ve got to like make payroll and build your organization and get the press and hire the right people and develop your board and all that kind of stuff. It’s this constant tension in social movement. So when he said campaign, what I glommed onto is, well, if we can really promise people that this would be new money over and above existing money, that it would be generous and do regranting out back to the very folks that are doing pieces of the work that have to be done. But it can wake up every morning, unlike many of the organizations, with one single focus. Marriage, marriage, marriage, marriage, marriage every day, all day. That would be a luxury. I know many people in the movement would love to be able to just focus on something but their job is to cover a lot of different things. And we could promise once it accomplished it ends, it was actually going to go away. We weren’t starting yet another organization to sort of add to the cluster of groups that were in the infrastructure. It was actually literally going to be a campaign. And I’m very happy to say we
fulfilled that promise and actually got it done earlier than we thought by about five years. I really understood that.

Did Evan give you a sense of where he was getting this from?

Yeah. Look, I’d been at the Pride Agenda. I had to do six issues at any given time. My thing would be you’d kind of wait for an opening on something. Oh, my God, sodomy repeal’s going to happen. Boom, everything goes to sodomy repeal. But it’s not like six months later I was like, okay, the government put money in the healthcare budget. Let’s go there. And I think you do game the system on multiple levels. You have many, many asks because the minute they do one you go great, okay, here’s the next one. Or you never know which one’s going to tee up. You never know which one’s going to sort of gain consciousness. And you do need to represent all these different issues and constituencies. That’s your job as a movement leader. That said, sometimes that feels a little dispersed. It feels like a lack of focus. It feels like you can never really press something home when you need to. Sort of something builds and then it falls off, you go like, “Oh.” Then you wonder, I’d wonder if we’d had a little bit more focus and time on that, could we have driven it further faster. And that’s what got to me, was why not try this other model. And Evan, God knows, he wore me down all the time. Every time he’d talk about it I’d be like, oh, my God, here you go again. And I sort of intellectually couldn’t argue with him but emotionally sometimes I would be like, whoa, I can’t keep up with you. I’m sorry. I was too busy. I’d get frustrated sometimes because I’d be like, “Okay, but look, Mayor Giuliani just signed something,” or we just got the New York State budget to put five million dollars into—he’d be like, “Good, good, good. But—” I’d be like, “Oh, my God. Okay.”

I got the sort of transformative nature of marriage over time. I think I came to that over time. And that’s the other piece that I think Evan did. Not only was there sort of this if we sort of disrupt the movement in the sense of a single issue focus campaign, but his contention that marriage was in fact really way beyond just the institution of marriage, that it really would make people see us in an entirely different light. Maybe unlike a non-discrimination law or a hate crimes law or domestic partnership or funding or whatever other cause and issue we took on, this was somehow going to be, as he would say, transformative. And I do have to say it is my experience that he’s right. That in the process of doing this battle over marriage, people have had to reflect very deeply about what I think was probably the key obstacle for many non-gay people, which is “I don’t think gay people share the same values I do.” And all of a sudden they said, “So let me hear this right. You want to marry this man or this woman because of love, commitment, responsibility? I understand that. I want that in my life or I have it in my life. And that’s a human aspiration that I can relate to. It isn’t different. It isn’t a value that I’m not quite sure. I share that and I don’t understand why I am keeping you from
that.” So just think there’s a way in which he was right that he thought in the
discussion around marriage we would make people, as he would say, sort of
think anew. And I think it was both LGBT people thinking anew about their
own possibilities and their worth and their life and what they want and it was
certainly non-gay people. I think for the first time they found it hard to say,
“You’re the other.” And I think they came back and said, “Hmm, maybe we
have a whole lot more in common. Maybe we’re just human beings together.
And the piece of you that is different I acknowledge but I don’t think it
matters that much.”

Meeker: So I took you a little off-track. Sorry. You were starting to talk about the Haas,
Jr. Fund.

Sweeney: So flash forward. This is a little bit of a hothouse here. Is that when I came out
here I didn’t know this but the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund had already
decided to do a new strategic vision for their foundation that included a
diversity and inclusiveness program. It was going to include lesbian and gay
people, race and other categories. They were just starting it, just flushing out
what it was going to be, just hiring new staff to implement it. And Evan had
seen the notice and somehow gotten in touch with them and had initial
conversations with them about the program officer job and what the program
could be. He, of course, came in and I think sort of wowed them, as Evan can
do. When they said, “Well, what would you have this program be?” he did the
whole, “Let’s go national, do marriage, do something incredibly exciting and
thrilling.” And in that process invited me to go in and see the Haas, Jr. Fund
staff and Sylvia Yee in particular, the vice president, to sort of talk about that
program. I think they were sort of excited about this huge vision that Evan
brought but also a little bit like is this the right thing for the community? For
Haas, Jr. Fund it was a big expansion in terms of they had been sort of more
of a Bay Area funder. This was obviously saying let’s go national, let’s take
on this big volatile politically explosive issue of marriage. All of it. It was
kind of a big set of challenges and change. And to the incredible credit of the
leadership there on the board and the staff they really said, “Let’s go. Like if
we’re going to do this new program, whether it’s on immigration or gay and
lesbian, or whatever, let’s just go and make a big difference in the world.” Just
thrilling and exciting.

But in that process I went and I remember the first meeting. We were just sort
of talking about the state of LGBT. As you can imagine, the staff at Haas, Jr.
Fund I think looked at me and thought, “Well, you’ve been around for a while.
What would you do if you were to do this program?” Because I had been,
obviously, and they were aware of my work. But after we had our first
meeting Sylvia said, “And what are you doing in San Francisco now for
work?” And I said, “I’m literally unpacking my boxes and I don’t know yet.”
And she said, “Well, have you ever thought about applying to work in
foundations as a program officer?” And I said, “No, not really. I mean, I’ve been on some foundation boards and been on community advisory boards for foundations, done more work on sort of the public foundation sector and I’ve raised a lot of money from foundations. I’m not sure I’d be the right person. I’m probably too much of an advocate.” It’s not how I sort of saw my future. And she was really like pressing me to think about it because I think what they realized was that I think they wanted to sort of invest in the dream of Evan but then have Evan lead it and that wasn’t going to be possible from a private family foundation. He was going to have to do it as a grantee running a campaign, that there are just sort of limits to what a private family foundation can do in terms of its own staff. Like is that its role in the world versus supporting others to do it.

02-01:09:38
Meeker: Maybe an understanding early on there’s a difference between (c)(3) and (c)(4) work, as well?

02-01:09:40
Sweeney: Oh, of course. Because it’s a private family foundation and well aware that in the end this was going to take an enormous (c)(4) push and not just a (c)(3) push. Evan wanted to wake up every single morning thinking about marriage and doing that. Is that really all that the Haas, Jr. Fund wanted the gay and lesbian program to be? Because when I started there we did safe schools work. We did a lot of sort of local community funding. We did HIV work. We did some non-discrimination work. We certainly did marriage. It was a much broader palate of organizations and issues, which I just thought was, particularly for a non-gay foundation that was entering this space, it was very important to sort of send a message, locally send a message to California, to the movement generally that we’re recognizing the variety of issues that were there in front of the community and it’s belief and support in a broader analysis of what needed to change. And, again, as all good program officers, also look at what’s the history of this family in terms of what it has worked on. Well, it was very, very involved in youth programming. The reason I brought in sort of the anti-bullying work and all that was, well, you know what this is. You have a huge base of knowledge of this and this integrates into your values over time about all kids being safe and protected. Levi Strauss, as you know, has an incredibly honorable history when it comes to HIV and AIDS in leadership, so I just thought that the HIV piece of this, again, sort of built on a larger family tradition. And people understood, too. Certainly in those days it was a huge priority for the LGBT community. So all of that was, I think, a way to also say that as much as we want to do this north star of marriage, I don’t need to tell you in 2000, 2001, there was a lot of people who were just like, “That’s crazy. That’ll never happen. That’s the wrong priority. Really? We finally have a non-gay foundation stepping up and investing in a bold way and you’re going to pick that issue versus something else? Is that the right thing?”
So I felt we needed to build in sort of understanding time and a recognition that we got it was a gamble and we were not going to do just one roll of the dice on one thing. We were actually going to acknowledge and build up other issues. At the same time, though, Evan and I were tasked with going around and raising what in those days were a significant amount of money to do this sort of long five-year investment on marriage that then became even longer. When we went out and asked donors to invest in this and sort of match the Haas, Jr. Fund’s extraordinary challenge on marriage, which you just have to understand, for many funders that was like, “Wow. That’s, A, a lot of money, multiple years on a big issue. I don’t know if we can go there.” So we didn’t have a lot of takers when we first went out. It was very, very hard. But it was really fun. The thing that was great about it is you can say, “We’re really asking you to dream. We’re asking you to really use the risk capital at this amazing family foundation, which was multiple decades old, very well respected and very serious and very patient and understood leadership development, all of it. We’re going to say time for a change, America.” And it’s just been so amazing to be part of that from the beginning because it really let Evan and Freedom to Marry kind of blossom over time with many setbacks. As in all social movements, two steps forward, three steps back. Many, many, many disappointments but then sort of the solid step-by-step victories along the way and the ability to fund a multiple set of strategies. Litigation, research, communications, messaging, advocacy, public education. Kind of the full coalition building, the full range of things that helped you get to the end result after, whatever, fifteen years.

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02-01:14:29
Meeker: So when in 2001 did you start as program director? Was it director?

02-01:14:36
Sweeney: Program officer.

02-01:14:37
Meeker: Program officer, right.

02-01:14:38
Sweeney: Yeah, I don’t really remember. I don’t really remember when I started at Haas, Jr. Well, actually, that’s not true. That’s when Crissy Field opened. May 6, 2001 maybe? I can’t remember. But the reason I remembered is because May 6th is my birthday and Haas, Jr. to this day has these gorgeous beautiful posters up that says, “May 6th, Crissy Field opening,” and it was an amazing day to be part of the Haas, Jr. Fund when this incredible investment happened, Crissy Field opened. And that was pretty close to when I started, as I recall.

02-01:15:23
Meeker: Did you ever get a sense of why the fund was going to be so invested in LGBT issues or who particularly there was pushing that area?
I think it was the trustees, as well as the leadership at the fund. Ira Hirschfield, Sylvia Yee who really believed in the ability of philanthropy to do transformative work. And whether that was supporting a public university like Cal or redoing Crissy Field as being the sort of gem that it should be for our beautiful city or work on transforming neighborhoods or changing public education, working on immigration rights, I think they really believed in the ability to play the role that philanthropy can play and should play when it comes to the American system. And I think the more we talked about the sort of state of lesbian and gay people in the country, the more I think they realized how central this marriage issue could be and how transformative it could be. And I think they related in a very, very personal way to it. These are very, very patient people. They’re very, very smart philanthropists. They’re seasoned philanthropists. Learned the good, the bad, and the otherwise over the decades. And as we started to get more investors into this effort I think they really saw the power of sort of driving something to a new way. And, frankly, seeing the excitement at the community level. And as we won small victory, victory after victory, Massachusetts, what have you, you could just see over time if we kept at this and got a lot of lucky breaks, of course, but also just did the hard work and learned from the big mistakes, that we could get there. And I think Evan was very, very critical in that.

But not just Evan. There were many of the legal groups that played such—whether it’s Mary Bonauto at GLAD or Kevin Cathcart and his team at Lambda Legal, certainly Kate Kendall at National Center for Lesbian Rights. We have such a bench of amazing leaders and that’s part of what I knew my job was, is to show the trustees these incredible leaders, right, and their ability to sort of be visionaries and transform things. Whether that was Carolyn Laub with the GSA Network or John Manzon-Santos at API Wellness. It’s just like this is the incredible leadership we are trying to basically put wind in the sails of and let the organizations go. And I really have to give it to the Haas, Jr. Fund’s willingness to kind of listen and learn when leaders and social movements hit bumps in the road or changed strategies or tried something and completely fail and say like, “That isn’t a bad thing. We expected it. We just want to know what you learned out of it.” And when things are tough, stay with leaders, build up leaders, give them the skills to build strengths around them and let them be maybe their core skill is what they sort of focus on versus management or communications or fundraising or what other pieces that kind of build an organization over time. So really I just can’t say enough about what a partnership it’s been.

But also visionaries in social movements: That’s Mary Bonauto and the ability to look thirty years down the road in terms of legal equality and say this is how we’re going to have our families be recognized and set it up the whole way. Evan, as much as he’s a lawyer, he’s also a campaign strategist. So that’s sort of the elements that you need to pull together to sort of build towards a final Supreme Court decision or in the end might be a congressional decision
on something. It’s really important to give them the time to figure out their visionary work and then support it and then, frankly, show it off to donors to say you need to invest in this.

Meeker: So take me into some of the practicalities. There you are starting at the Haas, Jr. Fund, obviously continuing conversations and working with Evan. He has expressed this idea to start what becomes the campaign Freedom to Marry. And I understand, I guess, the first announcement was a $2.5 million commitment over five years. How was that number arrived at? Was it specifically for Freedom to Marry? Can you tell me about that initial pledge?

Sweeney: Sure. It was arrived at through a lot of back and forth with Evan and I and the trustees and Ira and Sylvia about what would be an ambitious number, a transformative number, but a doable number. I don’t want to go too far out. And I don’t need to tell you anybody saying five years, for anybody who works in a nonprofit, that’s like, wow, really? Wow. I would love to know someone’s going to stay with me over five years. Many grants are one year, at best. Secondly, the number at that time was very big. Two point five million was a very large number in terms of private foundation grants in those days. Frankly, would probably still be pretty big in the movement all these years later. I know that was part of it. Was this was a big number. But there was also a challenge to match it. We had to go out and find investors. So that was a whole other piece to the work.

Meeker: Was there a percentage of that that was expected to be matched?

Sweeney: I think it was all of it actually.

Meeker: It was all of it, okay.

Sweeney: We had a very high bar. It’s interesting that I can’t tell you the exact number because I probably am in denial about it because I remember I used to just think we are never going to get here. It’s going to be so hard. It was like we would get an interim going. The first year or something we had to get towards like $800,000 or something and we sort of barely made it. It was a really hard slog in the first couple of years. People just didn’t know. Of course, we had movement organizations saying, “Is Evan starting a whole new thing? We already have HRC or the Task Force or the Lambda. What do we need this for? How is the campaign going to work? What’s the net addition to the movement? How is the regranting going to work? Who’s going to get the money?” You have the state versus national. Bring it to the states, don’t give it to the national. Da-da-da. But we worked through all that. That’s what we did. We figured out how to build an organization over time. I was very, very close to
Evan in how we started the sort of Freedom to Marry advisory board and who we brought on for that, how we set up the regranting so that it was very, very solid. How we started a sister funder organization, the Civil Marriage Collaborative.

