

**CJ:**

Hello, my name is Chelsey Jewett, and I am here interviewing Stephen Gamba on behalf of the Seymour Library and the Cayuga Museum with their oral history project through the New York Heritage Project. Good afternoon, Steven, how are you today?

**SG:**

I'm doing well. How are you?

**CJ:**

I am doing pretty well. So the first question I would like to ask you is when and where were you born?

**SG:**

I was born in December of 1969. Right here in Auburn.

**CJ:**

Okay. Um, can you tell me a little bit about your family? Your parents? Do have any siblings?

**SG:**

My parents are still with us. My mother's about to turn 80 this year, my father's 84, he'll be 85 soon and October and my I've got two older brothers. So I'm the youngest of three boys. And yeah, my parents are still together, although my father is suffering from dementia. So he's an interesting home but my mom is in very good health. She's a very young eighty year old. And my brothers live up in Cato now and I'm still living here right in Auburn.

**CJ:**

Okay, um, so what did your parents do for a living while you were growing up?

**SG:**

Um my parents, my dad worked at Alco which is now Bombardier. Yeah, which is closed but down at the end of Orchard Street there. We grew up right up the street from there on Orchard Street. And so my dad worked there and my mom worked kind of all over the place. She was kind of a she was a secretarial person. So she worked all over. She worked at Singers. She worked at Alco for a long time, she worked several other places. And she and she retired from the prison systems. She was, she worked for 15 or 16 years between the Auburn prison and the Moravia prison. She worked in the offices there. There's offices there.

**CJ:**

Okay, um, can you just describe your relationship with your siblings growing up?

**SG:**

Yes, so two older brothers. They are, let's see, I'm 51 so they are 55 and 56. And like I said, they both live up in Cato. They are other than us looking at like, we're very different. They like to you know, they're very much outdoorsman sportsman, like hunters, fisherman and such and I,

fishing I got into as a kid, but never much hunting. And then my brother and my oldest brother owns 40 acres of land up there in Cato where they hunt. They like to hunt that and fish and they have, both my brothers actually live together. And so the they're um, you know, I mean, we get along just fine everything but we are, you know, very different. I took the, you know, I teach music, you know, I do acting and seeing on the side and such. So we took very different routes with our careers and such.

**CJ:**

Okay, okay, that makes sense. Um, so in your family, growing up, did you have any family traditions that were unique to your family?

**SG:**

Um I wouldn't say you know, like, holidays were spent, Christmas Eve, my dad's side of the family would come. And then Christmas day, my mom's side of the family would come. You know, when we grew up the traditional meal for us and be you know, being an Italian family, the traditional meal was lasagna. And I remember being in like fifth grade and realizing that not everybody had lasagna for Christmas dinner, but so I always found that kind of amusing that I just grew up with that so ingrained in me we just always ate lasagna. When a great grandmother was alive. I don't remember this too well, because I was real little but they did do the seven fishes. She did do that a couple times, but I don't remember that too well. Other than that, not really. We did have a spot on the lake that we rented for most of my, actually about half my life we had that. And that was always where we spent much of our summer time and which was always a great time. It was a place where our family friends would just kind drop in and there was always, you know, there there was always activity bustling up there. So that was a big a big thing. And then my father's family my father's sister, my aunt and uncle had a cottage on the Sherman River down in Serra, Pennsylvania, where we would always go for about a week every summer. So there was there were the big ones that I do remember, but other than, like, big traditions, you know, that's, that's about it. So there were you know, those are things that I we did on a regular basis that I look fondly on.

**CJ:**

Okay, okay. Um, so can you describe your neighborhood a little bit on where you grew up?

**SG:**

I grew up on Orchard Street, down between Jefferson Street and where Alco is are now but I still call it Alco, but it's Bombardier. Um it was, back in those days it was the Italian neighborhood. And it was great. There were Italian stores on pretty much every corner little mom and pop stores. There are people in the neighborhood who only spoke Italian. And you know, there were, it was lined with chestnut trees, and we used to collect the chestnuts and we'd have neighborhood wide chestnut fights and such. It was just a really, really fun place to grow up. And it was and I think I'm probably the last generation having grown up in the 70s and early 80s, where you did go and you took off and you maybe came home for lunch or you didn't if you went to somebody else's house for lunch, depending on who you were running around with. You came home for dinner when the street lights came on. I think I'm maybe the last, if not

second to last generation that grew up like that, where, you know, if you're thirsty, you're just waltzed up to a neighbor's house and took a drink up with a hose and nobody cared and knocked on the door and said, Can I have a glass of water? and they give you one. It just was that kind of neighborhood growing up. And it was it really really was a lot of fun growing up down there.

