

Student: I'm here with Kris Bethea to talk about Flint Hills Pagans in the Manhattan and Kansas Flint Hills area.

Is there anything from the get go you wanted to talk about?

Kris Bethea: Starting the Flint Hills Pagans was the best thing I ever did.

Student: OK, we can go from there.

KB: OK, do you want me to just give you the story?

Student: Well, I can start with the questions and go to the story or you can just talk first and then I can pick up any questions that are left from there. However you want to do it.

KB: I'll just give you a quick run through. Basically, one year after 9/11, I wanted something positive, and I created the Flint Hills Pagans Yahoo! Group. Various people I knew joined, and we just sort of chatted. We suddenly decided we wanted to meet. We had a little meeting at a little restaurant. Then, meetup.com, we were able to sign up on there and slowly started to grow. We would meet in the park and have picnics in the park.

Then it was like, "Well, let's become a non-profit organization." So, did some research and found out it's not that difficult to do in Kansas. We got a little committee together and became an actual NPO. We adopted part of a highway for cleanup. I don't have the dates in front of me. But we did that a couple years. We would do open rituals and parties educational moments. Just gatherings and picnics. Basically just brought people together and had monthly meetings open to the public where we would discuss our plans, our hopes. It was very organized. We used the...whatever for having...

Student: Robert Russel's Orders

KB: There you go, we had all that. We were in the process of becoming tax exempt and I had to move for job purposes. Things after that, I had to travel. It was difficult. They started slowing down without me and sort of disappeared for about four or five years and then this last year a young man, Zach, showed up in the area from the military and now they've got all kinds of stuff going on. They've got their own classes, open ritual, it's just revitalized itself.

A whole new crowd of people. I mean, there are maybe one or two of the old people still involved but it's just new people same name. It came back to life.

Student: This is located out of Manhattan, Kansas. How wide of an area does it draw from?

KB: We claimed everything from Wamego - we had people coming from Counsel Grove, Fort Riley, Junction City, Ogden. Once in a while, we had people show up from

as far as Salina and even Kansas City and Topeka at the beginning. We just tried for Flint Hills because at the time there was really nothing out there. We just filled in a gap to bring people together.

Student: Did you have a lot of people from the military from Fort Riley that participated?

KB: There was a few. Prior to me, there was a Fort Riley group that had existed. I was able to bring in people from that when it died. We had a little bit of everybody – students, Fort Riley people, and people that had lived there forever. Previous covens, just people. The group, meetup.com, before they expected money, because people could sign up anonymously and see pictures and things like that and get a feel for us before they would come to open ritual.

Student: Has the group taken advantage of the new social media sites like Facebook?

KB: Flint Hills is on Facebook. I did start it because I still invested in it. I pretty much let Zach handle everything. They did purchase a membership to meetup.com which did help briefly but they were already growing before that. It's fascinating how it comes and goes in waves. There's a lot of people participating and then there are other times when it just drifts. It's fascinating to watch.

Student: About how many members would you say the group had at its height?

KB: Seventy-five to a hundred.

Student: You said it was after September 11th you started so was it –

KB: 2002. 9/11/2002. This is all documented I can send you a link. We have a whole history available online for the group.

Student: What year would you say the membership finally peaked around?

KB: 2003, 2004.

Student: And then it started dropping off and had a lull.

KB: And then I moved here in 2005, then after that it dropped off. This past six months is when it started back up again.

Student: In what other religious organizations have you participated?

KB: I did create the Capitol City Pagans. I did that when I moved here. We did that for a year or two and then jobs got in the way. Then, this past year, we had another picnic. It was a small turnout. There's more people interested so we'll try it again when the weather gets warmer. There's lots of people in the group but they're not all ready to come out.

Student: What about organizations before Flint Hills Pagans?

KB: I was military and I moved back to Kansas in 2001 right before the 9/11 tragedies.

Student: Why do you think people were attracted to this group? What was it that drew people in?

KB: People like to be able to be open and free about who they are. There's so much hidden in society, especially pagans, they like having the opportunity to be open and free and not have to hide. That was so great they were able to have a release and able to ask questions and able to wear whatever necklaces or earrings. I think it just gave them an opportunity to be themselves and learn more.

Student: Was there a need for that sense of community in the Midwest?

KB: Oh, definitely. The Bible Belt. I was amazed at how many pagans there were or who wanted to come. We did Pagan Pride Day and various things like that. It wasn't just pagans, we were open to anybody and there was always questions. They wanted to learn more, they wanted to understand, they wanted to know if we were demon worshippers.

Student: From your own background, how did you get involved in paganism?

KB: I'm a recovering Catholic. I bet you hear that a lot.

Student: I do, I'm one myself.

KB: All the way through confirmation, did all that stuff. Can't really say I know the Bible because I don't think Catholics are taught the Bible. I sorta drifted away. I remember as a kid always asking my mom, "Why do we have to talk to God in church? If God is everywhere, why can't I do it outside?" I always felt the moon, I can't explain it, I felt drawn towards it.

