

Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual,
Transgender, Intersex and Queer People in Kansas

Gilbert Baker
Oral History

Interviewed by
Tami Albin

June 19, 2008

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Please note: this transcript is not time stamped or indexed. It will be at a later date.

Gilbert Baker: Narrator
Tami Albin: Interviewer

TAMI ALBIN: Okay, record on this. We are good to go. Okay, so today is—

GILBERT BAKER: June 19th.

ALBIN: June 19, 2008, and I'm sitting here with Gilbert Baker. Thank you so much.

BAKER: Thank you, Tami.

ALBIN: I appreciate the opportunity. So I'm going to start off this oral history the way that I start off all of them which is, Tell me where you were born and when?

BAKER: I was born in Chanute, Kansas June 2, 1951.

ALBIN: And what was your childhood like growing up in Chanute, Kansas?

BAKER: In a very sort of 1950s black and white way, the full Donna Reed. (laugh)

ALBIN: So what did your parents do?

BAKER: My dad was a lawyer and my mother was a teacher. My dad became a judge and my mother kept on teaching.

ALBIN: And so do you have any siblings?

BAKER: I do have a sister, younger, and another sister younger than her—two sisters.

ALBIN: (unintelligible) the two sisters. And are they still living in Kansas?

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BAKER: No—well one does, I'm sorry, one does, and my other sister lives in Houston.

ALBIN: Okay. So aside from that, what was your life like in high school? What was that like?

BAKER: Horrible.

ALBIN: Horrible? So what happened?

BAKER: Well, I was always the gay kid. I mean—as I will say later this evening in my speech, I was born gay and I always knew it, so I was always an outcast, even from a very early age. So it was difficult, it was hard, and I had to kind of invent my own therapy to avoid suicide.

ALBIN: Right. So what did you do then?

BAKER: Art. Art has always been my escape and my high and my passion. So I became really attune to my creativity and that was my way out.

ALBIN: So did you have friends in high school or were you in—

BAKER: Oh sure I was very social, sure. Yeah, I'm the guy that brought the first 45, "Satisfaction", to the junior high school dance and got everybody dancing in the sort of new dance way where you didn't have to have a partner. I actually look back on that as really the beginning of my own sexual liberation. And for a lot of people I think it was. It was kind of the idea that you didn't have to have a partner, that you could dance and express your feelings for movement, and you could do that by yourself without any kind of structure around it. And so I really feel fortunate that I was born right at that moment when—especially dancing. And the music really was an incredibly liberating thing, so (unintelligible).

ALBIN: So what happened after high school?

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BAKER: I went to college for a year and got drafted, Vietnam War, and nineteen years old on my birthday inducted, U.S. Army, Kansas City, and shipped off pretty quickly to basic training and then ultimately I ended up in San Francisco as a medic and then a nurse. And then I served two years and when I got out I stayed in San Francisco.

ALBIN: Right. Right. So what was the experience like being in the military and being gay?

BAKER: Horrible. I would refer you to my good friend, Randy Shilts' book, *Conduct Unbecoming*, which I contributed my story to him. Again, I was the gay guy and subject to a lot of abuse and violence. Yeah, at the same time I was the one that turned my entire barracks on to LSD and I— I was always very social and very outward going, I mean sort of— Again a survival mechanism, I think, for me and a lot of gay people was to be the party master. And even though everybody else was giving me a hard time I was the one that's showing them how to have a good time, how to enjoy life and get into the groove.

ALBIN: So you stayed in San Francisco. So what year was that when you—

BAKER: I got out in 1972, early '72. So I had lived there since '70 when I went there. And—oh yeah (unintelligible). Yeah, now I'm going to eat.

ALBIN: There's the meal.

BAKER: Yeah, this is the—could I have some ketchup? Oh I see it. So yeah I stayed there. I—the whole time I was growing up—not the whole time, but certainly from the time I was really old enough to really read and to really discover the world beyond my immediate family, my whole life was about getting out of Kansas. I always envisioned myself living somewhere else and so I did it.

ALBIN: And I've heard that a lot of people did that from Kansas, left and went to San Francisco about that time.