So what happened there, Martin, is that we had people invest in Freedom to Marry, but then on the regranting part, the more we realized we needed a sort of a collaborative fund to sort of fuel the movement, people were uncomfortable with having Evan and Freedom to Marry sort of be in charge of all that. It’s a typical funder response. They wanted to have more of a say and be at the table and shape it more. And so we started this collaborative effort. Evan was one of our advisors but we had at any given time three to four non-funder advisors helping us out, figuring out communications, faith-based work, communities of color, what have you, to sort of say this is where the work needs to be augmented or done. And so then we would have these foundations put out in the field a million, two million, three million, whatever dollars over time. And, again, that collaborative lasted many, many years. Just shut down this last year. Was very important to sort of being a steady funding partner and strategic partner to Freedom to Marry and to other elements of the movement. It was very much about state based funding. It really helped elevate and build the state infrastructure because we knew that’s where we had to do this, sort of state-by-state strategy to get to national resolution. And it built a lot of camaraderie and learning among funders to sort of take back to their boards and principals and donors to say this is what we learned in Massachusetts, this is what we learned in Washington, this is what we learned in Kentucky, what have you and through these sort of ups and downs. And this is the mix of public education, organizing, research, messaging, coalition building, this is what’s working, this is what’s not working. And a lot of my job at Haas, Jr. was chairing or co-chairing or be a central player in all of that sort of funder development. As Evan said, Freedom to Marry is meant to be sort of an engine of resources to help drive and fuel the movement and I was one of his partners in that more from the institutional funder side than individually. But also, as you can imagine, when Evan would go out to fundraise from individuals, too, what really helped to have them say, “Wow, so your investors in this include Open Society or Arcus Fund or the Gill Foundation or Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr., or Overbrook.” These are respected long-time or powerful philanthropic partners and the fact that they’re saying we’re in makes me think people are really taking a hard look at this. Through good, bad, and otherwise they’re not saying you’ve got to get this done in the next couple of years. They’re recognizing this is like a huge challenge. So part of my job is to sort of translate institutional philanthropies commitment to individual funders and to say we need you in this. Whether that’s Freedom to Marry, Civil Marriage Collaborative, or just give money to NCLR so they can do that litigation case or give money to a statewide organization because the Civil Marriage Collaborative will bring money into this state but we need in-state donors to help back it up and sustain it over time.
Meeker: I don’t know if deliverables is the right term. But with this $2.5 million pledge did you get a sense of what the trustees or what your bosses at Haas, Jr. Fund were looking for that to buy, if you will?

Sweeney: I think it was marriage in six states in five years.

Meeker: So there actually was kind of a goal?


Meeker: I mean something measurable?

Sweeney: Yes, absolutely.

Meeker: Was that at all related to the 10-10-10-20 plan?

Sweeney: Well, as you can imagine, as we saw how hard it was going to be to win these states sort of step-by-step and we lived through the cycle of winning in the courts, having them be overturned in the legislature, the sort of courts/legislature/initiative/ballot box option, we had to be very, very careful about that. We learned a lot of hard lessons about that, that we couldn’t hold on to a legal victory or we couldn’t even hold on to a legislative victory because someone would just take it in front of the voters and then knock us down. All that that we’d lived through. It was very, very hard. But we slowly but surely sort of won our first set of states. At the same time we were winning in one states we were sort of setting up others to get on the trajectory of adopting domestic partnership or civil union and then moving them to marriage. And that was the genesis of the sort of 10-10-10-20 plan, which is let’s get ten states with marriage, ten states with broad civil unions, ten more states with fairly extensive domestic partnerships, and that is going to be the mix we need to kind of show that America’s ready for change in a national resolution, in a Supreme Court case. And, again, it will be twenty years. And as you know, it sort of played out that it went much quicker than that. Now, we didn’t know that was how it was going to play out. We were hoping. There were thoughts, ideas, but it was kind of made up as it went along.

And part of the 10-10-10-20 plan was more a reaction to the 2004 sort of ballot disasters than us saying, “Okay, what are we doing wrong here? Why are we setting ourselves up to just to be beaten up at the ballot box by these bullies?” That’s really expensive to try to fight, very hard to do. Not a path forward. So what do we need to do to sort of change that formula? And we did. It really became more manageable after that and it was very hard and tough
conversations about our messaging, our messengers, how we were relating this issue to the broader non-LGBT community and not doing a very good job of it. And so that’s where you saw kind of the all-in from across the movement. That plan really had brilliant people. Matt Coles at the ACLU and Kate Kendell at NCLR. Some of the greatest minds in our movement adding to like where does everybody fit in to this one issue, whether they’re a litigation group, a public education group, a state federation, equality federation. It didn’t matter. HRC, the Task Force. And so it felt like once we had that plan we could go through the ups and downs and that people would sort of be additive in the best way they can. “This is the strength I bring to it. Reaching faith leaders, outreach to corporations, whatever. I’m doing the litigation piece.” And it helped, I think, Freedom to Marry be more of a coordinating entity because everybody who came forward, they were like this is the plan you need to follow here. So if you’re going to go against that, like that’s not okay. Again, I don’t need to tell in the social movement that’s kind of a loose agreement. But there is sort of a moral imperative driving people with this plan towards an end and a focus. It was really, really important I think sort of developmentally for the movement to experience that we can in fact come up with those plans and with some breaks and hard work and sweat and toil really get there. And get there, in fact, even sooner than we thought.

02-01:32:14  
Meeker: So I do want to get into the 2004 and aftermath and 2008 and aftermath because it is transformative for the organization. But given that you were really at the foundation of Freedom to Marry and you being at the Haas, Jr. Fund and then being the foundation that provided the seed funding for the organization, I’d like to get a little more sense about how it actually formed in those early years. Other than Evan, I’m not interviewing a whole lot of people who were there very early on to actually get this thing established. You had mentioned playing a role in setting up the advisory board. I know that it was not a board of directors. Freedom to Marry was a fiscally sponsored project, what, of the Astraea Foundation or something?

02-01:33:05  
Sweeney: Was Astraea first and then it went out on its own, I guess, afterwards. I’m trying to remember all this. Yeah, that’s right.

02-01:33:13  
Meeker: What was the goal of the advisory board? What kind of people were you looking for?

02-01:33:17  
Sweeney: The advisory board really had just really, really amazing people. Like a law school professor deeply steeped in LGBT movement and marriage issues.

02-01:33:30  
Meeker: So that would be Barb Cox, right?
That would be Barb Cox from San Diego, who is amazing. Not only was she amazing in terms of the issue and strategy but she’s amazing in terms of being a chair of a board and just being okay with iterating this board and this organization over time. We just made it up as we went along. So what does that look like? We weren’t a nonprofit board. We were an advisory board. But we wanted to be taken very seriously. Evan knew that he needed us for all kinds of reasons, including how to figure all this out, let alone sort of have some accountability to somebody beyond like one funder or six funders. So we sort of built it up with non-gay allies. John Buehrens, who used to head the Unitarian Universalists nationally came on. Cherry Spencer-Stark, from Georgia, very active PFLAG member.

And a lot of them had worked with Evan over the years as he’d done marriage work in different states or in different issues and we just said like let’s get—and, honestly, some people we asked were like, “I’m not sure I want to do that. It’s not really a board of directors.” This maybe wasn’t the central focus of their work. They were not sure about marriage. And so we had to get people who were kind of in with the concept. And we did and we ended up with probably ten or twelve people at the beginning. And mostly it was kind of like, “Evan, how are you doing to do this work? How are you going to build out your staff? How are you going to deploy the 800,000, one point five million, two million? How does your regranting work? How do you think about investments in the states? Who are your partners? How are you sort of additive to the litigation groups or the national groups?” What have you. And Evan had to grow a lot as a manager in those days, had to grow a lot as a leader running an organization. That was not his strength and skill. He became very, very, very good at it. But we went through and churned through a number of different iterations of staffing. Because nobody ever had done this before. So what does a campaign look like when it’s trying to get a social movement to focus every day on a specific issue? What does the public education look like? What does the technical assistance look like? All that. We were like the brain trust that just sort of helped Evan think all this stuff through. He would go out, hire, try things, do things, some successful, some not. Some staff really worked and blossomed. Others would come and be like, “I’m not sure what this is. I’m not sure this works for me. Not going to work.” But that was part of the risk taking we were going to do. It wasn’t like there was a cookie cutter thing, you said bang, and this is what a campaign looks like. You had to sort of figure that out.

You don’t have to talk about people who didn’t work out or not. I’m kind of more interested in these early iterations of maybe different job categories or work that was being done. Can you walk me through some of those, if there’s
anything that’s particularly memorable or maybe something that didn’t work out that became a lesson learned?

Well, I will say a couple of things. The one that comes to mind the most actually isn’t so much Freedom to Marry, though if I think about it long enough I can think of some things that probably we tried and didn’t work out so well. But one of the things that happened is when we were early on looking at which states to invest in at the Civil Marriage Collaborative, we invested a little money in a lot of states. And that was the typical thing funders tend to do. Instead of making like a hard focused strategic choice you kind of back up a little bit and think like, “Well, I don’t know.” We didn’t know. I forget the first round of grants. I think was eight or ten grants. It was a lot in terms of like the number of states. And when you think about it now, 50,000, 75,000, 150,000, you’re like you think you’re going to get marriage with that much of an investment? We didn’t understand going to scale. We didn’t understand what the states needed, how they could work. And we were frankly wanting to say to some states that we knew were sort of not ready, that we wanted them to know that we cared about them and that we appreciated they were trying to fight a bad ballot initiative. So we’d give them some public education money and still get like wham, slapped down seventy/thirty. Well, how many of those grants are you going to do before it’s like what’s the point of this? Versus Massachusetts is in, it’s going. What they need is 250, 300. All in. Let’s like prove the concept in a place. Again, another state that was sort of ready and ready for an investment and could really take it. I think that took some discipline on the part of the funders to be okay with kind of saying, “Hmm, we thought maybe this was better,” but no, we had to learn things like we weren’t going to fund domestic partnerships and civil unions. We actually were going to do marriage and someone else was going to have to fund that because we just didn’t have a big enough pot. It was just, again, all good commonsensical tries. Like, well, what if we tried this and what if we tried this and we tried this. But I think we felt a lot of pressure about like we got to make this work. Like if we’re really going to get to like X-number of states in five years. That’s the whole point of a campaign, is it makes you feel a sense of urgency and learning from mistakes and going on. So I know that was a big set of learnings around the civil marriage collaborative. And we even did an evaluation. We were trying to be very conscious of our learnings over time and what that looked like.

Another set of learnings both on Freedom to Marry and Civil Marriage Collaborative is what does engagement around marriage look like in an African American community, in a faith community, in a rural community, in a state that has had a conversation around LGBT like Massachusetts for twenty-plus years? And so you aren’t building off nothing versus another state that hasn’t been in the conversation that long. And so you’re really kind of going from zero to sixty pretty quick. A state that maybe hadn’t had a nondiscrimination law or recently got one versus a state that had had one for
fifteen years. So the political system kind of knows what it is, the body politic knows what it is. The culture knows what it is.

And we had to have a lot of discussions, too, and acknowledge, I think, early on too that for some people, they were still parsing out kind of like marriage versus civil union, marriage versus domestic partnership. Sort of like how do I talk about this? Examples being people would lead with there are a thousand-plus federal benefits when you get married and I don’t have access to those. And really being very passionate about it. And maybe picking out Social Security death benefits or something that they thought would be like the big ah-ha light going on for a non-gay person. And a non-gay person thinking, “You want to get married for benefits? I didn’t get married for benefits. I got married because I’m in love with someone and want to—” It was the whole disjuncture of like sort of talking about marriage in a way that just sort of didn’t resonate for people. Even if they sort of intellectually said, “Well, I get why you want social security death benefits but I’m just not sure I’m ready to leap. Like can’t you get that with like civil unions? I think you can. Or can’t you just set up contracts to get that stuff done?” People didn’t know.

So I think we had to go through a lot of experiments about how we framed the issue, how we talked about it in a way that let everyday grassroots people have an authentic voice around it. I think, Martin, is I think we had to peel away a lot of self-imposed limitations, completely understandable why they were imposed, because society so devalued us, that we weren’t worthy of us saying, “I want to get married because I’m in love with this man.” And I think it took a lot for people to say, “I don’t think it has to be more than that. That’s what you say when you get married.” And we all go, “You’re in love with her. Great. Congratulations. You want to get married.” Gay people it was like, “Why do you want to get married?” It’s like, “Well, wait a minute? Why? So I have to come up with some justification for it?” I think the disjuncture between what that said about how people saw us, what that said about our love, the diminishment of it, the whole sort of worth of how we are in the world, very, very deep and very hard for LGBT people to kind of own it and say, “This is what this person means to me.” Because you’re being very vulnerable in the world when you do that. You’re putting out one of the most important things of your life and you’re letting the world judge it. When you sit back and think about that it’s so outrageous. It’s unbelievable. We don’t judge other people’s love and marriage but society certainly decided they could judge us. So I think we had to work through a lot around that. And then I think non-gay people had to work through a lot of like, “I never really thought about that before.” Literally all the barriers. We would say like social security death benefits and going like, “Oh, you can’t get that?” and wanting to find another way to do it. Like, “Does it have to be marriage? Can’t we just give that? Why don’t we give you that and not marriage?” You’re like, “How about not just that?” That whole way. And people want to maybe come with you a little bit but it’s too much of a leap to sort of have a morally equivalent my marriage is just like your marriage.
We learned a lot, mostly by just trying and failing—think about failing. It’s interesting. We tried a lot of things that moved the dial a certain amount but didn’t go all the way. So I think even things that didn’t get us all the way, I wouldn’t exactly call them failing as much as it just didn’t sort of seal the deal. I think it did move people. It’s not like they don’t think with their heads and understand what the thousand federal benefits are. They can’t totally dismiss that. But they want another way out. They still weren’t going to go quite to the morally equivalent thing. So we would get them a certain way and then not quite get there. So then we had to say, “All right, what is it that we’re not really putting forward that’s really making them think more deeply and thinking anew?” because it isn’t working. And maybe it’s not even working with us. Maybe we’re not tapping into our greatest strength and value that we’re not asking them to share with us. And I think we sort of slowly, over time, got that to happen. And my read of the last kind of four years of the marriage battle is LGBT people just drove this thing home. They just found their voice. They didn’t have to be trained. They didn’t have to be messaged. They just said this is my life and this is my love and this is what I want and I’m not stopping. These are my kids. We deserve better. This is my family. Then they got this is my bigger family and their bigger families that were all there. And I just think the strength and power of that, there was no stopping us. Certainly in the last two years when you just saw state after state. It was like whoa. And you just saw public opinion start to go like this and people starting to say things like it’s inevitable. Our opponents saying it’s inevitable. You just knew you were at a moment in a social movement when you were on to something and you had to just kind of drive it home.

Meeker: I think everyone who was an advocate for marriage for same-sex couples knew that there was going to be a lot of convincing and change of opinion amongst heterosexuals. But sort of the journey that gay and lesbian people had to go through. That’s a journey I personally went through. And were you aware that effort was going to have to be applied in that realm, as well?

Sweeney: Oh, sure. After I left Lambda, as you know, Tom Stoddard took over. Amazing leader. And Paula Ettelbrick was head of the legal staff. And Paula and Tom, as you may know, did the kind of famous debates around the country of should we completely reinvent the institution and family recognition into domestic partnership or civil union or some other thing versus sort of following the track of marriage? And so I was very glad that debate was happening. I think it’s a good thing it did happen. I think it made us honestly assess different options for us in the road. As you know, some people still think marriage is great for some people but not an option for them or what they want in how they lead their lives. I knew we were going to have to do a lot of work around this. But one of the things that I think Evan helped me with is owning institutions.
One of the things we funded at Haas, Jr. Fund, which I thought was really important, was the gays in the military issue. You look at society and you think like, “Why do you deny us this, the ability to serve our country?” Like that’s part and parcel of what every human being wants to do? “Why would you turn away the value we can bring?” And as much as I’m not a very military oriented person I totally understand and respect the need for the military and I want LGBT people to be part of it and to be adding to the country’s security and strength. And so, again, some people would maybe argue that would not be a high priority but when I listened to the LGBT people that were in the military or wanted to be in the military and what they went through, it was so outrageous and so wrong on every sense of the word that I just thought we’ve got to do this. And I think it sort of, once again, was an issue that made non-gay people and very important institutions in society rethink what they knew or thought they knew about LGBT people. The whole unit cohesion, all these like sort of threats and the showers. And all of a sudden it was like we can work through all of that. Why wouldn’t we do this? Why isn’t this good for the national security? Like why are we turning away this talent when we don’t have enough? All of that I think also let LGBT people say, “If that was a path for me that I ever thought about, it’s possible,” instead of, “Well, you can’t go in the military so then you just sort of take that off your list of life’s possibilities.”

