

Name: Bart Gamber
Date of Birth: 1972
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Interviewed by: Moss Bancroft
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00:00:01

My name is Bart Gamber. I was born in 1972 and today's date is 18th November, 2017.

Okay, thank you. So what of...where...when and why did you first move to Milton Keynes?

I belonged to a...(let me...I need to restate the question). I first came to Milton Keynes, as a visitor, in 1995. I was a member of an international gay and lesbian youth organisation from where I was living at the time, in Washington DC, and I had come to an international youth conference in Manchester and met my now partner, Tony, who was there representing Milton Keynes at this international conference. I had no intention of falling in love at this conference but that's what happened and at the time, where I was living in America, there was no provision for same-sex couples with a foreign partner. There was no recognition of that kind of relationship at all under the law. If anything, it was quite strongly frowned upon...*[laughs]*. So we tried to make it work there for about a year and immigration made it clear to us that Tony was not going to be allowed to stay, so we were about to be forcibly separated. I did a bunch of research into what was happening in the UK; found that, for the first time ever, a same-sex couple in the UK had managed to get residence status for the foreign partner – it was an international couple. So we knew it was possible and we thought, well, this is the only option we have; this is the one shot we've got to be together. So, even though in the UK there was no, again – the same as America – there was no recognition of same-sex relationships at all, this loophole in immigration law was for compassionate reasons and the government seemed to be shifting, in the sense that it was prepared to be...show a little compassion towards couples in our situation.

So, we came to the UK in August of '96. I submitted my application for permanent residency. I was told that I wasn't

allowed to leave the country while this application was pending. I wasn't allowed to work, which was very difficult, you know, I came here with what was in my pockets at the time, in '96. So it was a really hard time. And in fact, it took four years to get my residency, so during that whole period there were some pretty heavy restrictions on our...what we could do, where we could go.

And eventually I got the residency. At the time that we met, Tony was involved with this local lesbian and gay youth organisation but it was a secret organisation because, at the time, Milton Keynes was under the authority of Buckinghamshire County Council and they had issued a blanket ban on anything associated with the county council being used to support gay and lesbian young people in any way. At the time, you might remember, there was a Section 28 on the books, so any kind of government promotion of homosexuality – is the language they used at the time – was completely forbidden. So, at the time that this organisation existed, it was being supported by the youth workers who had to keep the whole thing a secret from Bucks County Council, who would have sacked them had they known that they were working with lesbian and gay young people.

So that was a really strange time and it also put a lot of pressure on them because there was a lottery grant – they secured a lottery grant for about eighty thousand pounds – to fund their work, this lesbian and gay youth organisation, which was hugely controversial; it was brought up in prime minister's questions in the Houses of Parliament; John Major, at the time, made a public statement, then and there, that it was completely inappropriate for lottery money to be used to support such an organisation as this. But that organisation was supporting very vulnerable young people in Milton Keynes who needed the support and, after moving here, I got involved – believe it or not, in '96 I was still a young person – so I got involved as a volunteer. I eventually became the paid co-ordinator, funded by that lottery grant, and then after I was...I was a paid co-ordinator for about four years and then, after that period, when the contract finished and the grant came to an end, I still stayed on as a volunteer and trustee, doing work with lesbian and gay young people. I became a volunteer youth worker myself, at the time, and lots of really great memories of phenomenal young people that we worked with in Milton Keynes. You know, at that time, there was really so little community there. The organisation had been...(I'm just rambling now; I'm just...*[laughs]*).

[Many voices all speaking at once]...it's okay, no, no, it's fine. We'll be getting rid of a lot of the detail of that.

00:05:02

Do you have a second question, I..?

Okay, so you've given us some great detail about the organisations you were dealing with but, during that period – you said it was four years – how did you feel in that period of uncertainty where you couldn't go home; I think you said you couldn't go out of the country back to America. So how are you feeling at that time?

Very vulnerable...at the time that we were going through the immigration process, it was a time where I felt very vulnerable. We were struggling to make ends meet; I wasn't allowed to work because of the immigration status. That did change eventually. At a certain point in the process, I was allowed to get employment, which is when I started working for the community...*[Tuts]* (Do I have to start all of that again?)