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BAKER: Yeah sure, the coast, New York. I mean, in the early seventies you have to remember that people were baling out of small towns. It was still illegal to be gay. I mean, you could be locked up, you could be committed, you could be imprisoned. And so there was a wave of immigration from small town America to the coast, to New York and San Francisco, a little bit to L.A. I was part of that.

ALBIN: So what was San Francisco like in '72?

BAKER: Oh, it was fabulous, really fabulous. We were coming out of the Haight-Ashbury summer of love, all that crazy, wonderful stuff, and so I was all very much a part of that. And it was a very exciting time and it was full of a lot of revolutionary ideas. There was really the—the moment when I think we really—as I think we were a part of all the other movements—the women's movement and the civil rights movement, it was really the moment when we stood up for ourselves—Stonewall, certainly was the moment. But subsequent to that, within just a couple of years, people came out everywhere. It was like, Okay I'm not alone, I'm not fucked up, I'm not damned, I have a good life, I'm a worthy person, and that liberation really took hold. And so for me and really a whole generation of people, that was really a defining time. And it was also before AIDS. So it was a time of sexual exploration, it was a time of a lot of drug exploration and spirituality. And yeah, so it was thrilling. You're only young once, so go for it. (laugh)

ALBIN: So what type of things did you do while you were living in San Francisco?

BAKER: Well right away I became a big drag queen because I love to sew and I love fashion and I love all that stuff. And then that's how I made my living and—and that was kind of exciting to be gender bending a little bit. This is way before it became so vogue. But yeah. And you know, I read a lot. I love literature. There was a lot of really wonderful thinking going on then, and I certainly followed all of that. And of course I love music and lots of rock shows and parties and reading a lot of books and doing stuff.

ALBIN: So what type of people were you hanging out with at this point? Like who—

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BAKER: Other people roughly my own age. I would say we were all in our young twenties. And they had come, like me, from places far and wide, and we were there to invent ourselves in a new light. And part of that was sort of inventing a new family. We had left our families that were not as supportive as other people have. And as a part of that early time in San Francisco was that I made friends that are still my friends to this day. And through that they became my brother and sisters in that we sort of invented our own families to take care of ourselves and support each other. And that really, of course, became incredibly important just within a matter of years when half my friends died, had to take care of them.

ALBIN: Do you want to take a bite of your sandwich?

BAKER: I do. Oh, this is so disgusting.

ALBIN: (laugh) Do you want me to stop the camera?

BAKER: No, that's okay, I don't mind. I'm having my lunch because I'm starving. I'm having a burger. You're right, it is a little well done, but it looks good. So yeah, it was a good time.

ALBIN: Here's some serviettes.

BAKER: Oh yeah. This is disgusting, I'm eating in an interview.

ALBIN: (laugh) Time is precious, I totally understand.

BAKER: Go ahead. Keep going.

ALBIN: So you were part of drag performances—

BAKER: No, not really. No, I was the seamstress, the seam master, made the clothes. Yeah, I mean everybody always wanted me to get up on stage because I was young and I was very beautiful, but I never could sing. And I could dance good, but I never really had that bug. But I love theatre and I love sewing, and my craft was always my

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activism. So as the movement began to really take hold in the sense that we began to have the first Gay Prides and then the first real protest as things began to develop around the country, I was very much a part of that. People would call me up. Harvey Milk, my good friend, would call me up saying, Oh we're having a march tomorrow, I need a banner. So the (unintelligible) would go this way. And I'd pull out rags and make Gay Rights Now in purple lamé or whatever.

ALBIN: And that's a great way to have a banner is with purple lamé. (laugh)

BAKER: Yeah. And that was always sort of my gift, and I always loved that I was able to do that.

ALBIN: Go and have another bite.

BAKER: (unintelligible).

ALBIN: You can just like keep—(laugh)

BAKER: Okay, and it's so disgusting.

ALBIN: (laugh)

BAKER: Okay, go ahead.

ALBIN: Okay. So now I'm going to ask you the typical question that you always get asked, which is about the history of the Rainbow Flag and how it came to be the flag which has had such an impact on my personal—on me and I know with a lot of my friends. I mean, the flag is the way that we found one another, that symbol helped us identify one another.

