

From Dumpster Diving to *Dallas Buyers Club*: The Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of GLBT History

A conversation with Judy Reeves, Vince Lee, and Leandra Zarnow

Judy Reeves—the lead curator who cofounded the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender History (GCAM) in 1999—is a longtime Houston activist. She has devoted countless hours to organizations such as Pride Houston, Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church, the GLBT Community Center, and the Houston GLBT Caucus, and helped facilitate the Buddy Program, providing in-home care for Houstonians with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s. Retired from the medical and banking industries, Reeves participated in a discussion about GCAM’s collections with Dr. Leandra Zarnow, assistant professor of history at the University of Houston, and Vince Lee, head curator of the LGBT Research Collection at University of Houston Libraries, on September 5, 2019, for Dr. Zarnow’s Issues in Feminist Research class in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies.¹

Leandra Zarnow: Judy, how did you get into preservation work and develop this curatorial role?

Judy Reeves: I grew up with history in the house and ... I’ve always been an activist at heart ... So, especially around the time that AIDS began, I had been in the community, and we had been fighting for — I hate to say this — equal rights. I hate that phrase, and I will never succumb to it. ... [W]e were protesting in every lane of that, and then when AIDS hit the Houston area, I quickly jumped on that bandwagon along with everybody else in the world because the lesbians — hate that word too — were the ones who were out fighting the hardest because all of our male friends were getting sick. So, that’s what brings me to this. Actually, when we had the meeting [asking], “Do we need a museum in this community at all,” I was there, and, yes, all of us in the entire room agreed that we did need a museum. We didn’t really know why, but we did need one.



Judy Reeves and Vince Lee discuss the history of GCAM’s origins.
Photo courtesy of University of Houston Libraries.

LZ: What do you see as the connection between the work you were doing around HIV and AIDS as an ally to gay men and the need for the museum?

JR: It didn’t take me long to figure [that] out once we got all the detail work out of the way with the government, etc., and I took in the first collection. A gentleman called me and said, “I’ve got things I want to bring over to the museum, will you take them?” and I [said], “Yeah.” So, he went over the next afternoon in his Jeep, and he had about fifteen boxes in it. I [thought] “Wow!” because I was always saying at the board meetings, “What if we throw a party and nobody comes?” But he said, “I’m going to go get the rest.” Before it was all said and done, we had sixty-seven boxes.

He had lived with them in his condo, a very small one-bedroom condo ... for twelve years because he had lost his lover to AIDS. The only thing he could do was box up their lives together, and literally he had paths throughout his condo to his couch, from the door to the dining room, to the kitchen, and into his bedroom. His bedroom had fewer boxes in it, but there was still a path to the bathroom. They were four high; I was [thinking], “Nobody should live like that.” So, I quickly decided, yes, we need our history, but



*Volunteers mount a display case featuring items from *Lady Victoria Lust onto the wall of the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender History (GCAM).**

All photos courtesy of Judy Reeves and GCAM unless otherwise noted.



Some of the original GCAM board members cut the ribbon at the archive's first exhibition, Pride Through the Ages, in 2000. Pictured from left to right are Bruce Reeves, Annise Parker, Judy Reeves, Rick "RainbodeKlown" Hurt, Phyllis Frye, and Jim Carper.

more importantly, we need a place for these people to have closure. These people who have lost their partners or family members etc., they need a place to come where they feel safe so they can get on with the ordeal of living. When I changed my mind[set] to that, it made everything else fall into place because it's all connected. That's me in a nutshell.

LZ: It seems like a lot of community archives start in people's apartments or homes. Why do you think that is?

JR: It comes down to, "What if we throw a party and nobody comes?" We can go out and rent a big building but who's going to pay for it? And, if we don't get any collections in, what are we going to do with that big building? We're obligated to it. GCAM actually started in 2507 Capitol Street ... a 3,600-[square]-foot warehouse [where] I lived. That's where it started with its collections, and actually, we cleared out and put walls up. About 12-by-12 [square feet of] room at the entrance of the warehouse was devoted to GCAM so we could start collecting things and put up an exhibit. We put up our first exhibit in the year 2000 and that opened us up to the community.

LZ: Can you talk about the collaboration involved in deciding whether to be a museum or an archive?