That's okay, just take a pause and start from where you...where you...

All right, um...so, for the four years that we were going through the immigration process, it was a time when I felt very vulnerable because, for a good portion of that, at the beginning, I wasn't allowed to work and we were struggling to make ends meet. So we were...we were living on Eaglestone at the time, renting a place, and at a certain point in the immigration process I was given the permission to work, so I got a job working for the lesbian and gay youth organisation that we had met through.

And I became a paid co-ordinator for them and I was there...over two periods I was the co-ordinator at Youthline and then I filled in the gaps with the volunteer work for them as well. But that particular time was tough for us because we didn't know what was going to happen; we didn't know what was going to be at the end of that process. It was brand new; one couple had been successful but we had no idea if there was any opportunity for that to be repeated. So there was always the spectre of being forcibly separated because at that time, still, there was no civil partnership, there was no same-sex marriage, so we had no status as a couple, apart from the fact that we were telling people we were a couple. So there was a point in the process where I had to stand up in front of a judge and justify the fact that I was in love with this man and that this relationship meant something to me, which is a hard thing to do under the threat of being deported.
[Laughs]

So, during that time, a lot of the work you did is sort of somehow politically or socially related. Did you do that just through choice – was that previous work you'd done – or did you sort of feel compelled to do it because of your situation?

Well, before I moved to the UK I lived in Washington DC. I had graduated from university there – I had a degree in psychology – and I went to work for the National Association of People with Aids as a caseworker, so I was working to help people with HIV get access to various kinds of medical treatment and healthcare: really difficult job; very emotional job. This was in the days before triple therapies and combination therapies were around, so people were dropping like flies, so a very emotional time. And when I moved to the UK, you know, I wanted to do things that I, similarly, would feel good about and that I felt were making a difference and helping people, so...I haven't always worked in the voluntary sector and the community sector but I have always had an interest in and been involved with that sector so, where there have been opportunities for me to work in employment in that sector, I've often pursued them.

00:08:27

Okay, fantastic. Thank you.

[Break in interview to discuss technical issues]

00:09:30

So, we've got some of your story of where you were living before and the early work you did when you were here.

Shall we do one about what he thought of Milton Keynes...

Yeah, yeah, so...

...you know, in comparison to...because a lot of people have said Milton Keynes is quite like America and we've had people saying...

Yeah, with the grids and everything. So, how did Milton Keynes compare to where you came from in Washington DC? How did it compare?

It's funny, when I first moved here, that I would hear from people often, "Well, Milton Keynes is very American, isn't it?"

And I would say, "Is it?" [Laughs] "Um, okay."

I think Milton Keynes is its own thing; it's quite unique. I understand that people are thinking of the grid roads and there are...in parts of the country in America there are cities that are based like that. But of course, all the roundabouts and the individual estates, that's all very...that's not American at all, so I mean it's...I can understand why people think that but, for somebody coming from America to Milton Keynes, it felt very different.

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And I think, you know, at the time that I came here in '96, that was...it seemed to be in a period of real upheaval in Milton

Keynes. I mean, it just felt like things were changing so quickly and there was so much building going on in the City Centre – you know, the theatre was built and then the Snowdome was built – and I can remember sitting under the Midsummer oak with Tony, having a, you know, an argument one day, you know, in the middle of a...it just was an empty lot with a tree in the middle of it. So, you know, things were changing rapidly and I felt, as an immigrant in Milton Keynes, that even though I perhaps didn't have some of the same challenges that a lot of immigrants would have, in terms of language barriers and cultural barriers, I sort of understood that this was a very diverse city that was growing more diverse by the day. So I felt like I was part of that in some way.

So, you were saying it was quite diverse, do you think that someone from the LGBT community was welcome in Milton Keynes, when you arrived?

You know what, when I first came to Milton Keynes from the States, I was coming from a culture that can be very judgemental. I sensed about the culture here in Milton Keynes that there was much more of a 'live and let live' kind of mentality and that was immediately more comfortable to me and I definitely noticed it. You know, in the States you're never at a loss for people telling you what they think of you and the British are a bit more reserved...[laughs]...in letting you know what they think. So I immediately felt that there was more tolerance here, in the sense that, people were prepared to just say, "That's none of my business," you know.