**CJ:**

Okay, Okay, that sounds really cool. Um, so in your family, did your family follow any particular religion? And if they did, did you, are you still following that religion?

**SG:**

Yeah, my mother still does follow. I do not I did. I was, you know, baptized and had my first communion. And I was confirmed in the Catholic religion. But I don't really follow it. Now. I don't really, I myself, don't really believe in organized religion, I believe in being spiritual and whatnot. But just my personal beliefs, as you know, organized religion to me is been the, the cause of most of the world's troubles. So I just don't I just, it's more political than it is spiritual, and I don't, I just don't follow it, especially with the Catholic Church. All the abuse that has gone on have been covered up, it's just not something that I can condone, or, or follow or support anymore. However, you know, my mother still goes to church, and she still practices and that's fine. And that's, you know, it doesn't, you know, it just is what it is, you know, that's what she chooses to do, and that's her prerogative, and that's great. My dad, having gone to Catholic school was turned off from the Catholic faith, very early, and, and then you know, my mother would try to take the three of us, us three boys to church when we were young, of course, you know, taking three boys who are all under the age of 10, to church, you know, a challenge, to say the least. So we were not always the most well behaved boys in church, I must say. So, but now, I just, you know, haven't grown up and now as I look at the Catholics, and I just don't, I don't follow that religion anymore. I don't support it. I don't. However, I don't you know, begrudge anybody else who does it's whatever, whatever the choice is, religion is very personal, and that's whatever you decide to follow into is, is fine with me.

**CJ:**

That makes sense. That makes sense. So what was school like for you growing up?

**SG:**

Elementary school was great. I have really vivid memories. I went to Genesee Elementary, and we walked to school, and it was, you know, just kind of walk down the street around the corner. My memories of elementary school are very vivid. Middle School is a little tough. That was where, you know, you start you know, we're adolescence hits, and you start you know, being young, growing up gay is difficult, especially in the early 80s. And so Middle School is a little tough, I did get bullied a little bit until like, eighth grade. And then by the time I got up here to Auburn, high school, it just I was big enough to blend in. So it really was, so high school was, I actually had a lot of fun in high school as well. Middle School was a tough year was, was a couple tough years, but but I don't look back on it with any animosity or anything. I just remember it being a little difficult and being you know, shunned a little bit just because, you

know, being who I was, was manifesting it, as you know, as kids, you just look at, you know, someone who's different, oh, they're kind of different, they're kind of weird, whatever, you don't really have the emotional intelligence to put your finger on what is you know, what is different and nowadays, is very, very different. And kids, I teach up here at Auburn High School, and I see students who are not afraid to be who they are. And I think that's a wonderful, wonderful thing. But back in the 80s, it wasn't like that. But like I said, I by the time I got to high school, it was, you know, it was so big and you can blend in and I liked that about being in a bigger High School.

**CJ:**

Okay, okay, that makes sense. Um, so while you're in school, did you have any hobbies or special interest? You mentioned that you were really into music?

**SG:**

Yeah, I was. I was, of course in the choruses and whatnot. I wasn't in band, but I was in chorus. I did all the musicals and stuff. I was in the drama club. I did play hockey as a kid, but I quit hockey at about 13 cuz I really wasn't that good, I was a good skater but I really wasn't that great hockey player. But, um, but most of what I did revolved around music and the art. Especially as once we got up to, you know, my mid early, you know, my mid to later teenage years I was, I was very active in the choruses, when I went to CCC, I was in the chorus there. And then when I ended up going to Fredonia for music school, so.

**CJ:**

Okay, um, so you mentioned that you went to Fredonia for college? How was your experience in college?