JR: There was absolutely no wishy-washy process here. ... We knew we needed a museum. We just weren't sure ... what we were going to do, and actually Dr. Jim Sears from ONE Institute [also known as ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives] was there to guide us. He gave us the four models of starting a museum. What he didn't do is say, "First you have to be educated and you have to have someone who knows what they're doing." ... So thirteen of us sat down, and we voted on it, and we decided we were going to be a museum that afternoon.

LZ: What are those four pillars that he suggested?

JR: Well, we could go meet with a university and try to do the collection there or a library or, in our case — I'm not

sure why because I don't know of any other museums that do this — we could go with either a church or a bar. I [said], "Those two are out." We have too many atheists in this community to go to a church with our history, and we have too many youngsters that we'd like to study [our] history to go to a bar. Or [we could do] a stand-alone [museum], which we did. It's been very difficult; it's been very interesting. I do spend more time trying to raise funds than I do anything else, but that's okay. It was a very eclectic group there that day. There were three writers for magazines and a botanist who did legal representation for court cases. He was one of those smart guys. We had a photographer in the community, and we had two entertainers, and we had five activists. So, guess what, the activists won.

LZ: Did you put out a call [at large], or did you just invite people that you knew?

JR: Brandon Wolf put the call out. He's a writer for *OutSmart* now. At the time he worked for Texas Commerce Bank, but he also ran a listserv ... He put the word out, and thirteen of us showed up, and it took about two hours. Before we left, we had already put together a lot of what we wanted to do within the week. We kept meeting every week, and by October we had our 501(c)(3) papers filled out, we were ready to go. We had no money; it was going to cost \$500 to turn in that little piece of paper.

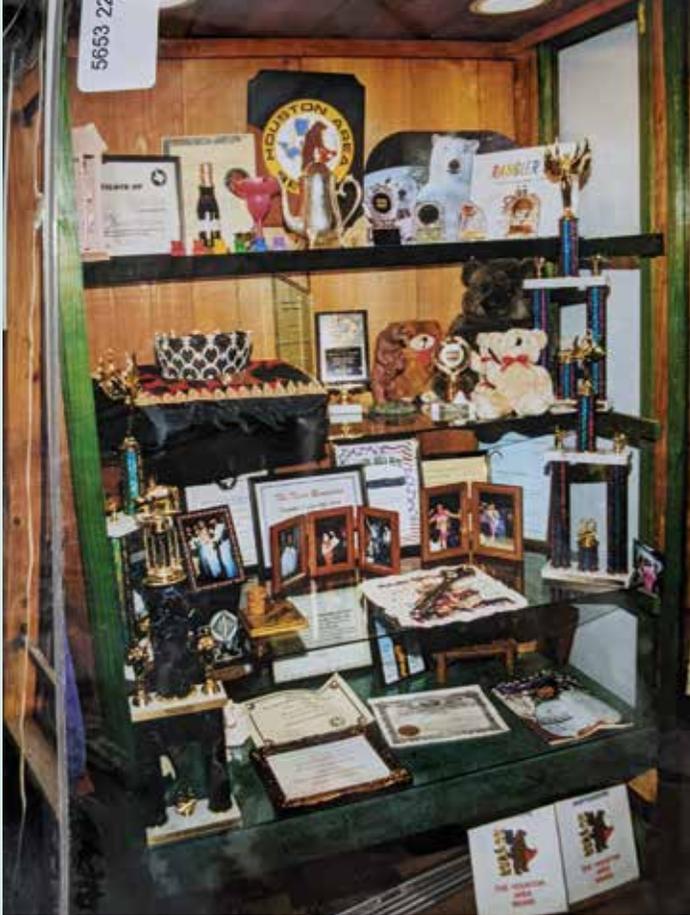
LZ: So, this was a labor of love?

JR: Yes, it definitely was. We had our first board, and we had our bylaws. We had everything ready to go, except we didn't have a 501(c)(3) [nonprofit] status. Bill O'Rourke who was a member of RICSS [Royal Imperial Court of the Single Star] and a drag queen said, "Well, I'll do a fundraiser for you." So, we did a quick fundraiser at one of the bars and we raised almost \$700 that night. ... By October we were up and running. It didn't take as long as it does now to get your 501(c)(3) papers back, and we were accepted quickly. A couple of weeks later Rosie Cheeks presented us with our original logo, and it was a gift.