Okay, so I know you didn't grow up in Milton Keynes but what did you think of – because you've spent a long time here now – how do you think you've changed, as you've lived here for a long time?

How have I changed? Oh goodness. I don't know if I have an interesting answer to that. [Laughs]

No, I...[unintelligible]

So let's go with how Milton Keynes has changed.

Yeah, how has Milton Keynes changed? Yeah.

Okay, let me think about that for a second. Since I moved here in '96, the city is still familiar. There are...you know, I live in Shenley Church End and we're not in the old village part but it's right next to us, so I...you know, every time I look out the window, I feel that there's still a big...you know, a long stretch of history here; that's it's not just a new city. But I've felt the upheaval at the same time and, working with the Community Foundation for so many years,

to see firsthand all of these incredible immigrant communities and diverse communities that are growing and emerging and becoming part of our character here; I mean, the character of the city is changing, in that sense. But I think, you know, my sense of it is that where that does pose challenges for communities, I think Milton Keynes has been better than most places at embracing that change and embracing that growing diversity. Not to say there aren't issues here, just like there are anywhere else, but it feels less ghettoised, if I can use that word: there's more engagement, there's more acceptance in a way. So I think it's to our benefit and our civic pride, really, that Milton Keynes has dealt with this situation in a more modern and progressive way.

Okay, fantastic. Do you have any special memories of Milton Keynes, as you've lived here so long?

You could talk about, like, the cultural involvement, with your drama, now...

Yeah, yeah sorry, yeah.

...and what you've been involved in.

Okay.

So yeah, through the drama that you've done here, could you tell us a bit more about it?

Well, I...I've always had an interest in the arts. I used to do a lot of acting when I was a student and I...you know, I wish I had the skills for visual arts because I absolutely love the visual arts but I'm not particularly talented in that way myself. But I still always feel the need for a creative outlet and, through a lot of the work that we were supporting at the Community Foundation, I got to meet a lot of phenomenal people in the arts sector; and I got the opportunity to take an amazing part in an amazing play – a very long drama...*[laughs]*...a lead in a three-hour drama – not having done a play for twenty years and there was a huge amount of memorisation to do and a very difficult subject matter as well: it was a play about a man who accidentally gets his wife killed. *[Laughs]* So it was pretty tough but I absolutely came to life through the...through this production, working with Pepper's Ghost and Rosemary Hill and all the phenomenal people that were involved and I just couldn't get enough.

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So I've kept on acting, I've done a number of plays locally and, because this is amateur theatre, I'm in this wonderful position where I'm being offered plays that I would...parts that I would never, ever be offered as a professional. So, I've got to play...oh, I got to...in the Twelfth Night I got to play Orsino and, I mean,

there's just been a number of really brilliant roles I've been able to play. And the theatre in Milton Keynes, amateur theatre, is...I'm going to use the word 'thriving' because it's active and it's passionate. I wouldn't say 'thriving' in the sense of being successful financially because it's really hard to sell tickets in Milton Keynes, so that's...it's always struggling but I love it, it's a creative outlet for me, and I know that we work so hard to produce work of a professional standard within...particularly within Pepper's Ghost.

So you say there's a lot of passion there and there's a lot of people really want to get involved in amateur theatre. Do you think that the organisations established by Milton Keynes Theatre and any of the other places around here with the groups, are they well catered for, these passionate people?

I think...well, there's different companies which produce different kinds of work, so there's lots of opportunities to get involved, for people in Milton Keynes that have an interest in theatre and being creative in that way. You know, the Gallery's undergoing this massive regeneration right now and there's likely to be a space within the Gallery's expansion that will allow for theatrical productions to be put on there for the first time, which will be brilliant because, in addition to the theatre in Milton Keynes City Centre – which is a massive venue and obviously hosts a lot of professional productions – there's a need in the City Centre for smaller performance spaces and I think the Gallery is looking to try to meet some of that need. So that's an excellent development.

Okay, fantastic. Is there anything that you think has made Milton Keynes sort of a success or a failure, in your mind?