**SG:**

Oh, my God, I loved it. It was, it was wonderful. I had a lot of fun. If I had to do one thing over, I would have buckled down more. I was very adamant on not letting my classes get in the way of my education, if you will. But, um, but I did okay, I did, you know, I could have done a lot better had I, you know, got, got my butt out of bed more often to go to my early classes, but it was in terms of development as a person, it was one of the best experiences of my life. And I've made, you know, my college friends from undergrad are just, um, you know, I'm still very close to many of them, and we still keep in touch and we get together whenever we can. And it's, it was college for me was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

**CJ:**

That's really great. I'm glad it was. So after college, what were some of the first jobs that you held?

**SG:**

Well, all through teenage, when when I was 16, I got a job at Kmart when Kmart was down at the Finger Lakes Mall many, many, many years ago, I worked there. And I worked there from when I was 16 until I was 26. I graduated from college and started teaching at Southern Cayuga

and it was there for two years and then I went to Port Byron and taught there for a year. And during my second year teaching at Southern Cayuga, that was when the store, the Kmart store closed, and then I got the job at Port Byron. So that was so my only job then was teaching and then I moved to Georgia. And I was down there for three years or for 13 years rather and I taught music in elementary school down there and then came back up here and taught at East Middle School with Auburn. And then when the economy tanked, Auburn laid me off and I got a job at Groton, teaching Middle and High School music, chorus music. And then I was laid off for a year from there. And then Auburn called me back. And I was at a Owasco Elementary School for five years. And then three years ago, they moved me up here to Auburn High School. So the only jobs I've had was at retail and teaching music and I've had you know, other jobs that are arts related, you know, acting jobs, music, directing, and, and professional seeing things like that. But I've you know, but all of my other than my work at Kmart, everything revolved around, you know, music and singing and the arts.

**CJ:**

That's very fair, that's very fair. So, what would you have to say is your favorite thing about living in Auburn, and what would be your least favorite?

**SG:**

Um, actually I was just talking about this with a couple colleagues of mine who actually also grew up on Orchard Street. And we were talking about how much we love this area. It's just, you know, the Finger Lakes are so beautiful. And it's, it's just, there's just so much to do, there's the you know, we have such a rich history here in Auburn, we've got a very nice, vibrant art scene downtown and the downtown revitalization has been wonderful. I like that you can drive three for four hours and be in New York or drive four hours to be in Montreal or be in Toronto. Or you can drive up to the Adirondacks and see, you know, so it's a very beautiful, centrally located place. And I, you know, I really, really like it here. My least favorite, I think, would be the, the, the, there's still a lot of.. how can I say this? Well, I'm just gonna say it and if it's blunt, then so be it. But there's still a lot of ignorance and racism that runs rampant, it kind of comes along with being in a, you know, I mean, Auburn is a small city, but for the most part, we are rural area. And I think that a lot of that comes with being in a place like this. And you know, and I still see a lot of that, and it kind of hurts my heart when I see and hear it. But most of the time, I've surrounded myself with people who are not like that. So luckily, I don't live it, but I do see it. And that's...I wish that there was less of that around here.

**CJ:**

I also as well. So has your neighborhood changed since it was when you were a child?

**SG:**

Yes, it has very much. So it actually started to really change during my early teen years, my adolescence and early teen years is when that area started to kind of go downhill. And you know, when the, you know, the Italian people that own those houses for years started moving out or passing away. You know, the children of those people either moved out of the area or moved to another part of town or whatnot. So those houses got sold, and they ended up

becoming mostly rental properties and such. So it has really declined. And then the closing of all the little mom and pop stores that were down there, the only one that still exists right now is Dom's Grocery, and they're not owned by the original owners anymore. they've sold it, but at least it still is a little mom and pop that does exist. But we had, I mean, just off the top of my head, I can count 1,2,3,4,5 stores that I was able to walk to within 5-10 minutes. So they all close and it really has, unfortunately has deteriorated, deteriorated. They did do a kind of, you know, they tried to, they they had a contractor come in and build some new houses and stuff. But all the houses are duplexes and triplexes, so it's kind of, you know, I feel like it's just going to maybe continue that cycle. So it'd be nice to see people moving in the area that are owning their properties and an owner occupied properties. I'd like to see that more. There still is a little bit there. But I'd like to see that comeback in that area because it is it is, you know, well it was a great area of town to live in, you know, but it's just unfortunately for whatever reason, it has really declined and now it's not nearly as nice as it was when I was growing up.

