# Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

**Interviewee:** Kyriacos Spyrou
**Interviewer:** Keith Stewart
**Place of Interview:** Scotia House
**Date:** 4 August 2009
**Files:** KS1-11

**Key**

**SK: =** Interviewee, Kyriacos Spyrou
**KS: =** Interviewer, Keith Stewart
[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time
[5:22 IA] = inaudible section at this time
Word 5:22 = best guess at word

**KS:** Can you tell me your name?

**SK:** I'm Kyriacos Spyrou.

**KS:** And where and when you were born?

**SK:** I was born in East London in 1966.

**KS:** So tell me a little bit about your background. You were born in the East End?

**SK:** Yeah, I was born in the East End, born in Upton Park in 1966. We ran a fish and chip shop, my family had a fish and chip shop. Then when I was seven we moved further out to Redbridge, so further on the outskirts of London, more outer London and stayed there 'til I left home,, which was when I was about sixteen-and-a-half.

**KS:** What was the area like that you grew up in? What was the school you went to?

**SK:** Very … predominantly a Jewish area, Redbridge at that point. Very few people from different backgrounds, so we weren't … there were a few Cypriots around but not many. I can't really remember that much about my schooling.

**KS:** When did you leave the Redbridge area?

**SK:** I left there when I was sixteen and moved to Leighton for two years, and then moved to Haringey in North London, where I've been ever since.

**KS:** Was that with your family?

**SK:** No, I left on my own. I left home quite young.

**KS:** What did you do when you'd finished school and studying?

**SK:** First job was working on a market stall, working in a chippy, and then got involved in youth work, partly because I was involved in the Lesbian and Gay

Youth Project as a member, and then became a volunteer youth worker, and from that got into youth work.

**KS:** Tell us a bit about the Lesbian and Gay Project – when was that?

**SK:** That would have been 1982, 82/82 and it was at Manor Gardens in Islington. At the time it was the first lesbian and gay teenage group in the country, and I used to go there and I think that helped shape what I did with the rest of my career really, just in terms of that seeing those other … 'cause when I was at school you never knew there were jobs like being a youth worker and so it opened my eyes to the potential of different types of work, and also I think gave me the confidence to come out very early as a gay man.

**KS:** What was it like in those early days in terms of being a gay teenager in London and living in London?

**SK:** I think actually at the time, 'cause I think mixing amongst other gay youth it felt … I didn't feel isolated or alone, I felt very one of many, just because I mixed with big groups of people. I think the isolating thing was I separated myself from my family and … my community as well as a Cypriot, and I think that took a while to change. So I think it was all very new and very exciting, but it was quite far removed from family or my culture really.

**KS:** Were there things like Pride, any of those sorts of events that you used to attend?

**SK:** I can't remember attending Pride 'til quite a bit later.

**KS:** When was your first one?

**SK:** I think that must have been something like '84 or '85 maybe, and it was if I remember rightly, on the South Bank. It was when it used to be on the South Bank was my first Pride.

**KS:** And what was that like?

**SK:** I remember just being quite overwhelmed by it and thinking … 'cause Pride also tends to be around my birthday, so it was almost like this is my birthday, we're having my birthday party, and it was just quite overwhelming being amongst so many people that were lesbian and gay.

**KS:** And did you continue your youth work with the gay community …

**SK:** Continued my youth work with the gay community, started off with Haringey Council and then with Camden and Islington council, and then got into working for Haringey council in their equalities unit, and that's where I then developed other skills to bring me where I am now.

**KS:** And when did you first get in contact with Stonewall Housing? How did that develop?

**SK:** It's when I worked for Haringey council, I worked as Lesbian and Gay Outreach Worker for the council, predominantly working around young people and black and minority ethnic young people, and it was through that that I met people from Stonewall Housing because they had hostels in the borough, and

also one of the people I worked with, Femi Otitoju, was also involved in the setting up of Stonewall Housing I think in some way, and I just remember being asked whether I'd sit on the management committee and it was being the rep from the Lesbian and Gay Unit in the Haringey Council, so that's how I got involved with it.

<Part 3 starts>

**KS:** And what were the issues for the LGBT community at the time?

**SK:** We were very much of the period when involved in almost kick-starting the whole Clause 28, Section 28 stuff. Very much the positive images campaign, the stuff we were working on, and then there was a huge backlash in the borough so we were fire fighting at the time against the backlash against what were then seen as loony left councils, so it was very much lesbian and gay against homophobic and race backlash that we were working against. I think those were the political issues of the time. Thinking about young people at the time, it was very much I think … young people were a lot more politicised about being young then, so there is also just about young people wanting and demanding a voice and rights as young people.