So I guess what I’m trying to say is I sort of want to make everything possible for LGBT people. And as much as I know some people don’t want to get married or participate in an institution, I get it. I don’t think people have to at all. That said, it really bothers me when we’re just shut out of things. That’s just like not okay for me because I want LGBT people to sort of dream a life of their own and have it be as full and rich of possibilities rather than I can’t go there and I can’t go there and I can’t go there, because I definitely was raised with a lot of those barriers and I think it holds people back in ways that is silly and wasteful.
Today is the 28th of April 2016. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Tim Sweeney for the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project and this is interview session number three. We last left off talking about your time at the Haas, Jr. Fund and there are still some things that I want to talk about, your time there, both specific to the work and also contextually, because we hadn’t talked about Goodridge, we hadn’t talked about Gavin Newsom and so I want to get your perspective on some of those things from the vantage point of somebody working in the foundation world. But there were a few things about working on the Freedom to Marry steering committee that I think would be worth asking about. And the first one, I realized, you know, last time we talked about what the Haas, Jr. Fund was looking for in terms of benchmarks, milestones that they wanted to hit. But I wonder if we can kind of just get into the weeds a little bit and talk about what a foundation looks for in an organization like this as far as reporting and like metrics and how feedback is given. How does that relationship exist?

Well, part of it is I think it depends on the foundation’s board and donors and leadership. And in this case, what was so great about the Haas, Jr. Fund is they realized what an audacious goal they had sort of markered, they’d laid down for society. Let’s open up the institution of marriage for same sex couples. That’s just an incredible dream and vision. And so how to get there? I don’t need to tell you, there’s no like sort of template that you hand someone in a social movement, say, “Okay, let’s change one of the fundamental institutions in society. Go.” It’s like how do you do that? And there certainly isn’t one for the LGBT community when it comes to, in this case, recognition of our families. So what was kind of wonderful is they let us kind of let a thousand flowers bloom. It’s like how would you go about actually doing this?

And the thing that I loved about Haas, Jr. Fund is we very much funded sort of every single element of what you would need to kind of get you over the top in the end. So whether that’s litigation or research or messaging or organizing or even just convening us to come up with like a joint strategy and get buy-in from the players in the field. None of this is easy. Anybody who’s ever tried to do it, it’s like, “Oh, my God, what are you talking about?” Especially if you’re, in this case, maybe forty years into a movement. People have kind of got their approach, their niches. Their relationships are kind of of a certain type and this was really a call to say, “Let’s try to do business a little differently.” And so Haas, Jr. was humble enough to say like, “Go at it. You teach us. We don’t necessarily know.” But you can imagine we very much tried to look at issues like how much kind of buy-in there was across the movement and the different levels of the movement, national, state, local, different facets of the movement, the legal groups we’re in, the state equality organizations we’re in, other national organizations we’re in. That as much as
people started attending the convenings, jointly talking about things, coming up with a set of criteria about, like, okay, if we were to do this what states would we invest in and why and what is the criteria for investing in a state.

And we ended up having a very long list of criteria that took into account all kinds of things, from where would their newspaper editorial boards be to what kinds of judges do they have, if we win or lose do they have a ballot initiative possibility? What’s the state of the legislature? What’s the state of our movement? You can imagine there’s a bazillion ways you look at a state and think like, “That would be a way in there, given history and politics and culture, et cetera.” So the more and more we saw people sort of sharpening their sense of what the investment criteria would be, I think the more the Haas, Jr. Fund said, “We’re sort of all in.”

Then, of course, you started winning things, sort of one state at a time, one legal case at a time. You started watching the polling move. And, again, on polling you really have to look at within the LGBT community, beyond the community, looking at the various aspects of race, of gender, of politics, of geography. You’re just going to move elements in time. And we looked at things like are we actually winning young people? And so if we are, does that mean sort of set us up even though it may take us a couple, three or four decades. Does not mean eventually we’re going to kind of get there, versus like are you winning in people that are sixty-five years and older because you’re just like, “Well, how does social change happen, particularly around sexuality and sexual orientation in this situation?” So the Haas, Jr. Fund was very patient and I think actually a learning partner with the movement about how you sort of had these markers that said like, “Wow, this is like getting there. Look at this incredible editorial.”

I remember another thing we looked at was when newspapers—people are going to laugh when I say this. But when newspapers started printing marriage announcements—people are like, “Really?” And I’m like, “No, listen, when you’re in a local town and you open your local paper and it says Bill and Peter or Mary and Susan got married, that’s like a really big deal.” Like the fact that people were honoring the relationships and really looking at things like everybody does in those wedding announcements, love, commitment, responsibility, the kids, whatever, the family, the parents are so proud. All of it is like a celebration of love and life. And so we took those as very important cultural markers, of saying like, “Wow, look how many newspapers are now doing this.” What was never discussed before is being discussed. And you know that a newspaper’s owners had to make that kind of decision. Like they had to go on the thought journey of like, “What is this statement we’re making by including these folks in what has traditionally been a non-LGBT space?” So it was a lot of those type of markers.

And then, of course, we looked at literally the investment from other funders, both gay and non-gay, and then the grassroots fundraising that was coming to
our grantee partners. So as they increasingly went out front as marriage as an issue, were they able to actually turn that into donors? Whether that’s direct mail or online or with major donor events or frankly just raising money from other foundations that heretofore had not given to them. So it was sort of a notion that you were building a base of support, sort of resources financially, public opinion, skills, tactics, strategy. And once we could lay all that, and as you can imagine, my job was to sort of paint that picture very often for my bosses to say like, “Here’s another step forward. And this is how, by the way, it fits into a larger strategy to get somewhere.” Or here was where we fell back and here’s what the analyses of sort of what went wrong and what we need to do again in the next round of grants to sort of change that.

I keep using the word learning because—Evan has once said when people said to him, “Tell us what was the gay model for winning this.” It was the “gay muddle.” And it’s true. The muddle part is what I relate to because we really were kind of making it up as we went along, looking at other movements, best practices, as best we could discern them. Certainly our own decades of history, of like what moved and didn’t move. So it was a very exciting—

And I think the other thing I would say, Martin, is that we very much also tracked the lesbian and gay couples who wanted to get married and the enunciation of why they wanted to get married. As always, you go to the very constituency that you hope the world will change for and watch them enunciate how they’d do, what they’d do. And whether it was public declarations, where people would just stand in front of city hall and say, “We’re going to get there someday.” And listening to them talk about what it means in their life and the values they wanted and the change they wanted to be and the commitments they wanted to make to themselves, to their families, to their kids, to their communities. I definitely think in all fundraising and philanthropy you put that out front because it’s the heart of why you’re doing things. Sometimes you’ve got to set aside like what’s the theory of change, what’s the strategy, and it’s a little bit more like, “Look at what this says.” And if we could take this and amplify it by tens of thousands, which is what we did.

And at some point what I loved about the marriage movement is it became the sort of ultimate grassroots juggernaut. Lesbian and gay couples all over the country just started saying, “I want this. It means this to me.” And they said that totally from their heart. They just said, “I’m putting it out there.” That’s a very brave thing to do in a homophobic society. And like basically said, “We’re not going to be denied.” And they did it everywhere. Pretty soon it wasn’t sort of this more orchestrated coordinated message thing. It just became this kind of grassroots tidal wave and that’s when I just really felt like they’re never going to stop us. I don’t know how long it’s going to take. But given what we want and are saying, they can’t deny those values in a democratic society. It’s just not going to work.
Meeker: It’s interesting you bring this up because, of course, say around the defeats of 2004, and then pushing the issue in the years before that, whether it was much less consensus in the community, let alone the broader nation, there was this sort of criticism from some sectors that the organizations were pushing this on gay and lesbian people who didn’t really want it. But then, in fact, you do start to see a lot of gay and lesbian couples going forward not associated with any movement, oftentimes not in San Francisco, New York, LA, saying this is something that I want. And that must have been, I would guess, kind of an interesting development to see from your perch?

Sweeney: Yeah. It was very interesting. And the Haas, Jr. Fund was very invested in the safe schools work. We were very invested in a lot of other family issues, early childhood education. We were doing HIV work. We were very clear that there were multiple centers of organizing and attention in a diverse LGBT movement. But we also knew the power that marriage could have in terms of a more engaged and transformative impact. And it was always a stretch goal. I thought we would win actually other issues first. I actually thought we would win non-discrimination protections first and that was obviously a logic that I was wrong on.

But I think that just the power of the institution and what it means, and all the sort of cultural and psychological issues that come with it, once we really dug into that, and it spoke to kind of—how would I say this? It spoke to the ability of a person and a couple to just clear out all the homophobic clutter they were raised with and say, “This is what I want in my life.” And it’s love, it’s family, it’s commitment. It’s like one of the most important decisions you make in your life. And I think once we sort of allowed people to go there it was so much more important in some ways than a job or public accommodations. It was so much more fundamental that people could just go there and speak the truth on it and speak the desire and the dream of what they wanted. And emotionally connect with themselves, with their partners, with their families, and then with the broader public about like what about this isn’t great for me and the world? Like why would you stand in the way of this? You can argue non-discrimination and jobs. You can argue all kinds of other issues where people, I think, can put up probably wrong barriers, but they do.

But once you get into this and basically ask the question, it is a little hard for people to come back with, “Because that’s the way it’s always been. It’s tradition. It’s a threat to my marriage.” And then when you say like, “Okay, let’s stop. And how is it a threat to heterosexual marriage?” They never had an answer to that. They just made stuff up. I think we kind of knew that fundamental truth. So the power of the issue and the movement is we knew the truth about ourselves, about why we wanted to get married. And once we said that it’s like truth’s going to win out. It’s going to work. In some ways it sort of unleashed this almost quiet revolution of people who have been
wanting to go there in a way that just we haven’t seen on probably any other issue except maybe in the height of the HIV epidemic, when it was like life or death and we were going to go there.

So that’s an interesting lesson, I think, for how social movements engage critically a minority community, engages the majority society, and tries to move the people’s understanding of the relationship, the values shared, etc. Really a little bit unpredictable to me because I couldn’t believe how fast the change has happened. As you know, when we started it, we thought twenty years. It was like just much longer. Through a combination of very, very smart strategic moves, I think it became much quicker. But I also think it just went deeper with non-LGBT people quickly. And I don’t know if it’s because they share the idea of what marriage is in their own lives and what family is and what commitment is, and so they just could relate to it so much. You’re going to talk job discrimination, if you haven’t ever really experienced discrimination, maybe you’re a little bit like, “I still don’t quite know what you’re getting at.” Whereas you’re saying I want to share in an institution that you participate in and you go like, “Once I get past the same gender thing I understand what that is.”

03-00:16:51  Meeker: You had mentioned that you were at Haas and your colleagues in the movement were studying other social movements, trying to get a sense of best practices. How formal was this?

03-00:17:04  Sweeney: Not very formal. I took a lot of my learnings from Evan, who just had studied a lot about the civil rights movement and kind of how that went forward. I’ve had sort off going into this, I guess, twenty-five plus, almost thirty years of experience, mostly on environmental issues or LGBT issues or HIV. And I really do think we had lessons learned about how we brought AIDS and HIV to the public consciousness and changed the world on that and changed the course of a pandemic. I think there are huge things that we did there that sort of fed our creativity and thinking about how to do marriage.

03-00:17:57  Meeker: Could you give me a few examples of those?

03-00:18:00  Sweeney: Well, one of it was the same audacious thing, which we can put an end to AIDS. A cure. We can do this. We definitely called on the values of caretaking and love and family and commitment, particularly for people who were in a very serious stage of a disease and people related to that. I think they saw gay people. All of a sudden it was like, “Oh, you guys aren’t these sort of automatons that are different than me that I don’t know and you’re basically about sex and I don’t know what that is because it’s not the kind of sex I do,” and all that other different stuff. Suddenly they were like, “Wow, you’re taking care of someone who’s sick and I know what that is,” or “I’ve seen it,”
or “I know I’m going to face it with my aging parents, what have you.” And then once we sort of harnessed the power of that, particularly the fact that so many non-LGBT people got involved in HIV and AIDS and said, “This is me, this is my family, this is my community,” like what are you talking about, and why would we treat this disease different than we treat other diseases?” All the kind of calling forth of that. I think we used those sort of common value based ideas on marriage. It was the same thing. It was like how do we get rid of the other? How do we get rid of the fact that people put the difference up and stay in that space instead of saying, “This is my struggle and my issue, too.”

I think we also looked at the enormous volunteer engagement that happened and happens on HIV, just tens of thousands of people doing what they do every single day, whether it’s prevention or care or helping in research or whatever they do, advocacy, organizing. And the way that HIV used every single tactic possible, from civil disobedience to being on research trials, advocacy, all of it, the services. And I think in the same way we looked at marriage and thought, “Okay, to really do this lift we’re going to have to go on every single cylinder.” And that means the sort of edgier push to sort of be right in the middle of the major institutions and trying to move it all. I think there were lessons around how on HIV we engaged the spiritual and faith communities in a very important way, to say, this is the essence of the human experiment on earth. Like where are we on that, particularly as we face death or grief or healing. And I think we brought that faith element to marriage over time and people started stepping up and saying, “This is the joy of life, is to engage in marriage. Like why wouldn’t you do that?” So I think about just sort of being fed by not only sort of strategy and tactics like that but hope and the ability to actually change things literally right in front of you. Like being sort of in the moment in history and knowing you’re shaping history is a terribly motivating thing to do. And you feel blessed at some level if you are part of that because you just remember where you came from and think like I never dreamed in my craziest dreams we’d be able to do this.

And the other thing about HIV is it was global. And so was this marriage battle. It’s all about recognition of family all across the world. And so as you know, in the marriage battle we engaged Canada and we heard what Denmark, the way that it sort of developed across the world. There was a lot of feedback, particularly from western Europe but also Latin America and other places. As the ball sort of just started to move people were like, “How are you doing what you’re doing in your country?” and “What was the engagement of the faith community and the non-gay community?” whatever. And we did a lot of that in HIV, same kind of sort of bottoms-up engagement.

03-00:22:30
Meeker: You had mentioned a lot of conversations with Evan about strategy and his learnings from the civil rights movement. Do you recall what he
communicated to you based on what he thought was applicable from the civil rights movement to marriage?

It was sort of what Dr. King somewhat exemplifies in my mind. It’s just that you don’t wait. You really claim what it is that you want. And even though you’re laughed at, you’re scoffed at, you’re told that’s never going to happen, that is enormous power, because you lay out a vision for yourself, for your friends, for your community, and you say, “We’re going there.” And what’s so interesting to me is the non-LGBT world then says, “Oh, that’s ridiculous. I never thought in my life we’d ever talk about—” They kind of try to bat you away and dismiss you. But what they’re really doing is saying like, “Wow.” Like I guess I’m going to have to go on a journey with these people that I either didn’t want to or I think is going to be really, really hard. Like it’s going to make me stretch and think about stuff that I’ve never thought about in my life. Sexuality, whatever.

And the fact that Evan and Mary [Bonauto] and all the plaintiffs that got married, all these amazing leaders just said, “Equality. This is where we’re going. This is what we’re going to claim. Nothing more, nothing less. And if it takes us decades, so be it. But like we’re the non-gay community’s worst nightmare. We are never going away. We’re never going to stop. So go ahead and throw whatever you want to throw at us. We’ll take the hit and we’re going to keep going.” And so much of what I saw in the civil rights movement, what Dr. King did, where he would go to voting and then go to housing and then go to employment and then go to bank lending. Just the whole way in which he and the larger movement embraced and sort of continually expanded their sense of what is a human right. Jobs and justice. It was like this hugely heart-driven audacious dream.