BAKER: It's amazing. Yeah, thank you.

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BAKER: Well, as the seventies went on we got more and more powerful, especially in San Francisco and New York. And by '77 especially with (unintelligible) and the initiatives being passed to at first give us rights and then they were taken away, we began to be more and more a protest movement, marching in the streets, mobilizing. And part of that energy was kind of—kind of a reinvention of ourselves. I think up until we had the Rainbow Flag we were really kind of stuck in a kind of victim mode. And especially with the pink triangle. It was put on us by the Nazis and it really did function as a symbol for our movement and our "liberation", but it wasn't from us. And so I began to feel, and others around, like well maybe we need something else. And people around me were saying, We need a logo. It was the time when they were making little graphic gizmos to put on everything, from the phone company to the power company. I don't know about a logo, but I was certainly keenly aware of flags because of the bicentennial in 1976 and this huge wave of American flags that just washed over the country. And I really started looking at flags with a new eye. And I thought, Maybe we could have a flag too because we're a people. And then a flag translates into everything, from tacky souvenirs to the names of organizations and the way that flags function.

ALBIN: I know that when I hear people talk about different coalitions with the word rainbow in it I automatically assume they're gay. I just automatically made that assumption because it has the word rainbow in it, so that is how I associate it. So how did the flag become an international symbol? Did people just pick up on it right away?

BAKER: No, I worked. I mean, this—yeah, yeah. I mean I—I knew the first day that it was going to be important. I knew instantly when I saw the reaction that it was going to be something. I didn't know what or how or—but I knew. And then I went into the flag industry for about ten years. I actually got hired. Walked into Paramount Flag Company, a little flag company in San Francisco, in platform shoes and pink hair. And I said, I have a flag and I think you ought to take a look at it. And at first they were like, gay flag? And I was like, Oh it's going to be big, and then—and lo and behold they did. They got behind me. And with their support, I really got into the industry. And through having industrial abilities then I began to really develop it, having immediately to drop two colors because there was no pink and to really refine it in a way that it could be mass produced and really available worldwide. And then, like I said, I worked in the

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industry for ten years. And then part of that was doing more than the Rainbow Flag. People did not want to hear about a Rainbow Flag. They didn't want to know about a gay flag. The American flag was good enough for everybody, and What do we need this for? And a lot of the other flag companies were completely appalled. And good old boy flag company in America just did not want to know anything about gay. And so in order for me to get the respect and the cred in the industry, I began to do more establishment things. (unintelligible), like I said, and I always had a flare for doing fantastically flamboyant spectacles. So I began to design other things. And in the course of my career I designed fantastic flags and displays and civic events for the President of France and the President of the Philippines and the President of Venezuela and the King of Spain, and a long list of heads of state. And that really—and then ultimately that sort of culminated in 1984 when I designed the flags and all the accoutrements for the Democratic National Convention. That national convention was a very big flag event and I really wanted that. And I basically banged down the door saying, Give it to me, I am the man. And then they did. But I did a great job on that. And then I continued working, doing the state occasions and society parties, pay the rent. And then a little bit of rock. It was a great time. The wonderful impresario, Bill Graham, out in San Francisco. And I worked on a lot of free shows out in Golden Gate Park for the Jefferson Airplane, my big favorite, my client for a year. So I sort of branched out. But all through that, all through those things, I worked on the Rainbow Flag. I worked on every Gay Pride. I designed stages and floats and just flags for the street, everything, everything. So that was—it never went away. And then by the time '94 came around, when I decided to really go for world domination with my first world record flag in New York, after that I really never looked back, and I thought, Okay my whole life is going to be about this, and that I'm really lucky to have that and that I should devote my life to making this really good. And that's pretty much it in a nutshell. One more bite. It's a really good pickle.

ALBIN: Yeah, it's a very good burger. So at what point in your life did you come out to your parents? Or did—did you—

BAKER: Oh they always knew I'm sure.

ALBIN: They just knew?

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BAKER: Oh I'm sure. Officially? 1970—'70, '71, Christmas.