So, we had everything set to go, and by the first part of the year we were being invited to speak to the Gay Chamber of Commerce and different churches. One of my favorites was to go to the church and speak to the Hatch group, because these were young impressionable children who wanted to learn history ... How lucky is that?! ... The one thing I did realize very quickly is that there were more people willing to give us busloads of stuff than handfuls of money. So, it became a problem very quickly.



The original GCAM logo was presented by local drag queen Rosie Cheeks during a fundraiser at Mary's Naturally, a popular Houston gay bar that closed in 2009.



An exhibit case from GCAM's 2000 exhibition *Pride Through the Ages* features items collected from the Houston Area Bears Club.

LZ: That is difficult for an archive when the collection grows bigger than financial coffers. Why do you think that there was this outpouring, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, to collect?

JR: I think that people were literally watching their history go down the tubes. If you had a lover who was ill and ultimately he died, I don't care how long you've been together, the family came in and took over. And when they came in, they took over everything, [saying,] "Every single thing in the apartment belonged to my son no matter what you say." These [surviving partners] were left devastated with absolutely nothing. Some of these guys had been together for years and years, and they ended up without so much as an apartment because their name wasn't on the lease, their lover's was. So, the families would quickly cancel their lease, and they found themselves out on the street. They saw their lives going down the tubes, and we turned that around.

We had people who contributed mightily in the community, in sports, in art, in the libraries, in the schools. We had teachers dying, we had librarians dying, we had drag queens dying. But everybody is worth something; they leave their mark on this earth, and these people were literally being wiped out. We didn't even have obits for them because the families wouldn't allow us to print anything that even remotely said they were gay or had AIDS. So, a lot of everything was being lost.

People jumped on the bandwagon quickly, "Here take it quick before his parents come." We were taking things, and

[saying], "Okay, sign this piece of paper that says you're the legal owner" ... because I knew that we just had to have it. They were going to be devastated if they lost everything. People had even bought houses together and lost their houses, their mortgage, everything. You cannot imagine what that's like to lose your lover of umpteen years and suddenly find yourself out on the street without so much as a picture of him. And [his parents] were throwing it all in the dumpsters. I was younger back then; I could dumpster dive, and we did frequently. We literally would follow the families and we'd stand across the street while they dumped it all, and we were on that like roaches. But we did it, and people were grateful for that.

LZ: In the Houston LGBT community there is this familial, almost, genealogy that was created and that was different than biological familial lines. It sounds as if your organization stepped in to make sure that the loss of community members would be registered.

JR: Exactly. We decided that very early on that these guys needed some place to go and this is going to be their closure. A lot of them took advantage of it, and they worked for us for a while and then they wandered off. I was fine with those guys ... getting a new life. What I couldn't understand was the families coming in and absolutely destroying everything. I don't know if they were so uneducated that they thought they might get AIDS if they kept some of his books or what, but it was just devastating to watch what went into those dumpsters: sheets, towels, books, pictures, photo albums, everything personal. ...

LZ: Curation is a big part of archival work with a connection between collecting and displaying. Your linkage of preservation to education goes all the way back to your first exhibit, *Pride through the Ages*, in 2000.

JR: We started that [pop-up exhibits concept], folks. ... And that was a great exhibit, we had thirty years of history all the way up to 2000, and we had at least one item from the G, the L, the B, and the T community for every single year. ... It was in a warehouse, and we had a lot of visitors. And [they asked], "When's your next exhibit?"

Vince Lee: For public exhibits it's very liberating because it's not in a contained or sterile environment, it's accessible. Folks can approach it, they can interact and touch materials. I've seen Judy have some items from the leather collection available, and folks would like to interact with many of those. The bar tops from Mary's. There are photographs that document individuals from the community that are no longer with us, and that's the last of the remnants or materials that document their existence and validate their existence.

JR: People thought I was crazy when I started to talk about that: "Look at the bar tops. It was 1985 when they put those pictures in there." That really is the best documentation for Mary's Naturally, which was one of the largest bars around at that time, and it was one of the more eclectic bars. The Houston Motorcycle Club found their home there, and that's



This piece of the bar top from *Mary's Naturally*, a legendary Montrose gay bar, illustrates how staff members decorated the bar top sections with photos of patrons, many of whom died from AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s.

what really started this little mushroom to grow. But the motorcycle club was there, so, the leather community felt comfortable there because of the motorcycles, and the drag queens kind of felt comfortable there because there's such an incest — this art community is so incestuous — so they were comfortable. The bisexuals could come in because everybody loves everybody, and even the trans people were comfortable there because everybody else was so comfortable. I could walk in there any time of the day or night alone and feel right at home; I couldn't do that in many bars.