**KS:** When you says politicised as young?

**SK:** I think … you said brief overviews about how I think politics has changed. I still do some youth work now, predominantly with heterosexual groups, but just very much feeling … but have done gay groups until quite … about three or four years ago, and just feeling that young people aren't as politicised about being young, let alone the lesbian and gay politics, also youth politics. There isn't … doesn't feel like there's a youth political movement in the same way as there was during that time.

**KS:** You got involved with Stonewall through the Haringey link, so tell us about joining the committee. What was the first meetings like?

**SK:** They used to have offices in Tottenham, in if I remember rightly an indoor shopping centre, and they had offices on top and I can just remember us all meeting in the small office. I think there was about four workers at the time and I think it was about three or four management committee members at the time, that's all I can really recall.

**KS:** What sort of things did you have to deal with as a management committee?

**SK:** Again I wasn't there for that long. I was only there in that role I think for about a year. I supervised one of the housing development workers, and if you asked me who it was I don't remember their name … that's unfortunate. It was a woman that worked as a development worker, and at that point they only had … when I first got to know about them, and I can't remember if I was on the management committee at the time, but when I first got to know them they only had one hostel and within quite a short period of time they developed a second and a third one, so they were expanding. It was a very exciting time for them because they were expanding really quickly and they were getting new hostels for young people, and I remember at the time the debates being around do they have a lesbian only hostel, do they have a black and minority ethnic hostel for lesbian and gay mixed, and those were

the sort of debates, about how they structured the new properties they were getting.

**KS:** And how did those debates move forward?

<Part 4 starts>

**SK:** I think, in the end, if I remember rightly, it got dictated a bit by funding in as much as I think one of the Hackney … they'd got one on the borders of Haringey and Hackney, Stamford Hill, and I think the funding for that was for a young women's hostel, so I think that helped dictate that. But there was very much a strong sense of wanting to make sure they reserved certain bed spaces for certain types of young people. And it was I think really healthy debates around it. I think it was just then about pinning down how they were going to formalise the structure. There wasn't resistance internally. It was something that I think everyone really wanted to happen and was very excited by.

**KS:** And were there any other things happening in the big picture over that year that you were there?

**SK:** Well locally we were involved in organising local lesbian and gay Pride events. As I said, there was the political stuff going on around what then became Section 28.

**KS:** And tell me about Positive Images?

**SK:** There was a Positive Images campaign, which was about having positive images in schools around lesbian and gay young people. There was this book, *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*, which was a bit of a catalyst for the Section 28, which was about introducing a children's book that had positive role models. There were two gay fathers in the book and it was basically saying to local authorities like Haringey's education department, 'OK, you've got an equal opportunities policy. How are you promoting lesbian and gays in a positive light?' So it was a challenge to the local authority to actually bite the bullet and not just have a policy, a piece of paper that says, 'We treat you as equals' but actually getting them to show it. So there was that campaign going on, Positive Images campaign. There was lots of really heavy stuff going on in backlash, like they were burning books, gay books, outside libraries. Like the far right Family Values Campaign were burning books outside. Did a few publicity stunts. At the time I was one of three workers and we were hosting an event for lesbian and gay young people. It happened to be held in a centre for children with learning disabilities, and we weren't … the media twisted it as if to say we were trying to get young people with learning disabilities to become gay and actually all we'd done is hired that space on a night that no one else was using it, to have a youth event. And it was that kind of manipulation and twist that the media were doing on everything that we tried to do with our work.

**KS:** How did you deal with some of that?

<Part 5 starts>

**SK:** Well I think at the time, again I'm not convinced how many of the Labour councillors at the time supported our work and I think some of them supported

it ‘cause they absolutely believed in lesbian and gay rights, and I think some of them supported it because it was the party line to support, so there was mixed commitment, even though publically there was commitment. I think at the time we were protected a lot by certain senior managers, in a healthy way we were protected from a lot of the furore that was happening, and supported in that sense. I think we didn’t really anticipate what a furore … when we started our work, we were quite naïve in terms of the impact it was going to have.

**KS:** Was there any connection with your work and Stonewall?

**SK:** In terms of some of the young people that we referred to the hostels, it was through our connections with other youth projects, so there was a network of young people that we were aware of that were needing housing, so we were one of the referral points for the young people. And Stonewall also signposted young people to some of our youth provision so they can get more social skills and activities as well. So it was like a two-way support process really.