ALBIN: And how was that?

BAKER: It sucked.

ALBIN: Yeah?

BAKER: I'm glad I did, because it really liberated me from a tortured, terrible psychology. It was making me sick, mentally, physically to have to lie all the time. So when I finally did come out I felt this great burden released from me, but it impacted my relationship with my parents for years, I mean even to this day.

ALBIN: Right.

BAKER: So, yeah it was tough. We didn't talk for five or six years at all. And then slowly over time we've healed it up a little bit, but yeah, it was tough.

ALBIN: So how do they feel about your success with the flag?

BAKER: My mother—I'm handing her *Life* magazine. *Life* magazine, full page color, world record. I said, Here. And she she's going, Oh that's really nice, but when are you going to get a real job? (laugh)

ALBIN: That's kind of a typical mom thing. (laugh)

BAKER: So, I think that they're intrigued by it. I think maybe secretly maybe a little proud, I'm not sure about that. I think that they really do have fundamental issues about being gay and it forced on them their own religious prejudices and they had to confront a lot of those things. And so it wasn't what they would prefer, but as time has gone on and the anger has subsided and now we're more than civil, we like each other.

ALBIN: Right.

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BAKER: I'm going to look ridiculous. They're going to have this all over KU and they're going to go, That guy's a pig.

ALBIN: No, I can put a like a little message at the front that says, He was hungry.

BAKER: I'm starving. Okay, keep going. This is our only chance to talk, so—

ALBIN: I know, I know, yeah. So, did you come from a religious family? I mean, We're in Kansas which is the Bible Belt, and I've run into a variety of people who talked about families and religion.

BAKER: A little bit, country club, country club. Yes and no. Yes, though, sure. Sure.

ALBIN: So, you're in San Francisco, you design the flag while you're there, you're working for a flag company. At what point did you— you're in New York now?

BAKER: I live in New York now.

ALBIN: Right. So—

BAKER: In '94.

ALBIN: Okay.

BAKER: I'm the guy that got off the airplane—I'd lived in San Francisco by then like twenty-some years. And I loved it; it was wonderful, (unintelligible) friends. But I went to New York and it just hit me. And I knew like within an hour that I was going to live there forever.

ALBIN: So, what is life like in New York now for you? Is it everything you ever wanted?

BAKER: I don't know about that. I have friends there. It's the center of the universe in the sense that there's everything going on there. There's everything from Wall Street to

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film and movies and fashion and finance and publishing, everything—everything. So I like the endless possibility of it all. And it's pretty. It's old and dirty and glamorous and modern, and then full of art and treasure and history. So it just fit me.

ALBIN: So what do you think the difference is in terms of the GLBT communities on those two coasts? Because those seem to be the two places that people migrate to or you hear stories of people migrating to either San Francisco or New York.

BAKER: That's true. People go to San Francisco to be gay, people come to New York to have a career.

ALBIN: Okay.

BAKER: That's really it. And I mean, being in San Francisco and being gay is great. And it's really changed the world in fact. New York is about having a career. It's about your art or your passion or your business or whatever it is, it's about that. And then the being gay and being out part of it is a really wonderful thing because we've changed that too.

ALBIN: Right.

BAKER: So it's really cool.

ALBIN: So have you noticed with the younger generations of students—I've had people commenting in their oral histories that the kids today, as they put it, don't understand the history or know the history. Do you find that when you meet younger generations of students they have no idea who you are or they have no idea—

BAKER: I think that's bullshit—

ALBIN: —what the history is? Okay.

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BAKER: They know it. They can find it out. You can Google it in two seconds. I think that's important. I don't think it's as important to know the history as it is to know who you are.

ALBIN: Right.

BAKER: That's the exciting thing about the younger generation is that they have a very advanced sense of themselves, the idea of getting beyond labels and I find that admirable. Keep going.

ALBIN: So do you often come back to Kansas or—

BAKER: Never.

ALBIN: Never? So—

BAKER: Thirty-five years today.

ALBIN: Really? Wow.

BAKER: Either thirty-five or twenty-five, I can't remember, but yeah it's been a while.

