

Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project: Mike Edmonds Interview by Anna Minsky
Transcription by Brianna Yanez, 2024

Mike Edmonds was the Dean of Students at Colorado College from 1991 until 2005, when he was promoted to Vice President of Student Life / Dean of Students. He was interviewed for the LGBT Oral History project on December 12, 2011.

Anna Minsky: We are recording. So, this is an interview for the Colorado College LBGTQ Oral History project. I am Anna Minsky the date is December 2nd, 2011. I am in the Worner campus center at Colorado College with Dean of student life and Vice president of Student Affairs, Mike Edmonds.

Mike Edmonds: [Phone rings]

Anna Minsky: Go for it [laughter] Mike Edmonds.

Anna Minsky: Um I look forward to talking to him about his experiences working with the LGBT community.

[Phone ringing]

Anna Minsky: Do you need to take it?

Mike Edmonds: Nah

Anna Minsky: Okay cool!

Mike Edmonds: Ok I think I turned it off

Anna Minsky: [Laughter] No worries. So, will you briefly introduce yourself for us

Mike Edmonds: I am Mike Edmonds. I am Dean of Students and Vice President for Student life at Colorado College, and this is my 21st year at CC.

Anna Minsky: So, when did you get to Colorado College and how did you find your way here?

Mike Edmonds: I started at Colorado College August 21, 1990. I came to Colorado College from [University of Mississippi] where I had done my B.A, my Master, and my PhD. I was working at Ole Miss as assistant Dean of Students, a position that I literally gotten right after uh finishing a masters and I didn't do any breaks in between any of my education I just kept going. So, I wanted to see if the PhD really made a difference in seeing how marketable you were. So, I applied to some schools and positions that I thought were reach positions and low and behold I ended up at Colorado College. I just feel just totally um blessed and excited to have been here now for over 20 years and it gives me an interesting perspective because I've been able to see the college you've all been changed. Thats how I got to CC when I started at CC coming from Mississippi, I probably gave myself three years to stay at the college, but I guess I was off by several years.

Anna Minsky: [laughter] Absolutely. Um can you talk a little about the climate um in regards to the LGBTQ community at CC at the time you got here.

Mike Edmonds: Well, you know when I first started at CC, I'm not so sure I would say the climate was...bad for our LGBT students but I'm not so sure that our LGBT students necessarily felt welcomed or comfortable or if this was a campus that they could that they could own and

feel invested. So, that's you know the climate may have not been hostile, but I'm not so sure it was encouraging, nurturing, and forward thinking, and inviting, and engaging. I think we are evolving to that state, and I believe we have started to evolve over the last 20 years um to that state. The same would probably be true for some of our minority student organizations because The Office of Minority student life which is now Minority student life and um International Students had just been formed. Rochelle Mason had just been hired as the first director and there was a lot of conversation it happened the year before I started. So, there was a lot of conversation about where to place two particular groups that didn't fit by race or ethnicity and those groups were where did you place harberin uh where did you place um our gay and bisexual and lesbian students. Bruce Coriell, who had helped formed Rochelle Mason's office and office of minority student life, encouraged the college to put all student groups who might be disenfranchised or at that time were not considered part of the colleges mainstream, whatever mainstream was or is, to be under that one umbrella office. So, that's how things got started in that office. So, um up until the early 90s there was not even a place or a person that could have served as a resource for student groups who didn't necessarily fit or students who didn't necessarily fit the uh template for whatever a Colorado College students should be.

Anna Minsky: Right, did those groups form any kind of alliance together? Or were there tensions between those groups?

