

HANS JOHNSON

I'm Hans Johnson. I've been a resident of Los Angeles County for 16 years. I live in Eagle Rock. I am a longtime advocate for civil rights and for non-violence. I also work in nonprofit advocacy. I am a long-standing community organizer, and have worked at the community level, at the local level, the state level, and in national politics.

'It felt like bullets or maybe firecrackers.'

I came out in 1990 in a period when hostility and hate crimes against gay people were quite commonplace and where the notion that you would be subjected to violence and harassment was very much accepted. My most direct story of violence is in Ohio. It's not here in California, but it was a touchstone for how I've dealt with and faced violence and how I advocate and stand beside other people who are survivors of violence themselves.

In October 1990, I was walking down the main street in my college town. I had just come out in the campus newspaper a couple of weeks prior on October 11 - National Coming Out Day, which is still a wonderful holiday for openness and honesty. I was a viewpoints editor at the paper. We did a special section of people coming out, including my own story. It was a wonderful and fraught moment of great angst and turmoil because you don't quite know how people are going to react. It's still something I remember when it comes to the importance of coming out and how vulnerable and isolated people feel when they do come out, especially if they do it in a very public way.

As I was walking down the street that night in October 1990 on my way to the library, a speeding truck went down the main drag just feet from me, and shouted, "F--got" very loudly. Someone in the bed of the truck shouted at me and was pelting me with objects, I couldn't quite tell what they were. It felt like bullets or maybe firecrackers. I didn't know what it was until I happened to see that one of them landed near me. It turned out that it was a quarter. I was able to find this coin and pick it up. In that haze, when you're just dealing with an attack like that, you're sort of disoriented, but there was something oddly grounding about finding the object that had been thrown at me. It was empowering in that moment to realize that it was just a coin. Something about a quarter seems so innocent, despite the circumstances of being shouted at so horribly and abused in that way.

‘Advocacy and experiencing violence go hand in hand.’

What was really bizarre was that I was actually going to the library to make a copy of a letter that I had written that day to urge the passage of the federal Hate Crime Statistics Act, which was pending before the U.S. Senate. By some crazy chance of poetic justice, here I was on my way to make a photocopy of the letter, and I get a quarter that I was able to actually use in the copy machine. I put a cover note, a Post-It note, on the letter to my Ohio senators saying, “I am making this copy with a quarter that was thrown at me on my way to send this letter.”

In retrospect, it still amazes me. It's still such a powerful example of how advocacy and experiencing violence go hand in hand. That experience of being catcalled, of having casual hate and violence inflicted on you, was softened in an odd way by the experience of being able to talk about it so organically and relevantly in the moment. There was a direct cause to be able to share the story of what had just happened to me with people who are in a position to affect you.

Experiencing violence and being involved in advocacy are kind of interwoven for me. And it really goes to how I went on to experience a really odd form of violent threat several years later, when I was living here in Los Angeles.

‘It was so destabilizing and dehumanizing.’

The spring of 2008 was a magical moment for LGBTQ people in California because the State Supreme Court ruled that the state could no longer bar same-sex couples from getting marriage licenses. That ruling in May basically extended the right of same-sex couples to marry starting in June of that year. There was also signature gathering going on at the same time to prohibit California from recognizing same-sex couples.

In the first week of June, I was on my way from Silver Lake to visit a friend of mine who was a visiting academic from Florida, a longtime gay historian whom I've been close to and have assisted in his research. As I was driving to West Hollywood to meet my friend, I was pulled over in my red Honda with rainbow bumper sticker on the back of it for no apparent reason. I couldn't figure out what violation I had committed. But I knew the importance of being deferential, of being compliant, of keeping my hands on the steering wheel. I didn't know what was about to transpire. And I was, of course, very nervous about it. The thing that was so alarming and completely destabilizing was looking out the passenger side window and seeing an officer with a firearm aimed at me in the driver's seat.