ALBIN: So what's it like being back for this quick trip?

BAKER: It's a rush. It's a rush. I'm glad I did. It's changed. There is a community. When I lived here I was alone. Now there's a community, so that's wonderful.

ALBIN: So what do you think with the state of—now that we have gay marriage in California, what do you think—

BAKER: We have it today.

ALBIN: Today, right. So what do you think of the future possibility of GLBT rights, like over the next couple of years? Do you think—

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BAKER: Oh, we're going to have them. I mean, you look at the big picture and it is more than America. I mean, look where Spain went and look where Stockholm and Norway and, yeah, I mean there's a big world. We're not leading, but we're not last. And so I have a lot of hope. My feeling is that the marriage thing will take some time. It will have to come back to places like Kansas where they have these dreadful amendments that prohibit it. All of this will get revisited in the courts, hopefully in a new court, but I'm very concerned that everybody will be rushing off to file suits and we'll have the Bush court. We may have a Democratic president and Congress, but we may have, in fact, a conservative court where we may not win. I'm not sure what the remedy will be, but I do know that time is on our side and that the young people generation, and more importantly my generation, we have fought hard, and we have—we've worked on our parents, we have our own children, and we're moving society forward. So I think we're going to be all right. I mean, it may take a little more fight and a little more work than people want, but we'll get there. And that's important. I mean, I look at like where we are today and I can't believe it, in my lifetime we're even talking about marriage and that, having this out and this open, but I also know that we're lucky. And then places like Jakarta, Indonesia and Tehran and places where people cannot be out at all or they are subject to imprisonment or even death. So there's a big world of work for us to do. We're a global community, and I think people need to keep that in mind and keep a perspective on where they are in their individual lives, where they are in their community locally and then understand that we're all part of this incredible wave of change for human rights. I'm done.

ALBIN: Okay.

BAKER: Thank you.

ALBIN: Along with—I was reading today—there was an article that just came out in *Time* that—it says, Yes we have gay marriage now. Now let's talk about the AIDS crisis.

BAKER: The what?

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ALBIN: The AIDS crisis and how—

BAKER: Oh, they're about ten years too late on that actually.

ALBIN: Right. Right, yeah it was a surprising—I can't remember the exact title of the article—

BAKER: Well that's kind of— I hate that because like you want to talk about your sexuality being a human right, and then right away it's AIDS and, Oh you're diseased. And that's sort of code for, You're still not as good as we are and you're sick. So it is important. It's more important in Africa, it's more important in the heterosexual community than it is in our community today (unintelligible). I mean, it's still an issue. I hear about kids running around, doing methamphetamine and unprotected sex and I'm like, What the—are you thinking? Don't you—didn't you get anything from us? At least do the right drugs.

ALBIN: So what do you think your future is going to be now? You're—

BAKER: I'm an artist. My life is about my art. I will do it until I die.

ALBIN: Just keep on going—

BAKER: I will just keep on going. It's really exciting to see the Rainbow Flag be so loved and appreciated. That's incredibly fulfilling as an artist. And then I paint and I do lots of film and video. I do everything. And—but really it's all back to the central thing, which is about gay rights and visibility and using my talents and my skills to promote that. So that's what I'll do until I die, I'm sure.

ALBIN: Okay. Well, I don't know if I have any other questions. You were right, you are efficient. (laughter)

BAKER: Well, thank you, thank you. I mean, I write. The one thing I will say—yeah I write a lot. Yeah, I have friends who are really famous and wonderful writers. And I'm lucky I got to meet a lot of famous, fabulous people. And they really influenced me with

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their own talent and their incredible contributions. And a couple of my friends, Randy Shilts and Armistead Maupin, (unintelligible) write, write, write. You have to write a book. You have to tell the stories and you have to do it. And then over the last few years I've really gotten into that.

ALBIN: So are you writing a book about the flag story?

BAKER: I am. I am. I've written several drafts and I've been working on it for ten years. And I could never finish it because the stories never finished. And—but yeah, it's a new way for me to express myself and to do the good work of human rights. And part of that is telling the stories. And I think everyone should do that actually. I think all of our stories are important. So the more that we tell our stories and express them, the more people will be comfortable with who we really are. That's the things. We're not scary, we're just people. Thank you.