Mike Edmonds: Oh, wow! Thats a great question, absolutely! I think we have been in a unique situation at Colorado College because all those groups have always worked under one office that you know that we don't have um like many colleges a Spanish house or a black house an African America house those groups have always worked under one office and for years just with one person. Thats one of the reasons why we had to start increasing the staff, but there's always been a sense of synergy and support from what I call the heads of state and those groups with each other. In fact, today's Friday, I think Wednesday I hosted a "heads of state" luncheon over in the Marieli carriage house. Well, the synergy, the laughter, the comradery, the collaboration uh I think there were 19 student leaders there plus myself and 3 other administrators. Was just very symbolic of that synergy and that sense of purpose that's always been there. Of course, there have been tensions and ups and downs through the years and I think we've had to pay attention to some of those tensions and see how we continue to evolve the office. For many years the office was just the director, well that's a whole lot of balls to try and keep in the air if you're just one person. Rochelle is very talented, very student committed, a product of CC but even at times that was too much for her and different groups may have felt because Rochelle is African America BSU may be getting too much attention or if she had interest in the mariachi band it could be MECHA then there could be some personality. So, surely I would not try to tell you it was all a utopia, but those tensions actually added to the relationships and the synergy and helped the college and since I've been the Dean of Students and now have the title of Vice president try to grow the office in ways that it can respond to some of those tensions. For example, we added initially a half-time staff person, a staff assistant, and then we grew that to a full-time staff assistant so there was an opportunity for Rochelle to have some help and I don't need to make it about Rochelle so I should say the director in the office. Then, I can't remember why we computerized the office and then we added a paraprofessional to be able to give more needs and then the paraprofessional position evolved into an assistant director's position. This past year, because we were able to bring on Beth Concilious, and Saurice and I just think we've had to pay attention to making sure the office evolved, as the issue evolved, as the campus

evolved, and as the needs of our community and students evolved. Many places look to Colorado College on the front range to be the beacon of light and hope, forward thinking, and to provide a sense of uh I don't want to say moral consciousness, but a sense of well maybe yeah that's the best phrase, moral consciousness on issues that may seem complex and foreign to not only to some of our staff and faculty at Colorado College but the greater community. We've always had a sense of not only purpose internally but also externally, so I think growth in the staff, in the resources, in the budget, to try to reflect the complexity of how students identify themselves or chose to identify themselves and the resources needed from them to be successfully both academically and personally. We've got to pay attention! Thats our mission. We want to produce productive bright citizens, and in order to do that I think people ought to be able to feel like they can not only be at CC, but own CC, be part of CC, be invested in CC, help CC sustain. Yes, we have been able to do some of those resources and in particularly when I think about this and that's why I am so thrilled to have the LGBT student life specialist because that was an area that I always thought we were weak, weak with. A few years ago, I tried to God I say a few maybe three or four years ago I tried to work out a relationship with UCCS and the University of Colorado that we could get a graduate assistant in that particular area so that we could admin our staff and be able to meet need. We weren't able to do that because as you know that was at the same time the financial crisis was hitting. So, what I think of how we've ended up now with being able to have a student life specialist full-time, not a graduate assistant, but a permanent line, I think we've ended up in the correct spot. I wish we wouldn't have had to wait the three years or so, but I do think that has always been a weakness. The other area I thought we had a weakness in was that we didn't have anybody particularly paying attention to the needs of Jewish students. I guess 6 or so years ago we were able to start the part-time Rabbi position in the Chaplin's office which is now has turned into the Jewish student advisors' position, I think that's Coby's official title. In short, I am very happy to see the two areas that I thought we were lacking in we have now, and it took time, but we have now been able to actually have bodies and staff there to serve as resources, not only for students in those groups but for the campus in general and for the community in general.

Anna Minsky: Mmmh, Thats great. Umm can you talk a little about the switch from, so was BGALA a student group when you got here, or can you talk a little bit about their existence and their transition to be BGALA if you remember that?

Mike Edmonds: Oh, wow I can't tell you that I remember all the...

Anna Minsky: Yeah, it was just the adding of bisexual to their group.

Mike Edmonds: Correct, and I think that came as people continued to wrestle with how people identified themselves. We certainly had students who were openly gay, and we had students who were openly lesbian, but I'm not so sure many colleges and universities knew or had students who were openly bisexual. The group then just started to evolve to include people who considered themselves queer, questioning, evolving, identifying, growing, developing. Then now we have the addition of transgender, so you see a long evolution. I can't tell you if I can remember a specific catalyst for the evolution student-led and student-encouraged.

Anna Minsky: Do you remember how kind of like what BGALA's presence was on campus? Like if it was a pretty quiet group that kind of met on their own and didn't make much noise, or if they also had some political activism? They had a presence that was known on campus? How they were received if so.

