

*Update: 10/22/2022*

**Oral History Interview Training Guide**

**Fall 2022**

Thank you for being part of the Rainbow History Project oral history program. Oral histories are one of the best ways to document and give texture to the life of Washington, D.C.’s, LGBTQ community. We couldn’t do this project without volunteers like you.

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**Rainbow History Project website**:

[www.rainbowhistory.org](http://www.rainbowhistory.org)

**Getting started as a volunteer**

1. Read, sign and return to Jeff the Oral History Volunteer Agreementform (usually done during your training).
2. After your training is complete, Jeff will share your contact information with volunteer coordinator Bob Dardano. Bob will connect you with your narrators and follow up throughout the process until you finish your interview. Read more later in this guide about what you do when you finish your interview so it can be cataloged.

**Communicating with your narrator**

1. Familiarize yourself with the Rainbow History Project website, *rainbowhistory.org*. Not all narrators will know a lot about RHP, so be prepared to represent RHP, its mission and activities. Your narrator likely will want to talk with you about how their oral history is stored, who can listen to it and how. See the short FAQ at the end of this document for information.
2. RHP (usually Bob, sometimes Jeff) will connect you with a narrator who has agreed to be interviewed and is looking forward to hearing from you. Bob will provide you with some background information on that person, but you should do more background research as possible.
3. Once Bob connects you with your narrator, he steps back; you will arrange with the narrator directly to conduct the interview at a mutually convenient place and time. **Meeting in person: If the narrator and the volunteer both are both comfortable, meeting in person is fine. But Zoom is also fine, even if the narrator is local.**
   1. **In person:** Some narrators may invite you to their homes for the interview; **don’t feel that you must accept the offer if you don’t wish to do so for any reason, no questions asked**. If you are meeting your narrator in a public location, think ahead about potential noise, as good sound quality is important. In fact, think about potential noise distractions even when meeting in someone’s home. (Think howling dogs.) Good outside resources are public libraries. D.C. Public Library branches allow you to schedule small rooms (even the smallest space works fine) at no cost. (I think you need a public library card to book.) Ditto Maryland and Virginia. If a location becomes problematic, ask us for help and we can brainstorm some options.
   2. **Zoom (or similar platform):** During the pandemic, we began to use Zoom. You miss a little of the personal interaction, but’s a fine medium and you are free to use it. If you already have a Zoom account with unlimited time, that’s great. If you need an account with unlimited time, let Jeff know and he can set up your interview in the Rainbow History Project Zoom account.
   3. **Time duration**: One of your narrator’s first questions when you set up the interview will be about time required. Most interviews take at least an hour to record, and you should expect that some folks will want to talk longer. I plan to be with a narrator for two hours.

**Preparing for the oral history**

1. Conduct some preliminary research on your narrator to inform your questions. Not all our narrators are well known but there’s usually material online about organizations or issues that you’ll be talking about. Reach out to Jeff or Bob if you don’t feel as prepared as you’d like to be.
2. Print a copy of the Oral History Narrator Release form for the narrator to sign. You can email the release in advance but be prepared to discuss the release at your meeting. **RHP can’t use the oral history without the signed release, so this is an essential step.** If you are interviewing by Zoom, the narrator and you will print, sign, scan; electronic signatures are acceptable.
3. The voice memo recording function on a smartphone works great. Be sure to try your recorder once or twice before the session. Practice downloading a file and listening to it on your computer, too. I like to take a charger with me to the interview.

**Conducting your oral history**

1. When you meet the narrator, either in person or by Zoom, take a few minutes to get acclimated to the space and comfortable with each other. Most people will be a little nervous, despite what they say, so set the tone. A great ice breaker is to simply review the process for the session.
2. Before you record the oral history, please review, complete, and sign the narrator release form with the narrator. It’s important that the narrator understand and be comfortable with the terms of the release. See the FAQ at the end of the document for details about the release to guide your conversation. **RHP can’t use the oral history without the signed release, so this is an essential step.** If you forget to have the narrator sign the form, just do it by email later, but stay on top of it.
3. Some oral history participants will have thought about what they want to say and will be ready as soon as you start recording. Others will want a lot of direction from you. Be ready to read your narrator’s cues—or just ask.

**Content essentials**

With a signed release form in hand, you are ready to record!