I think we in the LGBT community have been slowly letting that possibility sink into us and then demand more and more and more. And whether that’s around sexuality or the gender binary or all these institutions that we’re trying to change, we are sort of getting comfortable saying that’s what I need and that’s what I want. And almost by claiming it, even though there are all kinds of legal barriers, you make it happen for yourself. That’s what’s so powerful about it. Instead of surrounded by all the homophobia and transphobia, you just say like, “I’m clearing a bunch of this stuff out for me.” And I think that makes non-LGBT people say like, “Well, look out.” And I think it actually makes people admire sort of an empowered person who says, “I’m going to sort of be authentic and think in my own way and lose the fear, be authentic.” And once that happens, I just think it’s so powerful. And that’s what I’m sort of getting about this marriage moment, is its way more than marriage. It’s like L, G, B, and T. Now we’re in the T moment in a way that like, okay, let’s talk about bathrooms. Let’s talk about what it is and what it isn’t and we’re not going to let you put that speed bump in front of us and pretend it’s a real issue. It’s not. And the people that are being harmed there are transgender people.
So I just love the fact that it’s kind of opened up space for people to go at long-term prejudices and stereotypes and say, “Not true. Listen to an authentic voice. Listen to a community that is defining itself and making its space in the world and connecting with you on values that actually makes our community and our country better not just for us but for everyone, and all the potential that’s in us that’s wasted or held down.” And I think that’s another lesson from the civil rights movement, is once that is connected with and sort of blossoms, people are attracted to that. It’s like who doesn’t want to be around that kind of a person versus someone who’s constantly scared of being who they are and out of the closet and all that. That just holds back people in such a wasteful way.

Meeker: You had mentioned in passing a polling done of LGBT people on this issue. Obviously that makes sense but I hadn’t really thought about that. Can you tell me a little bit about that polling and what the findings were?

03-00:27:55
Sweeney: Well, the polling that I think you might be talking about is we did—I can’t remember whether we did it while I was at Haas or when I was at Gill. Anyway, within those couple of years, from one to the other. The polling that was so interesting was, “Did LGBT people and non-LGBT people share the same set of values?” And that was the critical piece to me because we were kind of shocked by the fact that non-LGBT Americans didn’t think they shared the same values as LGBT values. So you kind of step back and you kind of think to yourself, “Wow.” And what’s important to a movement is you’ve got to hear that. Like that’s big news. And I remember I heard it because I’ve been doing it for, whatever, twenty-five years already. And I thought like, “Really? Why would they think that? Well, what do you think our values are?” Full potential? All the kind of common values that make for a good society and a good family, a good neighborhood. You’re like, “Why wouldn’t you think we shared that with you?” So I think we really took that seriously because it was a huge barrier. And I think what we worried about is then you would get into specific issues. And right at the last minute when you’re like—maybe you’re on a ballot measure or voting for someone and you’ve got an openly gay candidate, if people go like, “I want to like them but I’m just not sure whether they’re in sync with me on some core value.” It lets people fall back to sort of a negative position. And I think we wanted to go like, “Okay, we’re not going to let that sit unaddressed.” So that’s where we really then, I think, tried to look at sort of the framing stuff we did. And also on the messaging work, it’s like we don’t need to be talking to ourselves. We need to be talking to non-LGBT people. And once that happens you’ve got to listen to them. You’ve got to listen to what they care about and then what they know about you and then you’ve got to be able to sort of authentically talk in your own voice to them and try to make a connection. And it takes a lot of patience because sometimes you listen to what they say about LGBT people and you go like, “Where did they get this information?” Well, big surprise, the
same place you got it, from a society that’s been uneducated and unenlightened and full of stereotypes. So just do the hard work. I’m working him through that and sort of disassembling that. And it takes enormous grace to do that, because sometimes you just want to be like, “Enough.” It’s just crap. And get really angry about it, which, of course, you have every right to be. But then you’ve got to think, okay, sometimes the anger is relevant, important, and does move people. Sometimes it gets in the way because people just shrink from anger, freeze up, don’t think, shut down. That’s not a good place. You can’t stay there. That doesn’t help.

So I think a good example of this was when Prop 8 passed here. And, of course, we were just devastated. It was devastating. Right? In California, the progressive beacon of the west, right? And we lost handily. It wasn’t close, which would have just taken a bit of the sting out of it. But what was interesting is the number of non-LGBT people who were outraged that their friends and family that they loved and cared about were basically being told you’re second-class citizens and your love is not legitimate. It created such a wave of we’re going to commit ourselves to fix this. And we have to be willing to be with them in their anger, invite them in in a new way, let them lead with us. All of that is hard to do, I think, in a social movement because you get worried they don’t really get it, their message is not your message, are they going to do some half measure, are they going to compromise, what do they know? But you got to kind of trust that they’re with you and you got to really in some cases step aside and realize, for instance, the message you may say to yourself or within the community is different than the one the non-LGBT community needs to hear. And maybe they need to have different messengers that just talk about the journey in a way that maybe an LGBT person wouldn’t sound authentic or real on. So that was just such an interesting moment. It’s almost like after Prop 8 we needed to step back a bit and let the world realize, “Wait a minute, what happened here? This is not okay.”

I think I mentioned to you the polling after Prop 8, actually the support for marriage went up. You’re a little bit like how does that happen. But that’s just the point. You could shut down, you could get angry, you could decide I’m done or I’m really going to go out there and like sort of attack people about their ignorance. Or you could sort of let it stew a bit and say, “All right, so what is this? What happened here? How do we move this forward?” And it felt like a lot more people kind of stepped up in that moment to say—even, I think, people who voted and were not feeling good about their vote. We had to give them a place to go. And that’s where you’ve got to be careful about like, “Why did you—” You can’t attack. You’ve got to talk it through them. Like, “Okay, you don’t feel good. Why don’t you feel good? What about this leaves you going hmm?” And then build on that. And that happened on a number of occasions. It wasn’t just California. You know how many of those ballot measures we lost. [laughter] A lot. At the same time, then you would win these court cases and with this ringing language. How many times have we
used language from the California Supreme Court or the beautiful initial language out of Massachusetts, which still just makes me cry. Where you would then put that in front of people and say, “That’s actually what this issue is about.” You could just see them being like kind of lifted up in a way that a phenomenal court decision can do that, with ringing language that’s very much across the value spectrum. And then people say like, “That’s where I’m going to land.”

Meeker: Well, let’s talk about the Goodridge decision, November of 2003, reaffirmed in early 2004. You were already at Haas by this point in time. I guess what was it like there at Haas when this first happened?

Sweeney: Oh, it was magnificent. It was so like this state got there. This is what we can do. And listen, we were very aware that Massachusetts had done decades of discussions about LGBT issues. This did not come out of an Oklahoma or a Wyoming, that just had not had that kind of journey. It had passed a lot of laws that had a very out, engaged LGBT community and allied community had an amazing HIV network to build off of. This incredible legal organization, regional GLAD, one of the smartest, most effective organizations in our movement’s history. All of it was of a piece. And even culturally, Vermont, Massachusetts, they were kind of working it from every end.

Particularly you’re sort of mentioning what did Haas need? Well, what we had then was the test case. Like this is how this can play out. And as you know, we had to go through the court cases and then the legislature. And was it two different sessions about whether they were ever going to get the thing on the ballot and all the drama around that and these phenomenal state organizations, MassEquality, unbelievable how much they grew and the sophistication with which they operated. All the sort of unexpected allies that started stepping up, whether that was Catholic voices within a different hierarchy or Republicans or business people or what have you that just said, “This is where we need to go.” And the price with which Massachusetts was kind of like as goes Massachusetts, so goes the country. All that kind of we’re going to get there people. It was so again clear. It’s like when you do the vision and you sort of get a stake in the ground and you think, “Okay, onward.” Like we can do this. As you know, I think we said six or ten states, whatever, in a short time period. Like one down and five more to go or whatever. And we knew, though, that the movement was really admiring the sort of lessons learned out of all that. The brilliant litigation strategies of GLAD being shared across the legal groups, the incredible state organizing. The way in which national groups tried to be net positive in coming in and being a partner on state battles, not an easy thing to do, I can assure you, in coordinating all the different players and stuff, the coalitions that were built, the deep faith work that happened. Those are really templates that were just taken state by state by state.
Meeker: Well, it’s interesting. The way you talk about it is in Massachusetts it was very deliberate, it was very deliberative with the work done by GLAD and they had a very clear legal strategy. They knew what was going to happen in political realm and they had already started to organize to address that. But then February of 2004, kind of out of the blue, the mayor of San Francisco starts issuing marriage licenses. And I interviewed Kate Kendell and she tells me her version of the story, which is Steve Kawa, who is Newsom’s chief of staff, a gay man, as well, calls her up on, I don’t know, Thursday or something like that, and says, “We’re going to start issuing marriage licenses on Monday,” and she encourages him to think about this. And he says, “Thank you very much. We’re going to issue marriage licenses on Monday.” And the way that she tells it is they eventually got a couple day reprieve to get talking points and that sort of thing. But here you are at Haas. Bob Haas and his family has been a very important player in San Francisco in politics, philanthropy. Was your organization brought into this at all? Were you notified?

Sweeney: Well, we got a little bit of heads-up, as I recall. I think I got a call from Kate. And, again, what’s kind of lovely about working with the Haas, Jr. Fund is they’re not afraid of being out front on things. First of all, they funded something called Freedom to Marry way before many did. Well, here was the good news. Back in our hometown here we had a leader who was willing to say, “Me, too. Freedom to Marry, I’m all about it.” I don’t need to tell you. You’re a little bit like, “Oh my God, do we know what we’re doing? How are we going to sort of handle all this?” That said, that’s what leadership is sometimes. It’s stepping out. Stepping up. And the mayor obviously felt very, very deeply about this. I know that it benefited him politically. But that’s what was so great about the Massachusetts decision. Like it really let people say, “This is where we can go. I keep citing the language of the—” I believe she was the chief justice that wrote that opinion, if I don’t have that wrong. Is it Margaret Marshall, I believe her name is?

Meeker: Yeah, I think so.

Sweeney: Oh, my gosh. It’s just so beautiful. You read it and you weep. You’re like this is where we need to go with this. So I think it had that effect on a lot of people, including the leaders obviously in the mayor’s office in San Francisco, who read that and thought, “You know, the time is now. What are we waiting for?” And so I think what we felt was yet again you had another marker. If aspiring, ambitious politicians like Gavin Newsom was at that time, because he was relatively newish, said, “I’m going there,” why would we stand in the way of that? That’s exactly what we wanted the country to do, which is to step up and say, “This is where we needed to be.” I know it was incredibly controversial. I know a bunch of the Democrats, certainly the Democratic Party, were like,
“Don’t do this.” It didn’t benefit him nationally as much as it probably did in California and here in the Bay Area and certainly in the city. But I think that’s what has been so fun and challenging about the marriage movement, is you just had twists and turns like that, where you thought, “Okay, make the most of it.” As long as he’s doing this, like let’s let his journey about how he got there, why he got there, and where he wants to go to be as clear as possible and let’s see if we get whatever, thousands of more people to sort of hear it and then do it in a different way because they’re like, “Why is the mayor of San Francisco doing this? I mean, he’s not even gay. Like what is this?” So you have this huge champion in this guy, right, and the people around him and the people within the city. The city attorney, all those folks that were like, “We’re in.” And what’s great about San Francisco is we are a diverse city. And as I recall in those days, most of the city hierarchy kind of stepped up right away, too. And it’s a racially diverse set of leaders among other things, gender diverse, and all those people stepping up and saying, “Yeah, we hadn’t really thought about it. Here goes the mayor. We’re with you.” Like let’s all, like as a city, do what San Francisco does, which is say these are the values that we espouse here and let’s lead. Much like Massachusetts sort of had, I think, a sort of pride in that. I think in a philanthropic way your job then is to sort of figure out how do you sort of bolster that engagement in a way that helps keep folks within the movement coordinated, helps align messages maybe as they sort of expand because it’s an authentic different voice and maybe a different kind of messenger. How do you just help your main grantees have the extra bandwidth to handle what is a potentially new resource but then also handle what might be the backlash, that doesn’t like the fact that a new resource and a new ally has stepped up. So it’s really that art of making sure you kind of make it a net positive as much as it possibly can be. And I think we did a good job of that.

03-00:44:14
Meeker: So I’m going to present a little counterfactual and I’d love for you to comment on that. Because I’m thinking just from the outside, what I know about foundations, which is from the outside, I can imagine one of the members of the Haas family or Ira Hirschfield or something like that, like saying, “Wait a minute. We have a plan. We are doing our best to execute on that plan,” which by 2005 is more articulated through the 10-10-10-20 program. But there’s already the roadmap in place. And we’re putting a lot of money into this. Get on the phone. “Hey, Gavin, what are you doing? We’d prefer that you not do this. We appreciate your support, come out in support of the Freedom to Marry but why don’t you get on the agenda instead of upsetting our well-designed plan.” But it sounds like that wasn’t the approach that Haas took.

03-00:45:19
Sweeney: No. Well, here’s the other thing. The Haas, Jr. Fund is a fifty-year old foundation, plus, and they’ve watched a lot of change happen, both locally, regionally, California and nationally. I think there is a great deal of wisdom and patience in the foundation for how change happens in these totally
unexpected, unscripted who knows kind of ways and I think one of the things they liked about Freedom to Marry—and, Evan, for instance, is the whole notion, is kind of losing forward and struggle. Like what is struggle? Well, struggle is forward backward. Sometimes backward, backward, forward. If it isn’t, you’re probably really not accomplishing anything. This is tough stuff. Homophobia is real and nasty in the world and deeply held by people. So you’re not going to get there by sort of half measures. You’re not going to get there without taking a lot of risks. And in this case, the risk was here was this mayor who decided to jump out on an issue, actually show—

I mean, think about this—show, kind of like they did in Massachusetts, in Cambridge, when the city hall did its first marriages and it was so like thrilling to watch people actually just holding the marriage certificate, the couples that come out. That’s what he was doing here. It was like let me show you the joy and love. You probably remember that. Those were incredible pictures across the world, of like, “Look at this.” People were kind of stunned, I think. I think it made a lot of people go like, “Really?” And two women? Two men? They’ve got bridal gowns on, they’ve got tuxes on. And they all seemed so happy and the community seems like wow. We’re like throwing off this barrier test. It’s just been so oppressive. So I think there’s just a lot of patience that social movements, if they’re going to get to where they’re going to get to, have to kind of go through that moment.

An example, I guess, Martin, to me would be from earlier in my history. And I’m just sort of relating this, I think, to an example of why I think Haas, Jr. is so strong. Levi Strauss Company put out the first corporate AIDS/HIV policy ever. Think about that. And I don’t need to tell you, if you think it was hard for the mayor of San Francisco to do this and sort of in a positive way on trying to change an institution, the fear and loathing around HIV and AIDS in those days, and the utter and complete discrimination and ignorance was so powerful and yet you had a company that laid down a marker and said, “This is how we act in society as a corporate citizen.” What does that tell you about the depth of strength, leadership, and ability to handle what is going to come back at you? Because I don’t need to tell you, they got a lot of feedback on that and it wasn’t pretty. But people knew in their hearts like there had to be a progressive rational path forward with HIV and AIDS in the corporate business community. You couldn’t put your head in the sand and pretend it wasn’t real, it wasn’t happening. And so there needed to be like a positive way forward. Levi Strauss provided that. Think about the level of courage and patience and tenacity that it takes to do something like that.

So flash forward. I think the issue here in San Francisco when the mayor did this was like, well, you never know. I don’t want to pretend for a minute it wasn’t like, “Oh, my God.” So we’re making it up as we go along. But, again, my point was it’s another support. Let’s flip it on its head and make it the best it can possibly be. And I think one of the things it did is it broke up the Democratic Party to talk about this damn thing instead of all that like, “Well,
you know, civil union and let’s like sort of not talk about marriage.” It’s like no. As a movement we were like we’re done not talking about this. We’re done saying let me think about it. We’re done with like I’m just not quite there yet or let a state decide and all that kind of like half-measure. This, I think, really helped break open a progressive stance on this. And I really do think those days of all those pictures and those weddings and all that sort of ignited perhaps as much for the LGBT community as much as anybody, like who doesn’t want that to happen in my hometown? I do. I want to be on our courthouse steps doing exactly that same thing.