But the bar tops with the pictures on them were a tribute to a lot of people who were already gone before they put those pictures on there, and there are still people living today that are on there. They put [a lot of those people] on the bar tops because they wanted to remember them, and I said, "That's Mary's tribute to AIDS. It's very small in scope, but that's their tribute to the AIDS people that [were] lost." They got to looking at it when it was in the Contemporary Arts Museum ... with different eyes this time because they haven't seen it in ten years. They remembered how much history there is in those pictures. It's not just a photo album, it is stark history and it hurts.

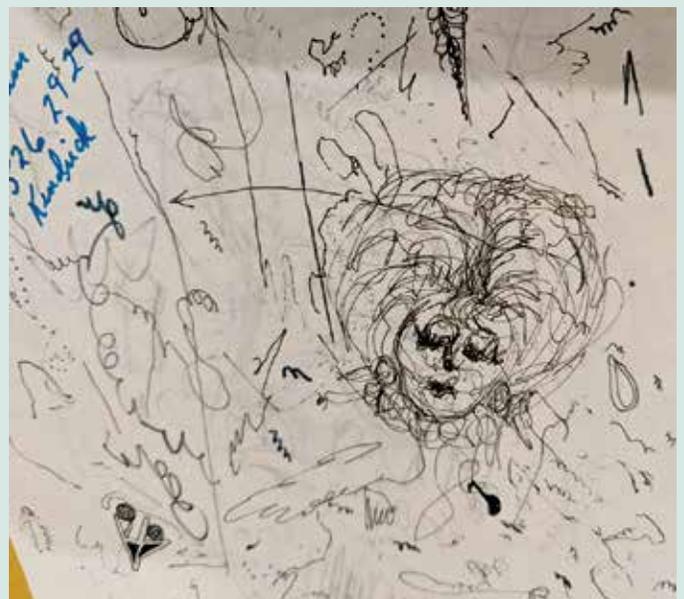
LZ: Have you received collections that you were surprised existed?

JR: Yes, actually just months ago, a person contacted me and said, "This person has died, and we want to do something with his stuff." This gentleman was a prominent community member, ... but in his other life ... he was a fan dancer in the twenties. I was presented with one of his fans, and I nearly died, ...[and] the other fan has been promised to GCAM. [The donor] actually had a picture of [the man] using these fans on stage.

We were contacted by the *Dallas Buyers Club* [film], and they had a [Houston] bar scene set up and ... wanted some of



Drawings from local Houston artist Fred Hinton, the partner of LGBTQ activist Gary Van Ooteghem, are among the GCAM treasures. The artwork above is an homage to *Mary's Naturally*, and the piece below is a doodle Hinton drew on a matchbook and gifted to GCAM cofounder Judy Reeves.





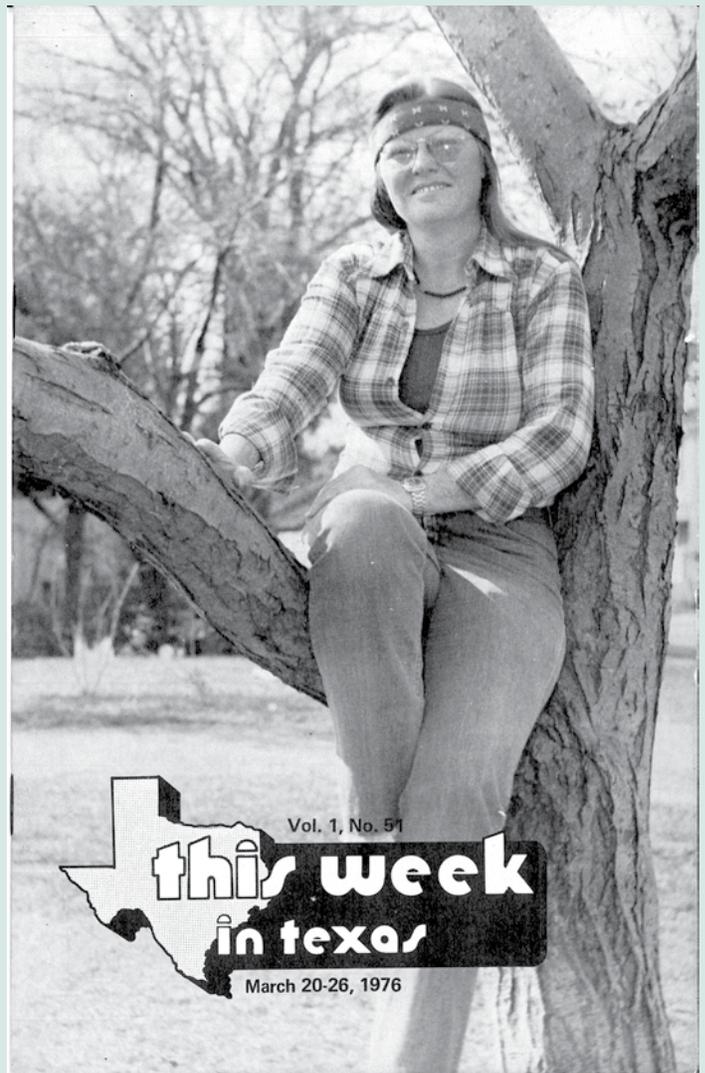
T-shirts with logos from various Houston gay bars were worn by background actors in scenes from the film *Dallas Buyers Club*.