ALBIN: So who are some of the other famous people you've met and know and have as friends?

BAKER: Please, I'm not going to go there. That would bother them immensely. Let's see, the most famous person I met—okay, the most famous person I met, not like he's my buddy, but I did have occasion to design flags for the King of Spain, Juan Carlos. And it was at a very fantastically elegant civic reception for him. And I certainly am aware of his history. If you know Spanish history, he was groomed by Franco to take over, and when he finally did succeed Franco he instituted democracy and then saved democracy in Spain during an attempted coup. And so he really is an incredible guy. And I also just was fascinated by so many that had that kind of privilege and life to be able to really have courage, to do something bold. So I had made flags for this fantastic reception, and then I was introduced to him by a rich socialite who knew him well. And she said, Oh this is Gilbert, he made all these wonderful, giant banners everywhere, fabulous. And he said—and this was in a room with very heavy hitting power brokers and money people, very straight. And he said, Oh you made these flags for me? And then he embraced me. In front of all these men he embraced me and he said, Ah the blood of our countries will be together forever in freedom. And I was like, Oh my God. And all the socialites were going, Oh my God, the gay guy's got the king, got (laugh) his

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arms around him and—and I must say that, that was pretty cool. I mean, to be recognized at that level is pretty awesome, and for him to truly get what it was about, that—in this case it was the Spanish flag. I don't even know if he knew I had made the Rainbow Flag. I'm sure that got to him later, but—but yeah, it was very neat and I'm grateful that I get to meet people that have power, and that could be political power or cultural power.

Because like I'm just this guy from Kansas that had the stroke of luck to be the one to make the flag, and as I say sort of pulled the sword from a stone. And it's given me an incredible life and it's given me an incredible education in the sense that I get to meet a lot of people. And not just famous people. I get to hear really incredible stories. I'm fascinated by what's going on right now in Eastern Europe and Russia and Poland. Nikolai Alexeyev is somebody I met and I totally admire for what he's doing in Moscow. Another friend of mine, Dimitri and Andrea Gilbert in Athens. They were like, we want to have a gay movement. We don't know what to do. I said, Start a newspaper. That will give you a voice and then you can communicate to each other. So yeah, over the years I've really been able to meet some wonderful, wonderful people.

ALBIN: So you were mentioning earlier that you do a lot of speaking engagements. What are some of the samples of the places where you would go and talk about things—

BAKER: I like universities because it's a pretty receptive audience. But I also do a lot of corporate. I think we have a lot of work there. We've gotten a lot of job protections, but we don't have everything. And also I think that there's a lot of interest in us, from a marketing point of view. I mean, certainly as a commodity the Rainbow Flag has been very successful, billions sold worldwide. I don't have a patent or a copyright, so all those dollars slid away. But it belongs to everybody. But at the same time I certainly have an expertise and a history about marketing. I certainly—it didn't just happen; I made it happen. So I'd like to be able to bring that to bear. Especially as corporations and businesses are trying to get our gay dollars it's important for them to understand, Well yeah, you got to come back to the table with something for us. Yeah, we'll buy your beer or your car but what's—what is it for us? And also educate them to that part of our incredible loyalty as customers, and we are very loyal, is that you've got to have

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the right policies in place for your employees and you've got to do more than just come around and say gimme and put a rainbow on it. You've got to have the real thing. And so I think that that message has resonated and I think it's done a lot of good. I think we've gotten a lot. I think we've gotten more, in fact, from moving our agenda economically, especially in the job place, than we have in the political place. I mean, actually in American politics, they're the farthest behind. So, dragging them along.
(laugh)

ALBIN: So is there anything else that you would like to say that I may not have asked you about?

BAKER: No, I'm still a little Jayhawk. (laughter) A little Jayhawk, but a lot of Big Apple, so there we go. (laughter)

ALBIN: Well, thank you so much.

BAKER: Thank you, Tami. Good luck.

ALBIN: That's great.

BAKER: Okay.

[end]