In college, I was a journalism student, and I managed to get assigned, and I wrote six stories on various non-traditional religions from paganism to Wicca to shamanism. I tried to find Satanists but they did not want to be involved. They didn't know me yet, I was not a part of that community. I was still on the outside. But through that, I met Kangra and Ursula. They did my interview for Wicca. They introduced me to some books. Then after the interviews, I was curious, something felt right. I started reading and researching.

I was a military spouse, so I went to Germany for three years. Did some more reading and researching and started doing some rituals. I spotted a grove not far from my house and followed a little trail. It's not like the butterflies in the movie but it was fog. The fog just came out of nowhere and enveloped my area. I could still see the moon and it was totally

magically. I found myself and it felt good. I miss my grove. I'm sure it's been developed by now.

Student: That's out in Germany?

KB: Vilseck, Germany. It's a good memory.

Student: I know many pagans don't describe their experience as a conversion.

KB: It's a wake up call.

Student: About when was this awakening?

KB: I wrote the articles in '96. I started doing rituals in '98. After that, it became a way of life. I don't call myself Wiccan anymore. I used to be an eclectic Wiccan. But now I'm just on a spiritual path. I'm on a journey, a spiritual journey basically.

Student: So if we can shift gears back to Flint Hills Pagans, you said the group met monthly. Were there more daily interactions online or anything like that?

KB: Well, yeah, we chatted online all the time. We had our regular Flint Hills Pagans group and we had the Flint Hills Council group and it consisted of thirteen people. We had the president we had a vice president and secretary. Then we had committee heads and chairs. We did various projects and helped the community when we could. We did drives and we did fund raisers. We cleaned the highway – I'm still proud of that. That's exhausting work if you've ever done highway clean up.

Student: For the Boy Scouts long ago.

KB: We were trying to make a difference and I think we really did. Plus, it's just kinda cool driving past that sign that says, "This section of the highway cleaned by Flint Hills Pagans."

Student: How did your monthly meetings tend to progress? Were they always ritual meetings or were they also social meetings?

KB: Well, we would start – OK we did have two meetings. We would have our council meeting which we would start with a ritual and socializing afterwards, and then we would have our picnics where we would just get together with anybody and everybody. They were usually potlucks. Have just a good old time. It was about twice a month. Sometimes there were classes and then there were always little things going on. Activities for kids.

Student: Was your behavior or social interactions affected by your participation in the group?

KB: Not sure I understand.

Student: Was there anything that you took from participation that had a direct impact on your personal life? Was there any distinction between inside and outside the group?

KB: I mean, I had work and school. I was school most of the time Flint Hills Pagans was at its peak. I had my son and he participated. He was three or four or five at the time. He was born in 2000. But he didn't really know what was going on at that point.

I really don't think there was a distinction. I had school work and I had Flint Hills Pagans.

Student: So there wasn't really a separation between this is my life in this group and this is my life outside of this group?

KB: That's just me.

Student: OK. Would you be willing to talk about more specific details on some of the rituals? What exactly was involved?

KB: Well, basically we just followed regular traditions, mostly the Wiccan ones. We would call corners. We would invite the god and the goddess into the circle. We would build a cone of energy. Sometimes we would have our own personal things, like if someone was sick, that we would use for that cone of energy. On Earth Day, that cone of energy would go to Mother Earth to heal her.

Then we would have the cake, which would usually be some yummy rum. Or mead, I think it was mostly mead. Different people would bake various cakes. We tried a variety of them with herbal stuff. It depends on what we had and what the goal was and everything. Then we would have open discussion if there was something someone was worried about or wanted to share with the group. We were open about everything. We had the protective circle. Then we would thank the god and the goddess and open the circle. Then we would socialize some more. Some people would go their separate ways.

We would always have kids. Kids would come running in and out of the circle. Children can't break circles. They are immune to the protections. You have to cut a door to get in and out as an adult but kids, no. You can walk right through it.

Student: How did members of the group interact with other members of the general public? Were there any conflicts or difficulties? Issues with living in the broom closet?

KB: There were always different people and different levels of being out of the group. There were some people totally in the broom closet and you couldn't take pictures of them or anything else. Sometimes we took pictures and put them on the website, but there were some people who were like, "No, no." We would totally respect that.

We also had participants in the Pagan Pride Days. There were always differences of opinions, different dreams, different – people are different. My goal was always the simple one of bringing people together. Some people had grander schemes than that. And there were some people who were members of a coven and were helping us out just to see who would be good to fit in.

When you bring any kind of group of people together, you're going to different conflicts, different ideas, different dreams. The interactions never got ugly in person. Sometimes online they did. Generally, they always had to go through me and very few people had issue with me. I was a mediator. I dunno, some people call me naïve and that other people try to live up to my expectations because I believe so strongly. I don't know. The issue was always with other people for the most part.