Meeker: So one thing that Gavin Newsom’s February 2004 marriages instigate really is the legal movement that then results in the California State Supreme Court decision, what was it, in May of 2008, so that marriages begin in an authorized way for the first time in California. I know that one thing that happened in the state of California, simultaneous with that legal campaign, was the California Ring education campaign. Haas, Jr. Fund was involved in that, correct?

Sweeney: Very involved, yeah.

Meeker: Can you tell me about how that came to be and what the goal with that was?

Sweeney: Yeah. One of the things we learned, after 2004, of course, is we’re not talking about this right. Like something’s wrong in our public education messages. And really what we tried to do in a more concerted way as a social movement is like what is best practice when it comes to message research, polling. These are hard won lessons. I’m sure Evan went through some of these, as did probably Marc Solomon, anybody else that was like more in the battle of it. But you soon found out that there are polling questions and then there are different kinds of polling questions. And you like can ask it one way but then you dig a little deeper and you’re like, oh, the support was really soft and can go away if a counterargument came that said this and suddenly your fifty-two/forty-eight flipped to fifty-three/forty-seven. You’re like, “How did that happen? We just lost ten points among young mothers based on the fairy tale princess ad. What did we not get about that ad?” with what we thought was like a core group of supporters that were going to stay with us. Whatever. Just use that, an example.

But so what Let California Ring was really this—I believe the term is psychographic research. I was learning all these things because I’d never done it before. Where we really tried to go deep about what is the non-gay community thinking about marriage. Like where do they enter this space at? What is in their heads? Rather than I as a gay person wanting them to come and speak on my terms about same sex marriage, it’s like where do they even
enter this space and how do they think about it in their own lives. So we did a whole series of focus groups and then we came up with a whole series of ads. This was an interesting thing, Martin, because I remember sitting around the table with very smart people in the movement, long-time leaders, and they would show us like a mockup of four or five ads and we’d look at them and I’d say, “Oh, that one’s going to be the one that’s going to be like—we should put all the money into that because that’s really going to reach people in a deep way.” So not true.

03-00:53:49
Meeker: Do you remember what that kind of ad would have been?

03-00:53:52
Sweeney: Well, I’ll give you a couple of examples of what we were working through. So you would have pollsters say things to us like, “On this issue you really shouldn’t talk about weddings so much because people think that gay people are not serious, they just want to get married because they want to have a party.” Kind of the whole, “You’re frivolous!” And, of course, as you know, over decades of work you get very sensitive of that. Like, “You’re a pride parade, that’s all you are, is just one big parade. That’s all you care about. You’re not serious about commitment, you’re not serious about what it takes to be in a long-term relationship.” So I remember in my head I was sort of like, “Oh, hmm.” So maybe you back away from that. Well, of course, what these ads showed is non-gay people, one of the first things when you say about marriage, is they’ll say, “Oh, my wedding day. It was one of the greatest days of my life.” “What about it?” “Oh, well, there I was. This woman and this man that I met, were committing, her whole family were there. The community was blessing us. It was unbelievable, right.” So we’re like not talking about that because? Because? And non-gay people would talk about their marriages and say, “Love, commitment, responsibility.” And we instead had to say like, “Well, 1,370 rights,” or whatever the number was, “and about social security death benefits and what about going to a hospital and need to make a medical decision.” You could just see people saying things like, “Well, okay, I get that but can’t we just like fix that with a contract?” Or like, “Really? That’s why you want to get married? It’s for that? It sounds so sort of technical,” and all that.

So what we were finding is these ads would come up, and one of them that we ended up doing was this like amazing ad about a woman trying to get to the altar to get married and having all these literal barriers in her way. And I do think it had an enormous impact on people saying like, “Oh, is that what I’m doing, is stopping people from like—I do feel good about saying you can’t get married when I would never let someone tell me about whether I can get married or not?” So anyways, all I’m saying is that it really made us step back and realize you’ve got to approach these change moments sort of really recognizing the audience you’re going after, where they’re at, meeting them where they kind of enter in an issue in a completely different way, not just,
“I’m going to be a lawyer and argue it from a rational point of view,” It’s much more about emotion and values. And I think we had a hard time doing that. Not a surprise since LGBT people are not exactly encouraged to share their emotions, their values. I think part of the armor of getting through the homophobia and transphobia in life is that you go to the rational and sort of protect the heart, which can be so damaged by all this like stuff they throw at you. So we put these ads out.

And where we actually funded to scale in Santa Barbara County, for instance, where we went full tilt, like let’s build a public education campaign and really go out there and engage people in this discussion in a way that’s not about a ballot measure, that’s not about a court case, but about like what are we trying to get at here, it really had an enormous effect. And, in fact, in the Prop 8 campaign we won that county. The problem was we didn’t do it in twenty-five other counties because we just didn’t know the scale and have the money. It was all part of the iterative experiment of like how do you do this kind of change in society. So it was a very tough lesson to learn. And we sort of took that campaign and blew it up even larger and obviously applied it in the different states where there’s different values. But it was a very important lesson for the movement. It was very important for funders. Because I don’t need to tell you it was expensive. That was one of those things where I was like, “$500,000?” For the LGBT movement at that point in time, that was a lot of money. But then you thought, “But this is the kind of investment and the work we need to do to get to the end we want.” So that’s another example of where we thought maybe we needed twenty million but we needed forty million. And, again, I go back to Evan and Mary and all these incredible leaders, people sort of saying to the funders, “Up your game. You really want to make this happen? Then we need a lot more money. You’re not going to get the change you want on the cheap. Like it isn’t going to happen. And so we need to get a lot more funders and people invested in this in a much bigger way,” and sort of understanding going to scale means. And it was a lot more zeroes than we thought.

Meeker: Let California Ring, and the way you’re describing it, is really, yes, public education. That was the public face of it. But in order to get to public education there’s polling, there’s focus groups, there’s research that needs to be done.

Sweeney: Yeah, and research in a way that I think people literally don’t understand. It’s much, much deeper. And, many more ways you approach it than we thought. It is not polling. That is not what we’re talking about here. It’s really, really understanding how people think and connect to each other and the world. And it takes a lot to figure that because you look at gender difference or race differences or class difference or educational differences or religious affiliation or what have you. There’s many elements to it as you’re putting all
this together. And frankly, we haven’t had a lot of that when it comes to sexuality or gender. So we’re kind of building the field in terms of how you do that.

I guess what I want to say, Martin, from a movement organization point of view, it’s like how do you build that into your litigation work, your organizing work, your advocacy work, your public education? Even if you get the kind of lessons learned out of it, you still got to say, “All right, now I think I get the journey that people are on and how they want to approach it.” What do I say to my door-to-door canvassers? What do I do with that? Or what do I say when I’m doing a big annual event and I’m bringing in a speaker? What does that look like? Or what does a house party message look like when I’m trying to raise small donor dollars, what have you? It’s translating all of that, learning across the tactics and the movement. Big lift for people who weren’t sort of raised conceptually about how you even do that. I was in the movement a long time. I ran a lot of organizations. I had never heard of that kind of research before. I didn’t know what it was.

03-01:01:35
Meeker: Well, this might be kind of wonky but I think about being an academic at the university and we try to get to some truth of the matter, right. And you have anthropologists who are doing ethnography, you have historians who are doing archival research, you have oral historians who are doing a different kind of life history research. How did you know what was the methodology that should be employed to try to get to this information?

03-01:02:06
Sweeney: It was hard to know that. Again, we sort of learned it as we went along. But you definitely go to other movements and look at what people have done. As you know, many times around the LGBT movement we look at like what’s happened around gender and women’s rights or reproductive rights, mainly because there’s some crossover there when it comes to sexuality. But we also looked at people who had done it for—pick the issue. An environmental issue, voting rights, gun control, what have you. It’s sort of a burgeoning field, in my understanding, in the last twenty to twenty-five years about how you do this work.

You probably remember George Lakoff, for instance, who was over in Berkeley, and he came and spoke to the Haas, Jr. Fund board once on sort of just the whole new notion of what changing frames and people even thinking about what that means. So, again, that was just part of the learning. Because he kind of had a whole way that he talked about that that kind of flipped the field on its head. And it was very important and I feel like was additive. But as you rightly point out, this goes much, much deeper than that. And so we try to just go to the best minds in the field.
And part of it, honestly, too, Martin, is who really wanted to do this work. Not everybody wants to work on LGBT stuff that’s in that field. So you kind of picked the people that were interested and engaged and stepped up and could kind of tell you what they thought their particular approach, how it would kind of add to sort of bringing light to what the journey, engagement would be. And then we had to say like, “Okay, you’re the vendor.” You’d put stuff out for bid and people would try it and you’d say like, “Oh, that approach looks really interesting and we might learn more going with that.” And we’d sort of like how they engage and how they work with people and they have good reputations in communities.

Because some of this is also being able to take researchers and say to them, “Okay, but situate yourself now inside this movement of ours. Can you take what you know and learn and adapt it to the field?” Because we may come up with some understanding up here but if we can’t translate that to a Kate Kendall or a Geoff Kors at Equality California, what good does it really do us? It’s nice to know but how do you relate to practitioners? And so I think we found some very, very good people who helped us build, through hook or by crook, what is this. And, again, I want to be clear. I think some of this is developing science within those fields. Like how do you really do this? Because you think there’s like a long history of people asking about sexual orientation or gender identity? I don’t think so. There isn’t. It’s much better than it used to be but it wasn’t all that rich twenty years ago, God knows.

So, again, we were trying to also look that even in the field the researchers even share best practices about kind of what are you learning about asking not just generally about sex orientation or gender identity but also then applying it to like a marriage context, because you can do non-discrimination or whatever. This was a very specific set of issues we then wanted them to say, okay, so how does that play out for a non-gay person, for instance, to relate to a same sex marriage.

03-01:05:55
Meeker: Can you give me an example of one of these vendors who you worked with and a bit about what their approach was, if possible?

03-01:06:04
Sweeney: Gosh, you’re making me pull up my history here. It’s Grove Associates.

03-01:06:22
Meeker: Lisa Grove?

03-01:06:24
Sweeney: Yeah. We’ve done some work over the years with Celinda Lake and her folks based in Washington. Trying to think who else would be an example.

03-01:06:45
Meeker: Can you think of, aside from the vendors themselves, what the research was that they were doing and how it was presented to you?
Sweeney: I’m trying to think of a concrete example. I’m just trying to think which one of these. I think it was in Maine. That went back to folks when we lost the ballot initiative there, who voted against us. But like regretted their vote and tried to say, like, “So what was that about?” I don’t remember who did that, I’m sorry to say, but I remember I thought that was such a smart thing. I don’t need to tell you finding money to pay for things like that, some people would be like, “Really?” You’re like, “No, no, no. That’s the whole point.” This is going to take us time and understanding and we’re going to make mistakes and we’re going to do it wrong but this is the very people we want to talk to. People who say, “I have a gay brother but I voted against him and I don’t feel good about that.” Like, “Say more. Was it your Catholic church told you to vote this way but you’re conflicted about that? What would you need to sort of understand how this harms a person you love or maybe doesn’t harm an institution you care about?” All that kind of teasing that stuff out. I just remember that that is the kind of work that then lets you step back and think like, “Okay, interesting. We heard you.” Then let’s put out a set of messages that address that. And whether that’s an older set of parents, grandparents that sit with their grandkid and say like, “We just want for the son exactly what we had for our heterosexual daughter when she got married.” That’s all this says. Let’s not make it more or less than it is. A lot of faith messengers, people who said like, “I struggled through this with my faith. Like this was not easy.” I think I mentioned this to you before but I always admired President Obama and that’s because I felt like he sort of shared in that measured kind of law professor way he kind of talks to the country sometimes about rationally walking this to X point and then sort of being okay with it. But it’s because he’s taken time and reflected and then shared that and isn’t defensive about it. So I think that’s what this was about. And whatever the issue was for people. As you know, people came up with all kinds of ways that they didn’t want to support this.

Meeker: In 2007 you moved from Haas, Jr. Fund to the Gill Foundation. Can you tell me about what was behind that move and your agenda for—

Sweeney: Well, part of it was I had long admired Tim Gill and his philanthropy and the Gill Foundation and I also was sort of increasingly frustrated by the fact that we needed to align our C3 and C4 strategies in the world as this became more and more political. Well, there are ballot measures or legislative or what have you. And I admired the fact that Tim Gill sort of fully engaged both the 501c3 and c4 worlds and, in a way that one can do legally, sort of aligned his philanthropy with this political giving. And I thought I needed to go there to do that because that’s obviously something I did not do at the Haas, Jr. Fund. I have no idea at all about any of the Haas family’s political giving and work. It just never came up. It isn’t what my job was there. So I thought that would be an interesting personal and professional experience for me to be with a funder like that, who was very open about that, and was doing some very exciting
work on the c4 side, as well as the c3 side, and who was deeply, deeply committed to a state approach and in a state that was sort of emblematic of what we needed to do to change America, meaning Colorado. And I’m from Montana so I sort of understood what the challenge would have been there.

So I just decided it was an opportunity that I couldn’t miss because Tim was being very, very generous in what he intended to give away. I felt like I sort of aligned with his state based strategy and his ambition. He’s famously impatient about getting stuff done. And just personally it was a time that I was ready for a change, too, in a sort of post break-up situation for me on a personal level with my relationship. And it was fantastic. It was one of the greatest decisions of my life and one of the greatest journeys for me in terms of sort of firing on all cylinders and taking all of my sort of nonprofit experience in the movements and not only doing it sort of philanthropically but having a partner on the c4 side and Patrick Guerriero and Bill Smith and an incredible team at Gill Action about what we could do, and then with Tim and the board about where they thought we can invest. Honestly, it was really fun and great to be so much of a sort of goad and an instigator of deploying resources in a smart and strategic way.

[side conversation deleted]

03-01:14:12
Meeker: Can you maybe compare and contrast what the work at Haas was like versus what the work at the Gill Foundation was like?

03-01:14:21
Sweeney: Well, they were very much alike because Gill had been a terrific partner with Haas, Jr. As you know, as we sort of put together the Civil Marriage Collaborative and state equality fund, another sort of donor collaborative, and I was very much a part of all that, we did a lot of joint funding, because just to get to scale with whatever the issue, whether it was the funding we’re doing on “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” or the funding about safe schools or what have you, you really wanted to have like six to seven to ten other national funder partners. And Haas is a terrific partner in all that. And, as you know, a lot of my time at Haas was meeting matches of money in order to get more money from Haas. It was like you had to go find funding partners, which I enjoy doing and we were very successful at. Gill was the same way. They had more of an individual donor network through what they call their Outgiving program. And they have the same thing on the c4 side called Political Outgiving. And so part of what I had also admired about Tim is he was trying to say, “Look, I’ve stepped up. I sold Quark and I took half the money from that and opened up this foundation to change the world around LGBT issues.” And I really admired that kind of generosity, right. When he went out there and looked for sort of partners in the gay community on philanthropy he didn’t find a lot. So he was like, “Well, I’m learning. I need to have other people to do this.” So he started Outgiving to basically say like, “Let’s get
LGBT people and allies, if they want to, to come in and do this work with us and sort of do it together and make it sustainable.” Because he knew his money wasn’t going to go all that far. He was very generous in what he gave away but I don’t need to tell you when you want to change the way in the incredible way he wants to, you need tens, if not hundreds of millions of dollars, not ten million. It doesn’t work. So I really loved the fact that we could go out there and push literally hundreds of donors to sort of step up in a big way and in a concerted way to say like, “Okay, what does a state like New Hampshire need to get to the next step in its evolution?” I sort of didn’t do that individual donor work at Haas. They didn’t have a program like that. But at Gill, that was very much a part of what I did. Outgiving was a main focus of like getting more money into the movement in a strategic coordinated way. So that was like fun to do. And I want to be clear, we did it not just on marriage. We did it on a bunch of other issues.