**CJ:**

Okay. So if there was anything that you could give in terms of advice to children growing up in Auburn, what would it be?

**SG:**

Um, it would be to remember that there are, there are other places and other things, and other viewpoints other than a lot of what is, can be considered the prevailing attitude around here. I encourage my students, and I don't I hear me out before, you know, I do encourage my students to, a lot of them say they go to college elsewhere, and I tell them, yes, go and see the world, see other places, see, you know, live somewhere else, where you will meet different people and people with different viewpoints, and it'll shape who you are. And then come back, you know, it's always it's never ever, and I always tell them, you know, the young people who want to leave here, I always tell them, we'll go ahead and leave, it's, oh, it's never too late to come back. But at some point, it will be too late to leave and you might regret that. You know, for me, one of the best things I did was go spend 13 years in the south. And being, Atlanta being such a unique city in the state of Georgia, you know, you have this big oasis of liberalism, and this really, really, really conservative state. So that was very interesting to, to experience that. I suppose that dichotomy if you will, but no, I would say get to you know, go experience other things and bring those experience back here because those are the type of people that this that small towns need are people who have been out and about and people who are educated. When I say educated, I don't necessarily mean college educated, I just mean educated in life and and other experiences that you might not get around here. So I just I, and then come back and bring that that sort of attitude, if you will, for kind of lack of a better term, but bring that back here and that'll eventually change the overall prevailing attitude that we have here. I think that's what is going to have to take.

**CJ:**

Okay, okay, that's very fair. I'm going to change topics just a little bit and just ask you some questions regarding the coronavirus pandemic. The first question I just want to ask you is how has the pandemic affected you personally?

**SG:**

Um okay, so when we, okay, so last March 2020. I, I've always kept myself really busy with, you know, directing choruses, directing shows, whether in school or in the community. And I was getting pretty burned out. At that point we had just finished, we just wrapped up our high school show Mamma Mia that year. And I was in the beginning, I'm the artistic director and conductor of the Syracuse gay and lesbian chorus, so we are in the midst of starting off that season for the spring and I just had a concert here in at Auburn High School music in our schools concert. So within two weeks, I had all of that stuff going and it had been busy like that for a few years and I was kind of getting ready for a break. And in there had been talk about the Coronavirus in the news, but it was something that was still in Asia, and then it came to Europe and and so when it came to Europe, we knew it was coming here. And so when we shut down, we literally had our concert on March 11. March 12, we came into school, and the power was out at Auburn high school, so we ended up having that day off. And then on the 13th was a Friday, my students and I refilled all the music that from our previous concert that we weren't going to use anymore and then they shut down over the weekend. And at first I thought, oh well what perfect timing we're shutting down. I didn't really think it was gonna be nearly as serious as it was. I thought I will be back by spring break. It was a nice little, a nice little, you know, break for me. This is what I needed. And then I kept watching Governor Cuomo daily briefings and it was getting worse and worse and worse. And I realized, Oh, this isn't going away anytime soon. And I ended up having a really hard time eventually, mentally, I got pretty depressed. There were days I didn't get out of bed. I had a really hard time, I had no idea of being an older teacher, I had no I didn't really, I'm never, I'm not that tech savvy. So teaching via zoom was something that I didn't rip it off, quite frankly, didn't know how to do. So I didn't have a lot of contact with my students, there was email contact, and there was through, you know, through your phone, we have an app called reminder where you can communicate with students as a group or one on one without them knowing your actual phone number. So that's convenient. But, but there wasn't a lot of teaching and quite honestly, how do you teach singing over a computer. And when I realized we weren't going back to school, last school year, it it got tough, it got tough. And I realized my life was rehearsals, performances, and that's what I do. And that's was my, not only my career, but it's also my sideline, and, you know, in my hobby and everything. So that's what my life revolves around, and all that and literally, at the, at the, with a phone call was taken away from me. And I just, it was really hard to, to deal with that. And plus, not being able to have friends over was really difficult. It was wintertime, it was the end of winter, so the weather wasn't that great. So we were trying to do zoom, zoom, little gatherings, zoom happy hours and such. And it was better than nothing, but it was...but it still wasn't the same, and you didn't have that one on one connection, that personal connection, it was just lost. And, you know, my house was tended to be where impromptu gatherings would take place, people would just say, What are you doing? Well, let's go, let's go to Steve's and we'll just hang out and whatever, or we'd go to other people's houses, you know, it's, that's just what we did for socialization. And we couldn't do that anymore. So it got a little easier when summer came, because we got a little reprieve in our infection rate over the summer. And plus, we were able to hang out outside. So we were able to see each other and be outside. But then when the school year hit again, and having to actually plan and do the school year with virtual classes, and we had a combination of virtual and in