Mike Edmonds: Both. I think it depended on collectively and individually. There were certainly some members of BGALA who that was their support network, that was their group, that was part of their group of friends, but didn't necessarily want to be politically active or pushing the envelope with the college. Then there were some particular members who did want to work in cooperation and collaboration with the college, to be involved, and pay attention to needs. I also think, I hope, and I believe we are reaching the point where the institution is as proactive as we possibly can be around some issues instead of always being reactive. I think that may be a big difference in how I would describe what was going on in 1991 and what's going on say 2011. 1991 with issues around gay, bi, lesbian issues. I think the college was reactive if something happened to react, and I'm sure people would probably say the same thing about woman's issues and minority student issues. The college is in a better state and frame to help be proactive instead of reactive. One of the reasons I think that is our student groups, I know this is an added burden, I mean I absolutely acknowledge that, education is an added burden to students who identify with any of these groups, and it shouldn't be their responsibility to always be the one educating. But helping make the institution aware has helped make the environment better.

Anna Minsky: mmh, absolutely. I am curious as to what was happening in the 90s in regards to how the campus delt with aids? and if you remember if there were still lingering issues?

Mike Edmonds: Well, a lot of aids education, a lot of some of the stuff still continues with the availability of condoms on campus. Some campuses in the 90s didn't redibly uhm believe that you know you ought to be providing condoms, well we certainly did. A lot of aids education, Judith Reynolds, was the medical director of Boettcher at the time she was a leader in those conversation. In the greater southern Colorado community, we've always had a relationship with SCAP (Southern Colorado Aids Project), in fact I think they were just on campus a couple of days ago. So, we had some really good community partners helping us educate our students. If I'm not mistaken and I could be, one of if not the first diagnose case at the time, happened over at Boettcher. So, that's why I believe Dr. Reynolds was very instrumental about educating the campus about safe-sex, safe sex practices. We did it in new student orientation, as you know we still sort of do it in new student orientation with the addition of sexual assault training. So, a ton of education, some students were doing some independent research on the issue, but a lot of education a lot of the acceptance of this is the reality were not going to talk about abstinence, the only way of um practicing safe sex, but we're actually going to talk about safe sex. One of the conversation or the lecture now that still happens about good sex or great sex was actually started again by Judith Reynolds back in the 90s to help educate the campus, and for us also to not put our heads in a bubble. We have a student body that will be sexually active, that's not saying that every student is sexually active, I'm not speaking in absolute, but we did have, and we do have a responsibility to be able to talk about education on health issues including aids and sex.

Anna Minsky: Mmh, absolutely. Umm back to student groups, do you remember when Equal was started, I don't know when that would've been?

Mike Edmonds: Oh god, see in my mind I would say they were always here. Rochelle Mason probably could give you the exact date and time, because she would have been involved.

Anna Minsky: Yeah, Thats fine.

Mike Edmonds: I can't remember it not being here.

Anna Minsky: Yeah, absolutely! Umm How about um the activism around Amendment 2 on campus, was that prevalent?

Mike Edmonds: Oh god, that was probably one of the worst times in Colorado history. Will Perkins and Amendment 2, the activism I think on campus was very prevalent because of the message of hate that it was sending. The campus actually through a lot of student groups, faculty members, staff members, and the Champlin's office if I can remember rights people were just taken back by the whole foundation of hate. Then there was a group of religious leaders in the community who may have referred to themselves as "Main Street USA" who were working with the college to try to combat this message of hate and bigotry that was coming out of the Amendment 2 movement. So, the activism was heavy Colorado College, and its people played a big role in trying to educate this community. It was just an ugly part of Colorado's history, and in fact I would say the vast majority that's what the whole concept of "The Main Street USA" religious leaders in the downtown corridor were partnering with the college, nobody liked this sense of hate that was coming out from the amendment 2 movement. So, the activism certainly impacted this campus. Citizens' project, I don't know if you know much about Citizens Project, but Citizens Project it was a local grassroot effort of community people that brought together people of all backgrounds and that was the Citizen's project, to try and get the message out that this was just unacceptable in the Colorado Springs community. The college had a lot of people who were involved in Citizens Project and not only as volunteers but donors. That organization still exists today to try to be the, one of the voices for things that are just wrong.

Anna Minsky: Yeah, absolutely. Were there, do you remember times of more discrimination on campus towards the LGBT community, when they weren't maybe well received or acts of hatred or discrimination?