And in the same way, what was also really fun about Gill was we were very much trying to move Colorado in a more progressive direction. In other words, we were trying to walk the talk of this kind of state engagement and show a kind of learning lab to the rest of the country of what a c3 investment in a state could get you in terms of knitting together progressive and like-minded people to move the state in a whole series of issues. Whether that’s budgetary issues or education reform or taxation or environmental issues, what have you, or in this case, also, obviously LGBT issues. We had some fantastic partners in Colorado on that and invested in things, like what we’d call the c3 roundtables, where you got the progressive organizations across issue to really work together in new and in different ways, share analysis, build relationship, understand leaders. We built up the communications capacities, the research capacities. It was really so fun to do that kind of work. I think you also know the other thing that Gill had, which was so unusual, and another thing I admired Tim for, and this is the third big thing, I guess, is he also had something called the Gay and Lesbian Fund for Colorado. And that actually supported non-gay projects in Colorado, his idea being that as you invested in local communities and they saw that LGBT people cared about libraries or the arts or childcare, that people would say, “Oh, wow, this local center was funded by LGBT people.” To get the money you had to say, “Supported by the Gay and Lesbian Fund of Colorado.” So it was sort of a branding thing. I thought it was just a brilliant marketing piece, where you just saw Coloradans all of a sudden say, “Wow, in our hometown the German Shepherd dog that the police department owns and bought to help us have a safer, better community was actually donated by the Gay and Lesbian Fund of Colorado. Who knew that gay and lesbian people cared about that issue locally here or what have you?” You can imagine the breadth of things that were invested in, from healthcare centers to youth programs. And it was just huge. And I think over the years that Tim did that, really engaged non-LGBT Coloradans to sort of see the LGBT community differently. My favorite thing, Martin, with that program, favorite, favorite thing, was we were big funders of public radio in Colorado. So no matter where I went in Colorado, and as you know it’s a very
large state, very dispersed geographically. So whether it was out in Grand Junction, far west, or down southwest in Durango, up north in Fort Collins, you turn on the local NPR station and it would say, “NPR, supported by the Gay and Lesbian Fund for Colorado, which also support—” and then they would throw in like a homeless program that we also supported locally. So we had a whole multiple layer effect of somebody listening to public radio, which, I think objectively one has to say in the media is a good thing for media given how crazy most of the media is these days. It’s like a sense of rational debate. So they would hear that that was supported by gay and lesbian people and they would also hear that the Gay and Lesbian Fund supported a very necessary civic or social program locally in Fort Collins or what have you. And so I think that was this like, “Oh, that’s cool.” And I used to feel so proud of that because then I would go into a community and people would say, “Oh, you’re from the Gay and Lesbian Fund. Oh, they fund blah, blah, blah, right?” And I’d be like, “Yeah, we do. That’s right.” It was just a wonderful tactic. And serious. This wasn’t a PR thing. It’s like we really believe these programs built civic infrastructure and brought people together. Again, we didn’t have that kind of a thing at Haas, Jr. because it just wouldn’t have fit there in the same way. They obviously have a huge civic program here in the Bay Area but it wasn’t something that I was dealing with in the same way. So the fact that I was at Gill and able to do sort of that state template in Colorado in such an interesting way, and beyond LGBT obviously, and sort of help move that state.

Another example is we started One Colorado. We had a very small lobbying, traditional lobbying group in Colorado but decided we needed to have like a much punchier statewide public education high-profile community engagement thing. So Tim and the board, God bless him, said, “Have at it.” So we just went out and built it over time and it’s a very effective organization.

03-01:22:32
Meeker: What is it?

03-01:22:32
Sweeney: It’s called One Colorado and One Colorado Education Fund and it’s essentially their statewide equality organization and just does incredible work and has passed many, many, many important laws, helped to get marriage to happen in Colorado. Does outreach across that entire state. Incredible work on trans issues and health issues and safe schools. Again, it’s infrastructure that you need over time for a movement.

But I don’t want to lose your question here, which is also to say at the same time I had this incredible staff led by Katherine Peck on the program side, Bobby Clark on the communications side, Patricia Evert on the donor resources side, our incredible COO, Lauren Arnold, where we engaged national partners, particularly funding partners, but also organizations in strategic development, in resource alignment, in leadership development,
things like supporting along with other funders the Rockwood Program for Leadership Development based here in the Bay Area, which is this unbelievable leadership development program. And having a cohort of LGBT leaders that we know. I know how hard these jobs are, trust me, and I know that I was never really given professional development opportunities because they just sort of didn’t exist in my time. Well, that was not going to happen going forward. So these people got to meet incredible colleagues, both gay and non-gay, across a variety of social movements, and say like, “So what is it like for you to lead this organization on youth or this organization on aging and what do you need to be a better and more effective leader, whether that’s management skills or vision or emotional development, whatever, professional networks?” And so we were really able to build on a very robust program nationally.

The other thing I would say about Gill, different than Haas, Jr., is Gill is a more engaged and directive funder on the sort of spectrum than Haas is. Haas is very engaged but I think the pivot point here is actually the word directive. Gill wants to hear more from a grantee about the actual outcomes and Tim’s, Gill and the board’s timeline for change was pretty like two-year, three-year, maybe five-year in a stretch. It was very much like I want it done and I want it done now. And very much reflective of Tim as an engineer and a mathematician and a tech guy, meaning like he’s very interested in sort of innovation and experiments. And so you look at a program, you’ve diagnosed it, you say, “Here’s a theory of change and a way to go in,” and let’s try it. One-year, two-year, three-years. You look at it and say like, “Is it working? If it’s not working, it’s fine. Take a risk. We don’t care. Get rid of it. Try another way.” But, as you know, in the nonprofit community, that’s not necessarily the most culturally comfortable place for people to be. They kind of get a way they do business and they kind of want to just keep doing it or not necessarily the most open to experimentation and innovation stuff. So it was a different approach in Gill. But I have to say it was really, really fun.

And I’ll give you an example. This is a little bit off the marriage issue. But in some ways I think, to get to my earlier point, it’s what marriage kind of allowed us to do in the world in a bigger, more ambitious world. So my vice president, Bobby Clark, comes to me and says like, “So, someone’s been in touch with me. He wants to come in here. He’s from a very noted family in hockey and his dad is a very, very big and important and famous manager in hockey. He himself is in the field. I think he’s a scout. But they had a brother and son who was gay who was a hockey player and who died in a car accident but had come out before he died, but also talked about how much homophobia in sports had held him back. And in memory of his life they want to dedicate themselves to eradicating homophobia in hockey and in sports.” Of course, I was like, “Wow. Really?” I said, “Bring him in.” That’s what you love about life, is they bring in someone with a phenomenal vision like that. So one of the Burke sons comes in, he sits across from us, just as buttoned up and smart and disciplined as you can possibly think, because obviously he came from
sports and all that. And he basically lays out this phenomenally compelling story about how he and his dad are going to dedicate their lives to doing this on behalf of their brother. His dad is Brian Burke, manager of Toronto Maple Leafs. I’m like, “Wow.” These are really seriously important people. But they’re talking about hockey. And I said to him, “Are you telling me for $25,000 you’re going to go out there and like change the world?” He was like, “Absolutely.” Well, as you can imagine, the greatest joy on earth in philanthropy is saying, “Take that 25,000 and come back and tell me how you’re doing. Good luck, God bless you, and how great is this.” Well, sure enough, this project goes out to just literally rock the sports world, along with other sports organizations. But it particularly takes on in hockey this phenomenal You Can Play set of videos and engagement and a whole program on training and education.

03-01:29:02
Meeker: So they came to you with a request for $25,000 as a kind of seed funding to get that going?

03-01:29:07
Sweeney: Yeah. And I just say that, Martin, because one of the joys of philanthropy, whether it’s at Haas, Jr. or the Gill Foundation, is you find a leader like that, right. Like Tim Gill would always say to me, whatever, “Ten percent of your portfolio ought to be just, frankly, throwing shit against the wall.” If it fails, is hockey going to be any worse? I doubt it. Whatever. And so, of course, this guy, Patrick Burke and his father, they just like have rocked sports, along with You Can Play and Outsports and all these other people that have now kind of stepped up in that arena. National Center for Lesbian Rights had a homophobia and sports project. Has one for years. And we’re now seeing the results of that all the way through professional and amateur athletic sports.

I think part of where I’m going with this is I think the fact that marriage was such an audacious goal, like we’re going to claim this institution that we’ve been shut out of and say it’s ours, and we just slowly over time—as you know, at some point when we got to twelve states, fourteen states, I think people just started to say—even our opponents would say, “I think this is inevitable.” You started looking at young people and they would say like, “What’s the issue? Of course they should get married. Why are we fighting about this?” You started thinking like, “We’re going to get to get there.” And then you thought, if we claimed marriage, imagine how many other things, if we just said, let’s get rid of homophobia in sports, it’s stupid. Sports should be one of the great strength-builders in every kid’s life. Like it’s great. Like why wouldn’t that work for everybody? And I think that’s what we’re on. So it was a really fun time to be at Gill because we could do those kind of—in addition to being a very serious funder and partner on marriage, which we were, both, obviously, on the c3 side, which is what I did, but Tim and his staff on the c4 side. We stayed on that. If there’s anything Tim Gill is, he’s about focus. So we were on that. But the fact that we could take these other opportunities and kind of blow them out.
Because I think one of the things that sort of happened in our movement is we’re engaging society across the entire spectrum now. I think when I originally talked to you, this whole notion that we have like this entire life trajectory in front of us and we’re going to sort of claim it all, that’s kind of what we’re doing right now. And I think our opponents are a little bit on their heels because they’re like, “Wow.” They kind of don’t know how to come back at us. And that’s good because most of what we want is totally legitimate and we should get it. So I kind of love that about the world now. And you’re seeing it now in gender identity and stuff. It’s just like we’re having conversations we never thought we’d have before. And it’s almost a little dizzying. I think I see the change. And one of the questions is, “Is it deep, will is sustain over time, will it be the next generation? Where do we take this and how do we link it to so many other issues that need to have that same set of movement around women’s issues or criminal justice or voting or poverty or whatever else that we need to be the change we need to have in the world?”

03-01:32:47
Meeker: I’d like to come back for another hour, I think, just to wrap things up. I want to ask you a little bit more about Gill and I always like to ask people about their thoughts on Windsor and Obergefell. You’ve actually, happily, talked a lot about sort of what’s next and where we are and so that’s good. But maybe just another hour before too long.

03-01:33:18
Sweeney: Sure. Sure, sure, sure.

03-01:33:19
Meeker: Great.
Today is Monday, May 2, 2016. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Tim Sweeney for the Freedom to Marry Oral History Project. This is interview session number four. So we got to you accepting the job at the Gill Foundation and talking about some of the work that you were doing there. We talked a little bit about Prop 8 and obviously a lot of people I’ve been interviewing have talked about that and they talked about it as really a lightning rod for being recommitted to seeking the freedom to marry across the United States. I’m wondering, there you are at Gill, you have to work with Tim Gill, who’s a major funder of this. I remember after 2004 there was a lot of soul searching and hand-wringing in organizations like HRC [Human Rights Campaign], saying, “Maybe this isn’t the right time.” But some others, Freedom to Marry and the Haas, Jr. Fund and others forged ahead. And I remember Evan’s saying at the time was that, “Even in a year where you have thirteen losses and one win, it’s a win year because now we have marriage where we never had it before.” Two thousand eight also caused some of that consternation but it also caused a lot of people to redouble their efforts and to come up with a renewed strategy and effort. What did the Prop 8 loss look like from the vantage point of the Gill Foundation and your interactions with Tim Gill?

Right. Well, I think a couple of things to say about that. I actually went on leave and came out and worked the last, I think, ten days of the campaign. Because, as you can probably imagine, I was very committed to California. I really wanted to see us win out here. It was devastating when we lost that night. I remember we were at the hotel. Part of my job was to work the stage that night and I had a lot of the spokespeople for the campaign, including parents whose kids were gay who’d been spokespeople for the campaign and we stood on the stage at the hotel and were waiting to go out to sort of make our announcement that things did not look good and that we were likely to lose. Of course, you know how on campaign nights people just want to believe that somehow those votes are going to come in from the next county and be more than how far we are behind. And we sort of knew the numbers weren’t going to add up.

So what was so emotionally difficult for me was literally being on the stage with like Sam and Julia Thoron, who are from PFLAG [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays], and who made an incredible life commitment to LGBT equality, including a very important ad for the campaign. And behind us was the screen that was showing Barack Obama winning, which, of course, just made your heart swell. It was just like historic, unbelievable, like you just felt so good for America and the world and for the LGBT community. And yet looking at the faces of the people in front of us with this devastating short-
term loss, it was just so hard to balance all that with kind of the hope, with the immediate loss.

I went back to Colorado. Something a lot of people on the coast forget about people who have been engaged in the middle of the country is you live with the kind of tough everyday fights all the time. When you work in Colorado, unlike in California, you really have to take into account a bipartisan strategy. The state is Republican, then it’s Democratic, then it’s Republican and it’s Democratic. And it’s essentially moderate and at times conservative. So the notion of losing like we did in California is not unfamiliar to Colorado because we’d actually lost a civil union battle there earlier. So the great thing about Tim Gill is he is born and raised in that environment. He expects you to lose. In fact, he would say if you haven’t lost some of your fights you’re probably not stretching yourself far enough. So I was really appreciative of the incredible persistence of Tim and the board and the Gill Foundation for saying, “Okay, what have we learned about this battle? Why did we lose? What do we need to know to do different the next time because we’re going to get there the next time?”

And I also remember watching and tracking the reaction to the loss of Prop 8, especially by non-gay people, who were just horrified. I think a lot of people, particularly outside California, just thought we were going to win without any question and so they were like, “Wait a minute. How did we lose? Like, really, California? Maybe you would expect that in Tennessee but not in California.” So I think that was the sort of galvanizing piece of the fact that we knew, because the polls had told us this, that large numbers of non-LGBT Americans now knew LGBT Americans. And I’m not talking one, I’m talking two, four, eight people in their inner circle, meaning they work with them, they’re friends, they’re family, they’re in the same faith community, what have you. And we all know that once that happens a whole series of changes happens for non-LGBT people about respecting LGBT peoples full equality and sort of wondering like what is the issue here, whether it’s violence or it’s serving in the military or non-discrimination or marriage and parenting. It was just like, “I’m sort of over this.” And I think Prop 8 was an incredibly galvanizing moment for non-LGBT people, saying like, “Really what’s the future on this?” Because, remember, even when we lost that battle by votes, the public would say, “Do you think this is inevitable?” and they would say, “Yes.” So it’s like we had a vision about where we were going to go with the country and with our own community and the country said, “Frankly, sooner or later.” Now, we wanted sooner. California votes said a little bit later. But we went right back at it.

To me it was really important to see the non-LGBT people being as angry as we were, being as outraged, basically saying, “This is my justice moment, too.” So I think that the challenge then was to sort of channel that energy into a new way of galvanizing where we were going. And part of what came out of that was the whole Olson-Boies legal challenge and all that and other non-gay
people. And I thought Ted Olson was so sort of emblematic of this. A real proven conservative who nevertheless found a set of values that got him to supporting same sex marriage. And that is the journey that we knew we could get Americans to go on. Like just more and more people. And, remember that some of the brilliance of Freedom to Marry was Mayors for Freedom to Marry or Conservatives for Freedom to Marry. They just kind of went at it in every way, shape or form to say, “No stone unturned. Let’s organize. Let’s really take the pulse of America,” and as it becomes more and more supportive, connect it, coordinate it, and amplify it so that other people who might be on the fence and afraid to kind of come out in their community and say something would say like, “I think I’ve got enough support. If they can do it and they can do it, I’m going to jump out there.”

You had mentioned the Olson - Boies effort, run by AFER [American Foundation for Equal Rights], kind of started by Chad Griffin, and there’s been a lot of conversation about this and it was sort of a difficult challenge to the organized movement when it first started to become apparent, I guess, in 2013 that they were going to mount a federal constitutional challenge to Prop 8. From, again, your vantage point at Gill, where you are working with many other foundations and organizations around the country, pursuing a clear, deliberate strategy, this thing kind of drops in out of left field. When did you first learn about the AFER lawsuits and what did you think about it?