1. At the beginning of the taping, please state:
   1. **interview date, including year**
   2. **your name** as the interviewer
   3. **name of the narrator**, spelling out anything that’s not obvious
   4. **narrator’s birth year**
   5. **location**— “We’re talking in Washington, D.C.”//” We’re talking by Zoom and [narrator] is in their Seattle home.”
   6. **That the oral history is being recorded for Rainbow History Project** (this is important)
   7. Ask about what pronouns the narrator prefers RHP to use. How do you they identify?
2. We don’t have a prescription but think about starting with one or two simple questions that will put you both at ease: “Tell me a little about your growing up. Are you a DMV native? When and why did you come to live in the Washington area?”
3. In an oral history, narrators set the pace, scope and direction of sharing their story. Let the interview take its own course. If you have specific questions, ask them during lulls in conversation. Mostly, just let the person tell their story.
4. Some narrators will have many things to talk about. Consider asking the narrator to focus on one topic in one interview, then schedule another session to talk about another topic.
5. Ask for dates, addresses and other clarification. It’s fine to ask your narrator to repeat or clarify the time under discussion. It’s okay not to understand everything that your subject is mentioning—it’s even beneficial. Even if you understand the reference, ask for clarity so the listeners will know too. Asking “You just mentioned the Blade—can you tell me what the Blade is.” Ditto acronyms for a group, a slang name for a club or reference to a person. Use being new in town or unfamiliar but interested to your advantage.
6. Simple follow-up questions can lead to gems of information. “How did you get to that place? What was that neighborhood like? What kind of clientele did this place attract? Where else did people go?”

**Concluding the interview session**

1. At the end of the recording, it is helpful to repeat the names of the narrator and interviewer, the date, and that the recording is taken on behalf of the Rainbow History Project. It is great to say “The End” so that researchers will know they’ve heard the entire file.
2. When the session ends and you are done recording, **ask your narrator for recommendations of other people who would be a good narrator.** Does the narrator know other people at the same or similar events or groups? Is your narrator willing to help reach new narrators? Personal recommendations are the best way to new secure new narrators.
3. Ask if RHP can add your narrator to our email list to keep them up to date on news, events and volunteer opportunities. (You can send the contact email info to Jeff or go online to our new site (October) and add it in the Sign-Up box on the home page.)
4. If the narrator asks if RHP is interested in accepting any paperwork or documents for the archives, say “Yes!” and that someone from the archives team will be in touch. Ask about the best way to connect, a basic description of the items to be donated, how big are we talking—a folder, a box, a file cabinet? (Trust me, it’s all happened.) Tell Jeff, and he will get the archives ball rolling.
5. Send your narrator a thank you email and include the sound file. They can share it as widely as they wish. Check back on anything missing, like the narrator release and follow up on potential narrator recommendations and outreach.

**Archiving the oral history**

1. Fill out the oral history form at the end of this document and write a short abstract that captures the conversation. This gives RHP the archiving and cataloging information that we need to make the oral history available. See the form for direction on naming conventions for all files.
2. **Do not get stuck writing the abstract!** Take it from me, this can be quicksand. Just bang out a summary of the conversation while it is fresh in your mind. It is not a transcription—think of it as telling a friend about this interesting person you just met and what you talked, just with more specificity. Do not let perfection become the enemy of making your work accessible to the public. You can always edit and improve the cataloging information later if you want.
3. Upload the sound file to your computer. Keep the original file until RHP confirms secure possession of it or until you or your computer dies, whichever comes later.
4. Transfer the sound file, scan of the signed release, and the form—all saved in the conventions found in the form—to Jeff, preferably by Google drive.
5. Let Bob know you are ready for a new narrator.
6. Let Jeff and Bob know of any ideas you have for narrators or groups to explore. Let us know your ideas for process improvements.
7. Make up a batch of martinis and celebrate.

**Required information form**

With the sound file, please send Jeff this information.

**Title:** Oral history interview with [narrator]

**Sound file filename:** Use this format on **everything—your sound file, form/abstract and the narrator release**: LastnameFirstname\_Year of interview … example: DonahoeJeffrey\_2022

**Narrator:**

**Narrator year of birth:**

**Interviewer**:

**Interview date and place:**

**Time period covered:** Decades the interview covered

**Topics/themes covered:** This should be general: if your narrator was a volunteer at say Whitman Walker Health, then capture that title; if you narrator talks about several clubs/bars, then ‘social scene’ is fine.If you are unsure, more is always better.