<Part 6 starts>

**KS:** What impact do you think there was for those young people actually having LGBT housing?

**SK:** I think the impact was hugely positive. I think it enabled young people, some of them for the first time, to feel safe, to be who they were naturally to them. So I think for many of them it was a sigh of relief where they could actually be out and open about who they were without feeling threatened or frightened. So I think it helped them feel safe. I know from my own experience about being amongst peers, other young lesbian and gay people as a young person, and I think it helps with confidence and self-esteem, and I think … I can’t see a negative in it at all. I think it’s a real positive move for young people.

<Part 7 starts>

**KS:** Thinking about some of the different decades – you’ve talked a bit about the ‘80s and ‘90s and now, what sorts of progression and changes have you seen for the community over those years?

**SK:** The lesbian and gay community?

**KS:** Yeah

**SK:** I think the ‘80s in particular were much more lesbian and gay people … maybe it’s the circles I mixed in, but there was more political around lesbian and gay equality. I think, ‘cause I was involved in lesbian and gay work and then HIV work in the ‘90s and I think the politics for me … I don’t think that we need to stop campaigning, but I think there’s far fewer campaigns, and I think people are less … not militant but less …active, politically. And I think things have changed. There’s many friends that are having civil marriages that were so anti those kind of … relationships, I would never have imagined that they would do what they’re doing. So people change. But maybe it’s about getting older. I didn’t imagine I’d be into my garden, do you know what I mean, like thirty years ago. And I am now. So it’s all … I think maybe it’s about evolving and maybe it’s about fighting for different things now. I don’t know.

**KS:** You said you were involved in the HIV campaign in the '90s. What sort of involvement did you have?

**SK:** I was involved in … I worked as an HIV trainer but I also worked for the MESMAC project, which was a young men's project about HIV prevention based predominantly in southeast London but also eventually became part of the Terrance Higgins Trust as well, and it was very much about trying to make young people aware about HIV but using a peer training model. So training young people to support other young people.

**KS:** And you were part of the training …

**SK:** Part of the training team. And then I worked for Camden Council as an HIV trainer for council employees and community groups.

**KS:** What do you think the impact was of the MESMAC process on young people?

**SK:** Again I think partly it was about empowering young people to assert their rights in terms of what they did for themselves, so it was about helping people feel confident to say no to certain types of sex if they didn't want it, and to negotiate safer sex. But I also think, as with me, going through youth work as a young person, it involved me getting involved in the work that I have done since, it's given other young people that I think were involved in those projects, MESMAC project, I now hear that they're professionals in a similar field as well, so I think it's been a catalyst for people's career paths.

**KS:** Opened up things for them?

**SK:** Mm.

<Part 8 starts>

**KS:** What about the 2000s,how do you think things have progressed?

**SK:** I think it's probably a lot easier to be gay than it was I'd say in the '80s. Maybe again it's an age thing, but I feel much more confident walking down the street. I think places are safer for me, but again it's about where I choose to socialise, so I'm also careful with that. I think … I don't think we should become complacent, but I think we've got more rights than we had; whether they're the ones we want or not I don't know, or whether they're enough. I don't think they are in lots of ways. There's still ways which … in my work now, victim support, hate crimes, it's being reported more but some of the cases we hear about are really horrific, so it hasn't got rid of the extreme bigotry in terms of the amount of the amount of homophobic attacks that are happening. So I think there's still pockets of real hatred against lesbians and gays, but I think in terms of rights we're beginning to chip away at it more. It's shifted.

<Part 9 starts>

**KS:** What about policing and housing with respect to LGBT? How do you think policing is dealt with in the LGBT community at the moment?

**SK:** I think it's … the police have shifted around acknowledging partly about … I remember when I was first involved in Haringey Council they were still the

days when police spent most of their energy in trying to catch gay men cottaging, whereas actually there's been a real shift away from that to … actually protecting lesbians and gay men in terms of hate crime, and just some of the stuff that we've been involved with where they'll police areas where there's gay bars and clubs, more about having a profile to protect people rather than try to arrest them. So I think there's been a shift to actually wanting … or not wanting but realising they've got a responsibility to serve lesbian and gay people as opposed to just treating them like criminals.