Well, I first learned about the AFER lawsuit from both Freedom to Marry and then all the legal defense organizations, like National Center for Lesbian Rights and Lambda, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], and single A GLAD [GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders], that Gill funded, and clearly there was a lot of skepticism about the approach, worry about the legal team. Obviously they were brilliant but how sort of steeped in LGBT theory and reality and data were they? All that kind of concern that always happens when someone sort of new comes in to a social movement. That said, they also brought enormous resources, as you know. It was millions of dollars they brought to the effort, including some from people who heretofore had not stepped up. They obviously had some marketing and media savvy, as was proven over time and could be a partner when we needed them. The thing I will give to that effort was the trial itself, when it had the moment, when Judge Walker turned to one of the witnesses from our opposition and sort of said, pressed them on like, “Tell me about the actual sort of damage that you think same sex marriage is going to have on the institution of marriage. Be very specific about what that is.” And, as you know, eventually they had to basically say, “We can’t really put our finger on it. There’s sort of tradition, but that’s about it.” So I thought it was really interesting that in some ways we had been saying all along there was sort of no there there in their arguments, that somehow this threat was like what threat to whom, about what? What is this? As a gay person I remember I used to just think like, “Why would my
marriage threaten any non-gay marriage?” I didn’t understand the sort of logic there. And it just felt like that trial really shined the light of day on that set of issues and I thought it was very, very important that for the sort of intelligentsia in the world that follows issues on that kind of high, almost intellectual level, people were like, “Yeah. Like really? It sort of feels like the other side gave up the ghost.” Like they didn’t really have anything and they had to admit it. Now, as you and I both know, that isn’t dispositive to a lot of people. They don’t get to that level of intellectual examination and discernment. But nonetheless, I think for many it really was, okay, if you have any sense of goodness and openness in your heart and you really can’t make an argument, then why are you stuck? You’ve listened to our side again and then go back and think about it. So I thought that was a very important thing. And you know how they sort of took it and made it into a play and all of it. They were phenomenal marketers and, frankly, to have the likes of Ted Olson out there as a marker, that even people who disagreed with him on this couldn’t entirely dismiss him. They just couldn’t because he’d been with them on so many other cases and was so effective in front of the court. That said, in the end, I think the legal approach and theory that was actually originated by the LGBT legal groups, and particularly Mary Bonauto and GLAD and Lambda and the ACLU and NCLR [National Center for Lesbian Rights] and all the team that was kind of in on this proved in the end that that was actually the right approach. But neither here nor there.

I know that Gill Foundation actually gave AFER a grant to do the work, one grant when it got started because, again, as I had mentioned before, one of the things that we liked about Evan is he was constantly trying to gather new allies, no matter what their partisan rank, no matter what their ideology, no matter what their previous stance had been on something. He was all about sort of thinking anew. So we just appreciated that a whole new set of players had stepped up in a big way. And I was cognizant, having been in California, of the profile of the AFER folks, and particularly in Southern California where they were incredibly important.

Meeker: Was that your decision or was there kind of a wrangling within Gill to decide whether this was an appropriate organization to receive funding?

Sweeney: Well, we did a lot of conversations back and forth, I obviously did with our other grantees, our other movement colleagues, with the board. We obviously sussed out what other funding that AFER was able to bring to the table, which, of course, as you know was very significant. They raised millions of dollars from some very, very high level both gay and non-gay donors. So our money wasn’t frankly remotely dispositive. I think it was probably more the sort of Gill stamp of approval more than anything else. And I appreciate that. As I mentioned to you, it was almost an experiment, to say, “Let’s fund them, let’s work with them.” Sort of a getting to know you grant and let’s see how you do,
what you do. We actually didn’t end up doing a second grant. I’m not sure one was needed. By that point that case had sort of wound its way through the courts.

It’s another example of how in the marriage movement folks would step up that you just maybe heretofore had thought, “I don’t really share a lot with you in terms of politics but here’s a set of values that you’re espousing that I’m now with you on.” So when Freedom to Marry had Young Conservatives for Marriage or Paul Singer and his shop at American Unity Fund stepped up, we really appreciated that. That in the end was the goal of any social movement, but certainly the one on LGBT movement and marriage, which was you really want to persuade everybody to sort of move and come your way and get there. And that doesn’t mean everybody with a capital D behind their name or everybody who claims they’re progressive. It’s literally if you want to move society towards a consensus, it’s a bipartisan world. So we need some of those folks to step up and say, “Let me give you my Republican frame for why marriage is a good thing and LGBT marriage is a good thing for society.” Because people come at it from many, many, many different ways in any social movement. So I think our job was to basically facilitate that and keep it so that it was as coordinated and as integrated as possible and not sort of bumping into each other.

04-00:16:50
Meeker: You had alluded to the fact that the AFER case, Perry, when it gets to the Supreme Court, it’s basically dismissed on more or less a technicality, letting I guess the Judge Walker decision stand, which then basically strikes down Prop 8 in California. It was not a federal marriage solution. In other words, their strategy didn’t succeed in the way that they hoped it would. But on the same day that the Windsor decision comes down, which is at the time much more impactful nationwide because it strikes down the consequential parts of DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act]. Was that a GLAD case? I’m trying to remember. No, Windsor was ACLU.

04-00:17:46
Sweeney: No, it was ACLU. Yeah.

04-00:17:48
Meeker: And Robbie Kaplan. I guess the point I’m getting at is at the same time that AFER is pushing this case in California, GLAD and ACLU and NCLR are pushing cases throughout the United States, none of which were designed to be what Obergefell eventually is. They were all hitting at DOMA and hitting at the portability of marriage laws. Were you at Gill involved in these strategizing sessions and what was Gill’s role, I guess, in helping the legal groups do their work and come up with the right strategy?

04-00:18:39
Sweeney: I don’t know. Ours wasn’t strategy per se. Ours was much more of a fundraising strategy, which is getting the resources applied to keep all these
different elements going, thriving, and coordinated. So yes, in some ways you can say we played a strategic role. It was more from the resource side of things. And, frankly, giving enough space to people. And that sounds a little bit like a vacuous word. But sometimes people need room when they’re trying to think through something as difficult as how do you move this issue through these courts? How many different ways to do it? And everybody’s kind of got, in the end, the same goal. There’s just different strategies to get there and different tactics sometimes. And so we wanted to just keep everybody kind of firing on all cylinders because, who knows, one goes up, it loses. You want a backup. Another one goes up and wins but only maybe partially, so that portion goes down, what’s to get to the next portion? So what we really admired about the legal groups is how much cross organization and sort of movement wide thinking was going on. It was very, very, very rich. We were totally comfortable and always have been with incremental change because I just think history teaches you that difficult lesson, that you can overreach and sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn’t and sometimes even when it works you can’t hold on to it. So we just felt like there was this very important job of working with other funders in things like the Civil Marriage Collaborative or just in co-funding, where we would say—

I’ll give you an example. In the last couple of the years of the marriage movement, when there are just court cases going everywhere, state after state after state, well, you can imagine the lawyers had a huge task in front of them. They needed more money to do the drafting and to work with the different firms, to do the communications, some PR. There was so much work to happen and you never quite know which state was going to ripen the quickest and then which circuit kind of went. So we all really resourced-up the prime legal groups, with hundreds of thousands of dollars because we knew it was like now is the time and they need it. And sort of everybody got some. You know what I mean? You didn’t want to sit around and be like you get three hundred and you get one hundred. It’s like, everybody just gets like a big chunk and you can sort of go. And maybe their budgets were mismatched but we knew they were all critical to the final effort. And so that’s more of what a funder does, is sort of sit back and try to listen and look at sort of where is the money moving, tracking also the private money that was going in. Because, as you know, people were stepping up and making many more contributions to Lambda Legal or Freedom to Marry or to a state equality group because things were happening. And so when they made the ask, grassroots people and donors were like stepping up and putting money in. And so you want to also give them more capacity to put that on steroids because in the end you’re kind of hoping that they can hold on to those donors and build their institution, particularly those that were going to last beyond marriage and have to take an implementation phase. So from a foundation point of view you kind of have a different set of objectives about the outcome on this.

We were also very mindful of the leadership challenges that were being placed upon people. There’s no template for this. You don’t go to law school
and get taught how to do this necessarily. You don’t go to management school and get taught how to run a portion of a social movement. So in supporting people’s ability to have a personal or executive coach or to do some convenings where they went away with colleagues and helped just sort of think through out loud with some critique about like what’s the next step on this, and then working through personal stuff. Because, as you know, when you’re a leader of a community there’s a lot of self-identity stuff that happens in this, that’s when the community’s mad about you and then when they’re thrilled about you, when they’re questioning you. You’ve got to really step up and be strong and clear and authentic about what your leadership is.

So there were just different elements of what Gill and our foundation colleagues brought to this that were more about—people use words like capacity building and leadership development. That is what it is. But to really make it mean something you’ve got to sort of drill down a little bit. It was like to actually do a better job at building your website and being able to get out social media to do the spin on a court case, that’s more like capacity building. You want that particular thing to really sort of get out there and reach tens of thousands immediately. To build your list, to get a donor that somehow came in at 250 suddenly to go up to 2,500 because they’re like, “Wow, this is like the most exciting thing that’s ever happened in my life and I’m all in,” or get a donor to say like, “Okay, I got it in my state. Well, okay, but California’s not an island. What about trying to get it in North Carolina?” It’s sort of shaping all of that interest and money movement. And so a lot of what the foundations did and Gill did is sort of think about that piece of our grantees saying, “What about if we tried something new of different or we need extra help here.”

I know Freedom to Marry had this thing they called the matrix, which was basically a grid of different states and different pieces of data about the states to determine the viability of moving ahead with marriage in each state. I’m sure that each of the legal groups had an equally if not more complex one about where to take the litigation and considering the political ramifications, whether there can be a state constitutional convention or the circuit court that it might eventually make it to. All of these kinds of things. What it sounds to me like you’re saying is that you kind of let the legal groups maintain their expertise in that and set the legal agenda and you just kind of, at Gill and the other funders, would sort of back-off and give them space like you said to develop very clear agendas based on data.

Well, and to noodle all through that. Okay, you’ve got data. What does it mean? I can assure you we would look at those matrices and where we thought we had something to add, we would add it. But I was always mindful that we were a foundation and we were in the c3 space. So you had to be careful about sort of getting in the way because there’s that power imbalance between a foundation and a grantee where a lot of people will say to a funder,
“Oh, you’re so smart. You’re just so amazing.” Because they need money from you so they give a lot of deference to funder thinking when, in fact, they might be thinking, “Well, I’m not sure I really agree with that but, frankly, I’m not going to get into it because I need to get your grand and I’ll just back off and figure that elsewhere.” So we tried to be mindful of just our own limitations and yet share the learning experience that Gill and other funders brought to this, which was years of experience. One of the joys of foundation work is you’re at this 30,000 foot level. If you fund across a movement you really do see how forty or fifty different groups do what they do. And so some of it you can say is, “It’s be really great if you talked to this person. I don’t think you two know each other.” In fact, I know you don’t know each other. And you wouldn’t believe how great their work is in XYZ. You may not know that. And they may not know that you’re great at ABC. And if you put your heads together you could really, really do some even better critical thinking than you’re already doing. So there’s a lot of that sort of mixing and matching on partnership.

Meeker: Are there any examples you could talk about in that?

Sweeney: Oh, sure, sure. One of the great Gill meetings, I don’t know what year it was, but it was when what became the 10-10-10-20 plan was coming together. It really was probably the top—how many groups? Maybe twenty-four groups. And they were across strategy, legal, and advocacy and organizing and research. And really taking a matrix like that, letting people go away and fill it out, come back, letting them talk it through. Like, “Damn, who said that? Who made that rating? I’d disagree with that. We forgot about this.” That’s the joy of that kind of exercise, is the common good that comes out and the wisdom is much, much stronger than any individual. And I think it also builds relationships. You build that more sort of collegial critique with a colleague. You become much more adept and even want a critique from someone that heretofore you might have been a competitor with or you might have just not known them or you just might have thought, “Oh, I had one discussion with them. I didn’t think they were very good,” Well, maybe they’ve learned up on that topic or they brought just a different point of view. And then other people, as you know, in group dynamics just play more of a leadership around humor, self-reflection, whatever. There’s lots of elements to sort of making the sum be the whole of all the different parts. So that was one meeting that was particularly useful over time. And we had a couple of those. We had a thing called, I think it was called the Collaborative, if I remember the name, and it met for a couple of years. And it was that same looking at the year ahead, what it’s going to look like from sort of a legislative angle, a litigation angle, a sort of public opinion angle, and what are the different things we should just be thinking about here? And so you have like the Movement Advancement Project, which does a lot of public opinion and messaging work. You have the Williams Institute with their brilliant research studies they did, all those
wonderful legal groups. You had grassroots advocacy groups like the Task Force. You had more Washington, DC based groups. Everybody kind of there putting their sort of group thing in about like where are we going to go. All that kind of work. Let alone like much, much smaller ones where you would get three and four organizations together to think through a very specific thing like how are we reaching like an evangelical Christian person with an LGBT son or daughter or something much more audience or message specific. There were certainly meetings like that. To give people the time and space to go think like that. Because when you’re running an organization you’ve got so much stuff going on. The board. You have so many stakeholders in a nonprofit sometimes. It’s like, oh, for God’s sake, really? Just sort of clear the deck and focus on like an issue and then a strategy and then a close-up, short-term, medium-term, long-term goal is really almost a luxury—particularly check your assumptions, check the data. Like has it changed since last time I really went deep on this? Are there new players? God forbid, are we tagging what the opposition’s up to? All that. It just takes a lot. And then you think, okay, now I’ve got to lead. I’ve got to go public and say to my troops, “This is the way we’re going.” The joy of philanthropy is to be able to look at that and then try to, in whatever way, help that coalesce. And a lot of that is just getting people in a room. Maybe helping form somewhat of an agenda carefully, and then just letting them have at it and probably providing some facilitation, usually outside of the group, that just lets people kind of rise above their own parochial interests.

Meeker: Are you doing these in Colorado or you get a suite of hotel rooms in New York and fly people in?

Sweeney: Yeah. No, we did them all over the place. Most of them, obviously, as you know, are near a major airport because they were cheaper. But you did a DC or a New York or sometimes we did them in Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, kind of the major places. But sometimes also they were connected to meetings at like Creating Change, because you had a whole other group of advocates who were there and you kind of wanted to support, just like gathering or an Equality Federation. They called it the summer gathering or summer institute, where you would be able to get really key state advocates who had done so much front line work and you’d get some from states that had just gone over the top, Oregon, and you’d get another state that had lost a battle and you would say, “All right. So let’s go away and do some deconstructs about lessons learned.” Sometimes you do support, like regional folks getting together. We’re dealing with tough stuff like in the south. You sort of build that kind of work, I think if you’re good at it, into the kind of lifespan of a movement, so it becomes, frankly, just part of the work instead of that kind of reflection and time off and cross-organization fertilization as a special thing. It actually should be built into the everyday work. You’re so
much stronger when you do that as a movement. But I don’t need to tell you it takes time and it takes money.

Meeker: So I imagine the decision to fund the legal groups, Freedom to Marry, the Task Force, was probably a pretty easy decision for Gill to make. How then does Gill decide what state groups or what smaller constituency groups, like identity based groups, are going to be funded? How do you vet those groups?