Mike Edmonds: Of course, I am sure there were, and I know we handled some through administrative length and some discipline issues and responded to some defacement of bulletin boards, people's poster on their doors [coughing], um poster in Worner center. I think some people may have thought that they could participate in some mainstream college activities if they were openly gay openly les- [coughing], I promise I am not contagious.

Anna Minsky: [laughing]

Mike Edmonds: Um openly lesbian. I am sure we had our issues of discrimination along those issues. Were we as enlightened as we are acclaimed to be now and then? No. Did we have and still possibly do some institutional issues? Absolutely! I do remember some, as I would call major breakthroughs, or major happenings. I can remember when there was the first openly gay football player, or openly gay athlete and how the college responded to him.

Anna Minsky: What was that like?

Mike Edmonds: I think the college responded, the student body responded well to him. I mean he continued to play football. I can remember when we had the election, um having an openly gay fraternity president and openly gay president of the IFC, who now still as an alumni of many years still involved with the colleges Greek system. So, I can remember some, as I would call them, watershed moments on campus and beginning to see people accept or start to accept students of difference as being part of our fabric. Which in many ways I think we always did, but to come back to your earlier question, yes, there were acts and moments that we shouldn't have

been or were not proud collectively or individually. Even when I think about the evolution of women studies to feminist and gender studies to begin to academically and think about issues in the curriculum and identity much different.

Anna Minsky: Um, has your interaction I guess with the community, or the LGBT community been kind of on like club basis or also like one on one because you are dean of student life so your someone for people to come to and talk to?

Mike Edmonds: It's been mostly, because I am dean of student life, I mean I interact a lot with some of the clubs, but mostly just like I was referencing the luncheon that occurred the other day, it's just you know way before the safe place campaign, I know that my office our division has always been a safe place for students, faculty, and staff. So, a lot of great relationships, it's funny you are asking that question, and my mind is going back to thinking about in particular students and people. So, I am very much a relationship-based dean of students and try to know the student body and all of its varied components of the student body and its types and a lot of one-on-one relationships.

Anna Minsky: Mmh great! Um, are there any other I guess like big world events or like big things big political events or campus events that happened that affected that community and if you remember like any stories about, I guess we're really also just trying to gather stories about specific events and um yeah.

Mike Edmonds: Well certainly Amendment 2. I think Amendment 2 was huge, I think you know the story about when Ted Haggard was supposed to speak on campus, he cancelled his speech on campus, and no one knew why. But that same night is when the story broke about um his activity with a male prostitute. When you look back at that timing, he was supposed to give a speech that morning uh he was not there, I am trying to remember who was hosting that debater who was hosting that speech and then that story broke. He had a son who actually was a graduate of the college or is a graduate of the college. When we first started getting request to start thinking about how we labeled restroom here. I can remember walking through buildings and paying attention and trying to make sure there were gender neutral restrooms in our building. When that became a concern of students and God was the first one in Slocum, I think it may have been in Slocum but uh um or Bemis actually it may have been in Bemis. Making sure that our signage was appropriate um figuring out how do you help students who work through identity um when they may be in transition. Yet and still if there is a scholarship that only can go to a woman by deed of gift and somebody is in transition how do you approach a student and say, you have been nominated do you want us to consider you for this? In helping or having those conversations with students instead of just being paralyzed by the topic and running away. I actually think we have been really good about, just ask, just go to the student. I think, I don't want to say its unique to CC because I don't know how other places are doing it, but I do think that's a symbol of how CC does care about the student and does try to be student focused. Don't get paralyzed about asking. Yeah, those are some of the stories or some of the moments I think about in memory off the top of my head.

Anna Minsky: Mmh yeah great, um what other questions do I have. Um, have I guess has the campus response or the administration response to request or needs of that community shifted as presidents have change? Or has it been more on the groundwork more like one-on-one dean of student life interaction, and you've been here for a long time, have those relationships kind of maintained a steady sense or has the presidents affected that and changed that?