person classes, it was tough. And it didn't and it was it was something that was a big, big, big source of stress and anxiety for me. And especially because you know, I've only been teaching up here at Auburn High School for this is my third year. So I had a lot of good momentum with my program and hit a brick wall. So I feel like next year I'm gonna be almost starting back from scratch. And, and so also all that was lost. And so the fall was really difficult for me. And so when, after Thanksgiving, when the school finally did say, okay the infection rates too high for us to be to be a hybrid model, we want to fully remote, but they still require the teachers to come into the building, I got a medical permission to stay to work from home, because I had everything I needed from home, you know, the internet, I had a piano there and everything. So I was able to work from home without coming to the building, which was a big help. And then when the spring came, you know, it sort of started, that's when we started to see the decline in cases and April 19 was kind of a magic number, magic day, because four days a week, or still remaining fully remote or going from remote to hybrid or whatever. So we did start to see more kids. And things got a little more normal, but and then and right before spring break in late March, they gave us the green light that we could go ahead and put up a musical, which we didn't think we were going to be able to do so that things started picking up when I started getting busy again and I realized for me, being busy is how I operate best I don't do well with a lot of idle time on my hands. So now it's looking like talk on the street for next year and hopefully this will remain true is that we'll be back in school next year with no restrictions which makes me really, really look forward to next school year. So it's like I've come full circle between dreading having to go to work on a computer or with some kids on a computer and some kids in person. Now next year, I'm really looking forward to coming back and getting back into everything. And really teaching these kids that what I did feel like I didn't have the chance to teach them this year.

**CJ:**

Okay, okay, that makes a lot of sense. I know, at my school, this coming fall, there's a lot of a lot of the restrictions that we had previously are being lifted. And it makes it a lot easier, and a lot more enjoyable to be at school.

**SG:**

I, you know, I give the students a lot of credit for, you know, sticking with it, I feel if it was me as a 16 year old, I probably would have dropped out, I don't think I would have I don't think I would have made it through it. So the kids that did and did well, many of which many of them did, I tip my hat to him because it wasn't easy for anybody.

**CJ:**

No, it was not. Um, so before we wrap up, is there anything else that you would like to say, in regards to just growing up in Auburn? The community of Auburn, just any last statement?

**SG:**

Well you know, the questions that I have, you know, there was one of them about anything missing from the published histories of the county or the published history, I feel like, um, you know, I feel like it's one of the ways that history is taught is, is a little is way too, Pollyanna and

sugar coated, I feel like the way that you have to own your history is to not only teach the good, but you got to teach the, the bad stuff, the dirty stuff, you got it, you know. You know, don't, you know, students needed kids need to know that there was a time when our country put Japanese Americans in essentially concentration camps, and people need to know that wealthy, African American neighborhoods were destroyed, and you got to take the, but they also should know things like, you know, we prevailed in the Civil War, and we, you know, and we won World War Two, and the good stuff, things like that, but I just, it's the only way things are going to change as if we face that, you know, face the stuff we're ashamed of. And instead of ignoring it. And that's, I feel like that's the only way that things are gonna change. It's gonna, unfortunately, take some generations of that. But I think it's those of us that are writing curriculums for school, it's, you know, we have to own up to this and not be afraid to say to our kids, hey, you know, , America did some bad things, like any country around the world did. You know, I mean, we're no different from anybody else. And we did what we did and whether it was right or wrong, you still have to own it. And I feel like we're not teaching our students to own their own history.

**CJ:**

That makes a lot of sense. Thank you for saying that. But yeah, I think that wraps up our interview for today. Thank you very much for sitting and interviewing with me. I very much enjoyed talking with you.

**SG:**

Thank you for including me. This was great. I enjoyed, I enjoyed it.

**CJ:**

Okay, thank you very much.

**SG:**

You have a wonderful day.