Sweeney: We were definitely informed by this sort of broader matrix of state opportunity. We learned over time it was best to focus on fewer states rather than too many. We obviously then looked at each state’s sort of political, cultural, and demographic makeup. So if you wanted to sort of go into a state and say like you’ve really got to have a sort of strong Latino outreach, because that’s like part and parcel of who New Mexico is, then you’ve got to go in and fund that kind of work. If you want to go up to a state like Maine, which has much less of a non-white population, is actually less religious than others, you sort of change the formula around that. But maybe there’s a strong labor component there or rural outreach. Each one is its own sort of little political ecosystem, cultural ecosystem. So you had to sort of just think about then what’s the sort of fine tuning to make all that happen and are there any lessons learned from previous states, both wins and losses that might apply to a new state if we hadn’t funded them. And then really, the art of it, Martin, I think the hardest thing, was just like how do you go to scale? Because the other thing we learned, and I know I mentioned this earlier in our conversation, some of the research stuff, it’s just expensive to do. We thought we could go in and win some of these battles earlier on. It’s like $250,000. Are you kidding me? That’s a drop in the bucket. It really takes so much more. And it’s going to take one, two, three, four, a five-year investment over time because if you’re going in and building coalitions across race, across gender, rural and urban, or certainly engaging faith organizations that you really haven’t had a relationship with, you’re not going to go in and build that on a transactional basis. It just isn’t going to stay over time. It won’t work. You really have to go in and say like, “This needs to be much deeper than let’s win marriage and go home.” Like people just say like let’s talk about establishing more of a vision for our state that’s bigger than that. And so those judgment calls were really challenging and a lot of times you also had to bring up some sort of a national resource or tie-in, maybe because the national group had an affiliate that you wanted to work with or just because they had the capacity to help you kind of open up a conversation that’s maybe about faith leaders in the Methodist church. Well, you can’t ignore the kind of national LGBT Methodist organizing group because they’re going to want to have a say and have lessons learned and relationships and opening the—so it was always the sort of mixing and matching between state level investment and national. It was difficult. Because a lot of the money in the movement, as you know, earlier in the movement, was very much going to nationals or only locals, like
a community center or something very, very local. There was almost nothing in between. And since our entire theory of change rested on a sort of state-by-state sort of domino effect in the end, we really had to up the resources and the focus and understanding of why state organizing and state advocacy was so critical.

Meeker: Well, that right there sounds like an important lesson learned. And I want to ask you about another, since we should probably wrap-up in a moment. A lot of what you’ve talked about, both at Haas and Gill, is working with funders to make sure that they stay engaged on an issue. The way that you described it is you’re kind of an intermediary between legal groups and the activists, on the ground organizations, the grass roots organizations and the funders. And you need to communicate the need to funders and keep them involved. After working on this issue for so many years, is there anything you learned that would maybe be useful for other people in a position similar to yours, maybe with a different issue, about how you keep these funders engaged?

Sweeney: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think I mentioned to you one of the things I’m proudest about with Freedom to Marry is that we did consider it a campaign. But as you know, in closing down that organization, we did a very serious evaluation and lessons learned set of documents that are readily accessible on the website to anybody. And, actually, in the process of building Freedom to Marry over the years, the staff and some of us that were supporters on the advisory board and stuff were already sharing lessons learned with other social movements as they saw sort of marriage get traction and the wind sort of at our back. So I think that that set of documents are very, very important and I hope people continue to look at them as a source of inspiration, because we tried to be sort of conscious and intentional, that as much as we sort of muddled our way through this, we did learn a lot about how stuff gets done.

But I think from a fundraising point of view, what I found so inspiring about the work was the fact that we have this very clear goal. It’s like the freedom to marry nationwide, period, and no watering down. It was like a very clear goal. The fact that we had this intense then focus on the states and the courts, and they kind of followed them, we could take a win in a state in a court, and go for it. We could take a win in a state at a ballot box and go forward. We could regionalize and then nationalize the conversation. The fact that we tried every single tactic and strategy you could possibly imagine, no stone unturned in terms of we’re going after every single American to understand what this is. We very much allowed the very people impacted to drive the conversation and be the voice and the ambassadors and they were just magnificent in what they
said to America about why they wanted to get married. All of that are lessons to funders about what it takes to step up.

And one of the big lessons is it takes a lot of money. Probably hundreds of millions when you finally add up the entire amount of money over time that went into marriage. And then you can never remove marriage from the larger context of the hundreds of millions it’s taken just to get us to some LGBT consciousness in the broader society. It’s all of a piece. And so to me, what it also shows is the number of people that will step up. People used to say to us, “Oh, you’ll never raise that kind of money.” I opened these interviews, when you were asking me about Haas, Jr. Fund, and them saying like, “Can you match our $800,000?” and we were just like, “Oh, my God, where are we going to find that kind of money?” And the California campaign in the end was like forty million dollars. It’s a real lesson about the money is there. The question is, “Is the vision, the plan, and the strategy there to inspire people to put their money where their hearts are and their dreams are?” That’s the trick of this. And we showed it can be done. And, frankly, done in a relatively short period of time and at no great cost, to be honest with you. If you step back for a bit, and we were in the corporate world, and we said, “What would it cost to do this kind of change in society?” and I said, “Oh, $250 million?” I’d be like, “Really? That’s it.” It’s a hell of a lot of money but in the greater scheme of things it’s not much.

So when you look at where our movement is, it just seems to me it’s just like imagine if we were a $2 billion movement and think about what we could do to end youth homelessness, bring down the suicide rate, deal with the mental health and substance abuse issues. All the poverty that’s in our community. The capacity for us to make change is there. The resources are there. And so the art to me is its really like picking a goal and saying let’s go there. Knowing we’ve done it recently, in an amazing way, that everyone, even broader society talks about. When they looked back on 2015, right, and everyone said one of the greatest moments in America. Marriage was on every list of like, “Wow.” And in such a positive way. It was like good for the country kind of thing. So the fact that the LGBT community did that with all of our allies just makes me want to imagine what next.

Well, let me then ask you, did you ever attend any of the oral arguments at the Supreme Court?

No. It’s funny you ask that. For whatever reason, I did not. I really wanted to. I’m trained as a community organizer and I always think you put the very people that are on the front line, they go first. So in this case, all those attorneys and lawyers and people that supported them, they deserved to be there. But most importantly, the clients and their families and their friends that stepped up and said, “I’m going to put my life on the line to get this for my
community,” they all deserved to be there. As much as I wanted to go, because you know there’s a very limited number of tickets and all that, I just felt like leave it to others, that on this particular one have really, really, really been central to it.

Meeker: How closely did you follow the arguments in those three cases?

Sweeney: I followed them quite a bit only because I used to run Lambda and I’m the son of a lawyer and many of my dear friends are lawyers. So I am sort of steeped in it. My approach to social change is so law and policy oriented. That sort of never left me. So I was really interested in all the who asked what question and how did they come back and all of that kind of drama and reading the tea leaves. I just would get obsessed about that. But then at some point I would just sort of go into a Zen mode and be like I can’t listen to this anymore. I’m so nervous. And I can’t sleep at night. So my default then would be to go to another issue. School bullying or some other related issue. In Colorado we had this incredible issue around payday loan lending and stuff that I really got into with Tim and the board and trying to reform that terrible industry and all those terrible laws. Whenever I get into like the heat of a battle that I just feel like go ahead and have four other things going on at the same time, so if you get disappointed maybe one of the other ones will pop and you’ll be like, “Okay, into the breach again.” And maybe that comes from the Hardwick decision way back when, when it was just devastating, and some of the other times. The Helms Amendment. I can name a lot of losses in my life that were just—as an organizer you just have something else lined up, no matter what, preferably like six things, because then the opposition goes like, “Oh, my god, these people never stop.” They’re just like this, jumping around, like, “Oh, now you’re going after social service money for mental health and now you’re going after this, around stopping bullying, and now you’re trying to stop violent stuff.” And that’s right, that’s right, that’s right. We are never going away.

I think it was New Jersey. Was it New Jersey? I think it was New Jersey and then Iowa. It’s almost like you got mojo going. You’d win these things and then you’d win even more. Like the body politic and the culture and we’d be like, “Yeah, why are we stopping?” You’d be like, “Yeah, why are you stopping?” So you would just see these moments of momentum. And Minnesota. I remember Minnesota went from being terrible on marriage to flipping the legislature and passing and then we’d win. And it was all within, as I recall, like two-and-a-half years or something. You can look at a dynamic like that and then really work with it to kind of make it go your direction. So whenever I would get obsessed over sort of a clear and present moment of decision, I just was like, okay, sort of a survival mode, is have other things going just in case.
Meeker: In my own mind I have a time when I remember the tide has shifted. Yes, there were those polls that people said it was inevitable, but inevitable could have been a hundred years. Was there a moment in all of this that you really thought, okay, this is inevitable and it’s going to happen a lot more quickly than most people think.

Sweeney: I think there were moments. When Edie Windsor won and was out in front of the Supreme Court, what’s not to love? Oh, my God. It was like America was happy for her. Like I just thought we are just not going to get denied. Sometimes in change you feel just a deepening on your side. Like the commitment is there and the country’s with you. Your opposition, which used to maybe have stronger, just started to weaken and the roots got less and less deep and people’s arguments got kind of more absurd or frankly more sort of silly. And you just thought, on a case like that, really you’re going to look at this woman and argue what? Really? And she just was emblematic. I can see the picture of her. She just was like joy. And that was the vision we were giving the country. Like do you want to go this way or do you want to go kind of this negative—what? So I just felt at that point that somehow the balance was shifting towards us in a way that was really deep and profound and that the other side was getting kind of panicked about like—because theirs was so negative. It’s kind of like the sky is going to fall in. And people were like, “I don’t see that.” And so they got even, it seems to me, more shrill and kind of more—and I think a lot of movable middle people were—how long did they have marriage in Massachusetts? Hasn’t it been like five years? They have like the lowest divorce rate in the country? What? So that was a particular moment of just—almost like pop culture adopted us as like—

Meeker: It’s interesting. And this question is kind of meta. I’m just kind of reflecting on it, the way in which you're talking about it, and the way in which a lot of obviously people in this interview project have talked about it is, it is a story of progress. It’s a story of opening up freedom to a larger number of Americans. Makes me feel very proud and optimistic. But then kind of place it in this broader context of this very tumultuous presidential election year we’re experiencing, the religious freedom bills, and not entirely sure what’s really behind those. Is it really desire for religious freedom or is it something else? And there’s a good deal of uncertainty and pessimism, as well. What do you feel now a year after Obergefell comes down? Do you still hold on to some of that optimism?

Sweeney: Oh, yeah. In fact, I’m even more optimistic than I was right after the decision came down because the truth is this decision has been accepted by the vast majority of Americans without any question. Without any question. Because I remember thinking before, if we get a positive decision, oh, my God, what if all these states rebel, what if judges won’t do it, what if, what if, what if, what
if. Well, honestly, okay, yes, of course there was pushback. It’s a societal struggle. It’s a certain element in society losing power. Of course they’re going to fight back. Of course they’re going to be angry. But honestly, the truth of the matter is, there’s just thousands and thousands of couples, same sex couples, getting married all across the country and their families are coming and their friends are coming and their coworkers and places of worship are opening up to them and, you want to know what, it’s a good thing. It’s helping kids, it’s helping whole multigenerational families. Again, remember what they said was going to happen if this happened. Well, it’s happening and none of their doomsday scenarios, worst case scenarios, have come true. They just haven’t. The truth is it’s been a net good thing for communities. So let’s go back at them then and say, “All right, so let’s take up another issue. Anti-discrimination, what have you. What is your issue here? Why can’t we move forward in the same positive way?”

The religious exemption issue to me is the other side admitting that they can’t win directly on any other issues anymore. They can’t win on anti-discrimination and employment. They can’t win on public accommodations. They can’t win on transgender issues. They can’t. So what they do is fallback and say, “Okay, if there has to be a set of these laws in the country, and I guess there’s going to be, I just want to be able to pick and choose about which ones I don’t want to participate in.” Well, okay. It’s not like they didn’t try that when the civil rights act was passed. We have been through this before. This is the, all right, then I’m going to be the victim. I’m going to be the one that’s discriminated against and I’m going to somehow opt-out. Well, I think we’re clearly in a battle around that but I am very hopeful that in the end we will not have any unnecessary exemptions from the law. We will be treated just like we’ve always asked, just like every other category of people that are covered by these laws. So I feel like we’re in it in a high profile way. We’re in it in, whatever, twenty-four states. But, again, that’s only half the country.

And the other side wants them to make it look like, oh, the whole country’s—it’s like that’s not true. And, gee, in this last legislative session it just seems to me we won in Georgia, West Virginia, Missouri. I wouldn’t exactly call those liberal bastions. In fact, all of them are majority, super majority in some cases, red Republican-run states and they’re working through this. That’s what struggle is. So I remain incredibly optimistic. Look at North Carolina. My God. The corporate business, small business outcry about that bill is simply astounding. We’re in the greatest engagement of corporate America in the history of our movement. Does that make me optimistic? Damn right it does. That’s a strength. I can assure you the other side isn’t feeling very optimistic about that.

So I just see these elements of society kind of getting there in terms of the broader LGBT agenda. I’m glad we’re working through the transgender bathroom bill. Like let’s face it, understand it, get through it, and get to the other side where we’re doing the right thing to help protect our transgender brothers and sisters. We can’t avoid it. We can’t pretend it’s not there. It’s a
real issue. So work it through. But I think it’s fantastic that if their charge is that somehow guaranteeing transgender folks the right to use the bathroom of their choice is somehow endangering women and children, we are demolishing that argument. Not just the LGBT community, the broader community is saying that’s just not true. So it’s about time we face some of these. It’s scary to do it because of how nasty our opponents are on it but I think that’s our work. That’s what a social movement does.

04-00:57:40
Meeker: And I know I’ve talked to other people, Thalia and Evan and others who have been consulting with other social justice movements, reproductive rights, etcetera. Do you see there being any spillover, if you will, from the freedom to marry movement in the sense of the optimism and impetus to expand freedoms in the United States to other issues?

04-00:58:15
Sweeney: I do. I do. I believe that the freedom to marry movement has inspired other movements that change is possible, and frankly, fairly rapid change. The folks that I have seen, particularly in the immigrant rights community where a lot of the DREAMers [Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors], many of whom are LGBTQ themselves, were inspired to sort of come out a second time over and above their sexuality or their gender identity, but as an undocumented person, was just so moving to me personally and so important. So I do see elements of us sort of recasting issues and helping people think anew in other social movements. And I just think the fact that also we’re sharing lessons about having a legal strategy and a political strategy that sort of feeds off each other and then a strategy of sort of very broad civic engagement across every ideology, sector, etcetera, all of that I see people thinking let’s see how that might apply here.

04-00:59:23
Meeker: Where were you when the Obergefell decision came down?

04-00:59:28
Sweeney: I was here at this very table that I’m sitting at, early in the morning. As you know, it came down East Coast time. And I was getting ready to go into the Haas, Jr. Fund office to do some work. We were down to a very few number of days left before the—we knew it was going to be one of them. And I always knew it was going to be ten o’clock in the morning, whatever, all that timing thing that you get with the Supreme Court. So I’d wake up really, really early here, thinking like, “Has anybody heard because it’s seven o’clock here, ten o’clock there.” And I actually think I found out from the New York Times and I think I got something from Evan like thirty seconds later and then I got something from Matt Foreman at Haas, Jr., and we all ended up going down to city hall here to do a big celebration with Kate Kendell from NCLR, our fabulous, amazing local heroine, and then all these other folks here that had been in the court cases. Gavin Newsom showed up. It was like a who’s who, as you can imagine. And it was just a completely glorious day. And I
actually went that night to a wedding of John Bare and Ignatius Bau, who were colleagues from the Outgiving days and who lived just a couple blocks down from me here. And you can imagine. It was the coolest wedding because the judge read from the decision, that said this is real across the country. When I think about it now I just get teared up because it was so joyful. Obviously they had thought about this as a possibility when they were planning their wedding, but to actually have it happen, it was like very cool. Sometimes in life you just think it’s a life well led to be so blessed. Couldn’t be better.

04-01:01:51
Meeker: Is there anything else you’d like to add? It’s a pretty good note to end on.

04-01:01:56
Sweeney: Yeah, yeah. Well, that’s good.

04-01:01:57
Meeker: Thank you, Tim.

04-00:01:58
Sweeney: You bet.

[End of Interview]