**Number of sound files:**

**Abstract summary of interview**

**Abstract sample:**

**Oral History Interview with Stephanie Kreps (1950-)**

**Description**: Stephanie Kreps, co-founder of the Rainbow Youth Alliance (RYA), recounts the history of the LGBTQ+ teen support group Rainbow Youth Alliance. She also discusses her work and collaboration with PFLAG in Maryland, as well as her support for LGBTQ rights in Maryland with the gay civil rights organization, Equality Maryland.

**Date**: May 10, 2021

**Coverage**: 2000s-present

Stephanie Kreps co-founded the Rainbow Youth Alliance in 2006, after her son came out as gay. After attending meetings through PFLAG (former acronym standing for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) of Columbia, Maryland, Stephanie decided to start a youth support group closer to home designed for teens ages 13-18. RYA, a program of her Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville, did not require parental permission to attend. She sought assistance from Lambda Legal on parental permission and liability issues. As RYA grew, it eventually started receiving consistent support from Brother, Help Thyself. She also discusses advertising the group at Montgomery County schools and the obstacles she encountered. Eventually, Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays (PFOX), an anti-gay group associated with Focus on the Family also started handing out flyers at schools, resulting in a lawsuit and ban on flyers in Montgomery County. She talked about RYA’s connections to GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance, now more commonly called Gender-Sexuality Alliance) clubs and the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) Day of Silence Day of action. She discussed her work advocating for gay civil rights with Equality Maryland, especially through marriage equality lobby day where supports would go to Annapolis to lobby Maryland legislators. She talked about State Senator Nancy King of Maryland’s 39th District in Montgomery County, who refused to support same sex marriage for many years before changing her position. She discussed how, after the Civil Marriage Protection Act of 2012 was passed, opponents of same sex marriage launched Maryland Question 6, a referendum on the new bill that failed to reject the Act and same sex marriage. She also served for several years as secretary of the board of Metro DC PFLAG. Discussion also covered: Youth Pride D.C., the Dignity Center, David Fishback, and Unitarianism.

**Interviewer**: Jerry Wei

**Narrator**: Stephanie Kreps

**Location**: Gaithersburg, Maryland, via Zoom.

**Transcription**: No, not yet available.

**Original Format**: Yes, recording available (.m4a, 50.1 MB)

**Duration**: 55:02

**If you don’t have the format/duration info, no worries.**

**Rainbow History Project oral history collection FAQ**

**Who can hear my oral history and how?**

Once the interview is done, the volunteer taking the interview sends the sound file to RHP oral history lead Jeff Donahoe along with a short abstract that gives an overview of what the interview covered. The **abstract** is publicly accessible online on the RHP website through a Google search on names or topics. However, the **sound file** itself is not publicly accessible. The sound file lives on the RHP Google drive.

When someone wants access to a sound file, the website leads them to email Jeff Donahoe to receive it. Jeff asks the requester questions to make sure that the requester will use the sound file for educational and cultural purposes only—not commercial, and checks for any restrictions on the narrator release. So, there’s a human interface before release. Most of our requests come from academics and journalists, but we receive some from community or family members who want to learn more about the narrator.

**What is RHP?**

Rainbow History is an all-volunteer, 22-year-old nonprofit organization dedicated to collecting and preserving the diverse LGBTQ history and culture of the DVM area. We collect paper archives, photos, some objects, sound and video files and LOTS more. Our archives come from individuals or groups looking for an appreciative home for their materials. We also present public programs that bring people together to discuss topics of interest to the LGBTQ community. Sign up for our email list at rainbowhistory.org to be in the know.

**What do I talk about?**

Oral histories are interesting because the narrator gets to lead the interview. But there are some common themes. We try to gather general information about how each narrator created their own LGBTQ life in the D.C. area. Where did you live? How did you make and maintain friendships with other LGBT people? Where did you socialize? How did you learn (word of mouth, organizations, media?) about LGBTQ activities? Then we also know at groups you were part of (political, social, religious, cultural). RHP does not have a set list of questions; it’s not a survey. We have a few starter questions to get things rolling, then we follow your lead. If there’s something you don’t want to talk about, you don’t have to do so. Importantly, RHP is not looking for “everything was always happy” interviews; many people have spoken about discrimination within the LGBTQ community, as an example, and those are important stories to gather.

We’re happy to answer any questions or help people in any way that would work best for them.