Mike Edmonds: You know every president has his or her own style, institutionally I think our commitment, our education, and our awareness continues to grow. Like all the enhancements that have occurred in the office of Minority student life and International students I mean span over two presidents with some help two or three academic deans, so a great sense of collaboration. Its new with president Tiefenthaler, I think she would tell you that it's her sense that we are an inclusive campus and I think we have evolved to be more inclusive campus than we were. The diversity task force has always been charged with all issues of diversity and that's been true under different presidents. So, in particularly, I guess I've worked under several presidents, I think the institutional commitment has grown and evolved, different presidents interact differently. For example, Dick Celeste showed up at drag ball one year in complete drag on a segway. I don't necessarily think that's going to be the case with every president that would be here. So, I guess it just depends on a particular president's style. You talk about stories; I can remember watching or the evolution of drag ball where it went from an event to help raise money for aids, to campus activities, to two or three years ago even students and members of the LGBT community complaining that it has just degraded and people didn't like where it was, to last year's reincarnation or recreation and evolution. So, not that that was a story, but it just sort of talks about how even the activity now has become a tradition and now is a campus tradition that people look forward to. Now, I think with the presidents the institutional commitment is strong, I think Dick Celeste would say that he was definitely a supporter and an advocate I probably think Kathryn Mohrman, a previous president prior to Dick, would say the same thing and I suspect that president Tiefenthaler would say the same thing.

Anna Minsky: Right, yeah absolutely. What is the college doing now in regard to LGBT issues? Are there any specific things that the college is taking on right now?

Mike Edmonds: Well, you know Ginger Morgan, out of the student life office, did that big alumni survey in the state of experience, for students who identify as LGBT, why they are at CC and currently at CC. So, I don't know if you all are scheduled to talk to Ginger at all, but Ginger led that project and that effort, and I think those results continue to help inform some of the direction we should be going I.E The addition of Beth Concilio's position. So, if you ask me what has the college done? We added a specialist to be able to respond to that group of students' needs. We just did that this August so that would be the most notable thing I could point to you current in real time. Plus, Ginger is leading that study in the homecoming reunions. I also think Heather Horton's position just has been really helpful directly and indirectly, in helping us think about inclusion, identity, our policies, our responses, and our environment. With Beth, Roger and Syri I think we are putting our resources to work, in a state where we have multiple resources.

Anna Minsky: Another question, I know you are dean of student life, but you are also among the faculty members. Do you know of any issues gay faculty members have come up against and how well or not well that's been dealt with? Or if that at all?

Mike Edmonds: You know I don't.

Anna Minsky: Okay.

Mike Edmonds: I talk with the academic dean's office, yeah, I do teach a few classes every now in the drama department. But I wouldn't know how for example some of the curricular issues, some of the tenure issues, some of the issues in particular relate. I know that because I said on the college's budget committee that the compensation committee is requesting the college figure

out a way, and very few employers do this, it's coming, I think. There were a couple fortune 500 companies that are trying to figure out how they can help employees who are same-sex united partners. There is a tax consequence and federal tax consequence just depending on how you file. I know that's an issue that people are talking about, how do we help address, but I know that because I sit on the budget committee not necessarily because of that ...

Anna Minsky: and is the college, yeah oh right.

Mike Edmonds: And I am not that hoist.

Anna Minsky: Is the college trying to address that and trying to hear that?

Mike Edmonds: Yeah, Dan Johnson, the chair of the econ department, uhh not chair of the econ department. Dan Johnson, in econ whose chair of the conference colleges compensation committee, could talk more in depth about the way the college is attempting to resolve that. I can say because of my work on the budget committee it has been brought to the attention of the budget committee and figuring out how do you work around federal law to be able to do this, to support what we're trying to do. Will it get resolved this year, don't know, but working towards it.

Anna Minsky: Mmh, cool! Um well is there any other stories you'd want to tell me or memories?

Mike Edmonds: Nope! [inaudible] No, this has been good.

Anna Minsky: Okay great, it has been very helpful. Thank you very very much!

Mike Edmonds: No worries, it's always good when you...

Anna Minsky: Um [giggle] will you do me one more favor. Will you just say, Andrew wants me to have you he is running the project, and he wants to collect voices saying "The Colorado College LGBTQ oral history project" will you just say that.

Mike Edmonds: The Colorado College LGBT oral history project.

Anna Minsky: Great! And then will you say, "One story at a time".

Mike Edmonds: One Story at a time.

Anna Minsky: Great, Thank you so much!

Mike Edmonds: Bye. Have fun!

Anna Minsky: Thank you!

Mike Edmonds: And thank you...