our local t-shirts and things to wear in the bar scene. They wanted to be authentic. The wardrobe people came down, and I pulled about sixty t-shirts, and they went through them, and we talked about them. I couldn't use the newer bars ... They actually used twenty of them in the scene. I ended up with three credits in the movie, two for GCAM, one for me. But it's really hard, when you do something for somebody, and you don't charge them for it. I found out that's wrong. We're supposed to be charging for all this, especially when it came up for an award.

LZ: Judy, Vince is drawing focus to a collection that you brought today.

JR: This was Fred Hinton's art ... He was just, a stay-at-home person, ... he didn't like crowds. ... But he was a phenomenal artist, [who] didn't think he had any talent. ... He loved to do black and white ... [T]hese were depictions of various places and drag queens. ... Mostly it got his foot on the ground from something that went on in the community, so they are very historic to the Montrose area. The *TWT* [*This Week in Texas* magazine] ... featured him in one issue, but he was very surprised that they wanted to even bother. ... [In] one of my favorite pictures, ... probably one of his most historic pictures in the world, all of these words in that headpiece [shown] are all related to Mary's, the bar. It's depicting the first LUEY [Let Us Entertain You], which is on the forty-seventh year [in 2019], ... [of] the Houston Mardi Gras celebration ... The motorcycle club is depicted on there because Mary's wouldn't have been put on the map if it wasn't for the Houston Motorcycle Club. ... Torchy Lane who was a drag queen in Mary's forever. ... But it's just a little bit of everything, and if you're studying Mary's or drag queens or Mardi Gras in Houston or any of that, or leather, motorcycles, this picture fits into all of those categories ... It just breaks my heart that he didn't think he had talent. I have every one of his little fun doodles and sketches, and I've got matchbook covers with early sketches on them ...

My heart-stopping moment with GCAM came the day that there was a knock on the door at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning. We were still in a warehouse at the time, and I opened the door, and there's this rather imposing woman wearing a state trooper uniform complete with a badge on her waist, which is about nose-height with me. She says, "Is this that museum?" And I went, "Yes." I thought, "I'm going to get arrested or killed, I don't know which." That gun was bigger than I was. She says, "Oh, can I come in and see?" And I went, "Sure." She walked around the entire museum area, which again was only a 12-by-12 room of



A March 1976 *This Week in Texas* features Houston bar owner Lynn from *Just Marion and Lynn's* on the cover.

thirty years of stuff. And she turned at the very end of it, and she said, "I understand that you have a *TWT* here that has a picture on the front of Lynn of *Just Marion & Lynn's* [a Houston lesbian bar]." I went, "Yeah, it's over here in the exhibit." She said, "I'm Lynn." [That] just took my breath away. I backed into a wall and went, "Oh, my God."

She had no idea that anybody was collecting anything in this area. I'm tearing up. She thought ... when she went away to be a peace officer in Austin that she left her [*Just Marion & Lynn's*] life behind her. I thought, "Man, if I had two of those, I'd give you one," but I didn't have two of them. But she says, "I just wanted to see it one more time." I said, "Come back anytime. We don't have to be open for you to get in the door." But it was really startling, and people along the way have come back to visit.

To learn more visit gcam.org, email curator@gcam.org, or call 832-722-5785, 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.