**KS:** Do you think the relationship between the community and the police is developing or growing?

**SK:** I think with great caution, and that's because I think there's a long way that I think the police have got to go, in terms of building relationships with the gay community. I think the gay community has a lot of history that says why should I trust? But I think it's moving in the right direction. I definitely think … just from sitting on groups that I sit on with the police, and just seeing the shifting attitudes. Like I sit on the Criminal Justice Board, diversity council, and it really is … when I think back to what it was like in the '80s when people … all the police were concerned about was arresting gay people, and now it's like actually being acknowledged as a valid partner around diversity issues in terms of along with race and along with gender and trans issues; I think that's a huge step.

**KS:** Have you seen a difference in the '80s, '90s and now about how people and organisations like the police actually relate in terms of the language they use and the way they communicate?

**SK:** I think they are more conscious of how they communicate. They may get it wrong, they still do get it wrong, but I think they're more aware of the impact so they're more conscious and considered.

**KS:** And what about housing for the LGBT community? How do you see that at the moment?

**SK:** To be honest with you, I'm quite removed from it, so I wouldn't … I wouldn't say I have much knowledge about the current housing issues around LGBT.

**KS:** And are you still involved with youth working?

<Part 10 starts>

**SK:** I am, I still run peer motivator training for young people who want to develop into youth work and it's their first early stages, so I work with sixteen- to twenty-one-year-olds, training them to then be peer motivators. So I work with, my young people work now is training only.

**KS:** Is that across communities, or just LGBT?

**SK:** It's across communities. At the moment for Camden Council, but also we're starting a peer support group here for young people supporting young victims of crime and I'm going to be involved in developing the training for it as well, so some of those young people we're targeting, what we're wanting is young gay volunteers to be involved in supporting young gay men that are victims, so we will be doing targeted work.

**KS:** How do you find the attitude and views of young people now when you're dealing with them … straight young people as well?

**SK:** Straight young people, it frightens me! I would not want to be a young person now. A lot of the young people that I work with or hear about through my work here are young people that are either involved in gangs, whether willingly or not, or feel threatened or frightened about being young on the street, and I think that's a big shift, 'cause I never felt frightened as a young person on the street. If there was anxiety, it was about being a young gay person, but I think the whole youth-on-youth crime is really scary, and I think … knowing I can see the anxiety of the young people I've worked with, that some of them are involved in gangs and/or are scared of gangs. And I know from some of the work we do here, one of the projects we do is about helping young people that want to remove themselves from gangs, and I just think being young must be so scary. Full stop.

**KS:** That's given me a nice picture of some of your experiences, some of the different views in those blocks of time, and how things have changed. Just to sum up, what's your views on life for the LGBT community in London now?

**SK:** I think … a lot of us are getting older and there's not enough social things for older people. Just friends, seeing friends … I think a lot of people … maybe it's about friendships I have, but people who were very much into the drugs and dance of the '90s who are now dealing with mental health problems, dealing with wanting to find ways of socialising that don't involve alcohol all the time because they're recovering alcoholics or they're recovering drug users, so wanting to find … and I don't think we provide enough social stuff for people that don't involve alcohol and/or drugs, so I think there's the older generation … I think we're a bit complacent as a community now. I think many people do think I don't know what the problem is, what we've got to complain about, but also quite [4:10] and I think agencies like Galop and what we're trying to do around third-party reporting as well is I think homophobic crime recording is on the increase and I think the bulk of that is because people are more confident to say oy, this isn't right – what's happening to me. And I think that's good. I don't know what else to say! <Laughs>

**KS:** That's brilliant.

**SK:** I wouldn't want to be a young person now! <Laughs>

**KS:** You're happy being an older person?

**SK:** Oh absolutely! I'm more than happy being the age I am. Yeah. And I think I grew up gay in a really good period of time.

<Part 11 starts>

**KS:** Just to finish off then, if you grew up in really good period of time, just a couple of things if you think back to that time of growing up, things that stand out for you that were good or …

**SK:** What stands out to me is I feel lucky that at the age of fourteen I could find a gay youth group that … was such a lifeline for me. So I felt really lucky around that. I think … from the age of nineteen right up until my early thirties I got jobs because I was a gay man, so I was in jobs and part of the criteria was

that I was gay, or part of the experience was because I was gay that I got those jobs, so feel really fortunate that those opportunities were there for me. So I just think I've had a really lucky … and I was born and brought up in London, and I think if there's one place you can be accepted in this country, it's here.

**KS:** Brilliant. Thank you very much Kyriacos.

**SK:** You're welcome!

<End of recording>