[Ultimately,] I was not ticketed. I was allowed to go on. I was quite shaken. I arrived late to my lunch in West Hollywood. There was no explanation for having a firearm aimed at me. In the context of what I

was experiencing at the time and the political context, it was so destabilizing and dehumanizing. Here was a – moment of triumph and of vindication for human rights in the State of California – and yet, at such a casual moment on my way to a reunion with a friend from another state to rekindle our shared interest in LGBTQ history, here I was subjected to what could have been a really horrible, if not fatal, interaction over something that I still to this day have no idea what the justification or provocation might have been.

'I didn't feel I had any power in the situation.'

I had no explanation and no interaction with the officer [who pulled the gun] because the window was closed. I couldn't raise my voice. I didn't feel I had any power in the situation to even ask. In retrospect, you have many thoughts about what you would have, should have done, what you would have liked to have done, what you're entitled to ask.

It really shook my trust in law enforcement as a supposedly trustworthy entity for dealing with reports of hate crimes and as a reliable source for redressing and seeking refuge from violence, including violence fueled by hate or intolerance. It really fueled on my part a desire for there to be some degree of accountability for how people interact with police at the municipal level, and at the county level. Part of why I have pursued work in advocating for survivors or victims of violence is my own experience with the very casual brandishing of firearms at me in an instance where I least expected it. I know from my experience, my work, and my advocacy, just how many people experience police violence in far more brutal, life-altering, and devastating forms than what I experienced. But it continues to be a touchstone for how I approach advocacy and for how I work with LGBTQ groups around the country dealing with unwarranted threats or use of force, harassment, and violence that LGBTQ people routinely experience, especially in the trans community where incidents of hate are far more likely to be violent.

I did not share that incident widely with people. I closed up around that experience, in part because of the context. There was so much else going on. Prop 8 was a big battle that year. Marriage equality and the wave of friends getting married during the golden window that opened between May and November was really quite consuming. Like many people who experience some degree of violence or threat thereof, I filed it away. I didn't really examine it or look at it.

The last year has actually given me cause to reexamine that incident in a whole new way. Last year, as a member of the civilian oversight commission, I was targeted by some people in the audience at a community forum. It drew it [the incident with the officer's firearm] back to the surface in a way that really surprised me because I hadn't addressed it. It really did make me have to take a more critical look at that experience and what it meant, especially because another commissioner shared their own experience of being targeted [by law enforcement] in the previous year and she also happens to be openly LGBTQ. In that

instance, it was the two openly LGBTQ commissioners who were most targeted by some members of the public. It was one of those moments where you really have to look at who is seen as a target. Why are some people more vulnerable than others? How can rage or frustration at one entity get channeled at someone else? It made me make some of those connections and ask some of those questions, which I think is really worthwhile.

'Violence is not just something that happens in a moment.'

My experience with being on the other side of a weapon is a really important experience for basic empathy. In my work, if I'm looking at candidates for leadership or governance positions in law enforcement, I'm looking for some degree of flexibility in their perspective. When you've experienced violence on the other side of the weapon from a badge wearer, and you're able to talk about that, and you have access to that experience and can advocate and speak from that perspective, it tends to make you less prone to thuggery or to brutality or to unquestioned use of force or to hair-trigger use of lethal force. It can tend to make you more cognizant of the reverberations and long-term impacts of threats of violence or actual use of force on people. Violence is not just something that happens in a moment, but it has lasting implications for the people on whom it's threatened or inflicted. One thing I think I bring to advocacy from my own experience is an insistence that people negotiate their own perspective. That ability to shift perspectives and to imagine or experience being on the receiving end of threats of force or violence is an extremely valuable fluency to have. I would actually say it's kind of a necessary fluency, especially for trustworthy law enforcement.

This process has been a catalyst for me to reexamine and to assess for its meaning. Everyone experiences violence differently and different levels of violence and violent threat are equally valid as experiences and as reference points for how we respond to violence and the threats of force in our lives. I hope that by sharing my story, I can encourage other people to put their experiences on the record, especially for the LGBTQ community. I hope we can see the connections between our stories, and we can see the bonds that responding to violence and persevering through violence and the threats of violence make between us and other parts of our body politic.

Recorded at:
Alhambra,
Los Angeles County, CA
05/30/2024
2:00 pm