Milton Keynes is renowned for being a thriving local economy. You know, the government often likes to highlight Milton Keynes as an example of an excellent, thriving local economy that's forward-looking and progressive and technologically savvy. And I think that Milton Keynes has earned that reputation. However, as many people are well aware, there is a tremendous amount of poverty and vulnerability among different communities in Milton Keynes and we need to do better at addressing that gap. I appreciate there's lots of bigger issues on a national and even global scale that are affecting that but there are things that we could be doing locally to help people. It's a challenge that is a little bit different in Milton Keynes than other places just because we have this amazing asset, this fantastic resource, of a thriving local economy with a very progressive technological bent, while having all of this tremendous need and desperate families who are unable to even feed themselves sometimes. So that's, I think, the challenge for us, going forward as a city: Milton Keynes needs to

look how to make sure that we are looking after the most vulnerable.

Okay fantastic.

Is that even...I don't remember what the question was now.
[Laughs]

You know, it was just a...it was just success or failure. Are there any other questions you'd like?

I think we just want to ask, do you see yourself carrying on living here?

Ah yes, great, yeah.

And what do you think the next fifty years will hold?

Okay.

Do you think you'll stay in Milton Keynes, and why?

Okay. Having said that Milton Keynes is not especially American, on the other hand it does have a lot of things that feel familiar to it – the fact that there's a lot of newer buildings in the Centre:MK and the City Centre feels a little bit like an American shopping mall at times – so I...it was a great way for me, as an American, to begin to feel at home in a foreign place and I am comfortable in Milton Keynes; I've always been comfortable here and have no plans to leave. I love this city. The longer I live here the more I learn about it and, working with the Community Foundation, I learnt a whole lot about amazing things happening in this city, led by incredible people, making the most generous sacrifices of their time and their energy and their emotion, to help vulnerable people; so I'm a bit in love with this city and I have no intention of going anywhere.

So, Milton Keynes is fifty years old now. What do you see happening in the next fifty years?

That's a tough one. What do I see happening? Well, in terms of the next fifty years, I think Milton Keynes...there's some gaps that we need to address in Milton Keynes. Educationally, we need a thriving university in Milton Keynes; personally, I would love to see an arts school in Milton Keynes – I think that would do amazing things for our cultural sector and the cultural life of the city.

00:20:15

So I think there's some opportunities there for Milton Keynes to fill in some of the gaps and keep some more of our young people

around because, once young people finish college, there's not a lot of opportunity here for continuing your education. So I think that's something that should be a priority for us, going forward over the next fifty years. I would like to see the educational offer of Milton Keynes diversify. And, you know, I think there's...because we've got this unique situation, with all these emerging immigrant communities, there's so much opportunity there to really diversify the cultural life of the city and to incorporate those differences in a mainstream way that everybody can appreciate and engage with.

Great. Thank you. Is there any...anything else?

Have you got anything you'd like to add in to your story now? I mean, what sort of places that you might go now, you know, we've been...sort of, we filmed down at Unit 9 the other day, which is sort of a new, upcoming sort of venue.

Yeah.

Is there any place that...

Any particular favourite place to go, or..?

...have you got a favourite place that you might have attended or...people talk about the Bowl concerts or..?

Somewhere you go regularly in...yeah?

I know if my partner were asked this question he would tell you that he loves to go to MK11, over on Kiln Farm. It's a bit of a niche venue; it's not huge; it's not particularly fancy; but they get some amazing acts in there: really prominent people who were involved in the birth of Hip-hop back in the day and some really, really impressive acts. So I know that Tony would tell you that he loves to go there and would recommend that as something...a venue for people to keep an eye on. Personally, I am a homebody; I don't go out much...*[laughs]*...so, apart from work, I don't know if I have any great recommendations on that.

Thank you. That's brilliant.

Really good.

Appreciate that. Sorry there were a few breaks in that. I do apologise.

No, that's fine.

[General chatter]

That was a great interview.

Yeah, thanks very much.

My pleasure.

We've got to edit that down, that's the trouble.

No, I really appreciate that.

No, my pleasure, my pleasure.

00:22:21

END OF INTERVIEW