Student: Was there any property owned by the group at any point in time, like a building or land or a vehicle? Was there anything like that at any point in time?

KB: We did do parades and at one point I donated my deceased van to the group. We never had anyone that could fix it up. We were going to use it for parades because we realized after walking in two or three parades – it makes your feet hurt!

Student: What was the process for joining the group?

KB: Showing interest. The Yahoo! group. Basically, I had it – still have it as open, but you have to let the moderator know. Just send me an introduction so I know you're not here to spam us.

Student: Was there any effort to actively recruit new members?

KB: Yeah, at K State we put fliers out. There were a few stores that let us put fliers on their windows. The dusty bookshelf and some of the places in Aggieville would let us put stuff up. We put some stuff up at Fort Riley, too.

Student: You indicated there weren't too many conflicts, but were there ever any incidents where you had to decline someone who was interested or had any difficulties with someone where you've had to ask them to leave?

KB: We've had potential for that. When that would happen, and I'm sure we've probably killed the grass, but if we had them we would salt it. We would salt the circle, we would salt the street, we would salt wherever we were at. No body could step through with their negativity. Although the potential was there for people to be upset, it never happened.

We had one person concerned because blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah. We had other people saying this person was trying to coerce them into doing something else – that never transpired. That other person never showed up. Everything that had a potential just never really presented themselves.

Student: What kind of relationships did Flint Hills Pagans have with religious organizations in the area? Other pagan groups, non-pagan groups, other Christian groups, how did your group interact with those other groups?

KB: Like I said, there was a couple covens that were scoping out. We had a really good relationship with one. We had a tedious, tentative relationship with the other. We watched Jesus Christ Superstar and I priest from Fort Riley was supposed to join us but was unable to attend, sent sincere apologies, and we had a discussion online about the movie and everything which was fun.

We didn't really have that much interaction. We didn't have Fred Phelps come and picket us or anything. He messes with pagan religions because they don't care about his beliefs.

Student: He seems to have enough difficulty dealing with people in his own religion.

You indicated there was participation with the children, how exactly were children handled? Were there specific educational programs or activities or youth groups?

KB: We had sometimes many rituals, sometimes arts and crafts, sometimes they participated in the main rituals, and sometimes they just danced in and out of the main circle and just sort of did their own thing. We did have a Wiccaning, which is where a girl is initiated into the circle. As I'm not a true Wiccan, I'm unclear as to exactly how it works. It was a beautiful ceremony. The little girl was absolutely adorable. Everybody had fun and took lots of pictures. It's kind of like the equivalent of a baptism.

Children were always welcome. There was one year where there was a family friendly and adult level of dancing with the dead or however you want to do it. I think there were – I think it was a mute or dumb feast is actually what it was. You can't speak during the whole meal, which is really tough for children to do. The children didn't come to that one. And sometimes [Belting?][28:30] rituals can be a lot more adult oriented.

Student: And you indicated you have children?

KB: I have a son. He's about to turn ten.

Student: Mine just turned eleven, so...

KB: Wow.

Student: Does he follow your religious path?

KB: I told him that he has his choice. Actually, this just recently came up. I bought him books four years ago about rituals. I don't remember the lady's name, but she writes the most beautiful books where she explains pagan rituals and beliefs and stuff. We would

read those but recently there have been a lot of questions like, “What do you believe, mom?” And of course, grandma and grandpa don’t really know all that much. It’s understood but not really talked about. I know my brother, I offered to discuss it with him once, and he was like, “Kris, I don’t want to know.”

He [Kris’ son] likes to define himself as a pagan. He has his own little altar that has its own little seeds and acorns and rocks and stuff that he’s found outside.

Student: No ritual knives yet?

KB: No. He does have a wand, but not a knife. I’m not going to force it on him. He can make his own choice. He’s welcome to participate in mine but he also goes to church with grandma and grandpa. I’m going to let him be who he needs to be.

Student: Any sort of educational programs for adults in the group outside of the regular meetings? Were there any sort of training programs?

KB: Oh, yes. There was tarot classes and there was basic ritual herb classes. Anything that anyone was interested in it was taught and shared. That was always separate from the regular meetings, too.

Student: You indicated there was a kind of central council that operated the group. How was that number maintained if somebody had to bow out? Was there training?

KB: There was really no training. The original council, I chose. That’s bad, but hey, I was the founder. Basically, the original council was those people who had been with me from the beginning. As it grew and as some people realized, she’s serious about this. They had to bow out because it was taking too much of their time and they had other obligations. So in the beginning, we went through a lot of people in the council because they didn’t realize I took this seriously and it wasn’t just a game.

Then we got some good people, various people from the community. Our core we came up with the bylaws and the requirements. We defined everything. Basically, we didn’t have enough members in the original council to have a voting thing because it was pretty early in the game. After that, the populous had to vote on whether or not they wanted us or some person in the council. We had people that got voted in, usually by verbal vote. No body was uncomfortable with that. No body ever really dissented. They had to apply or show interest and then we’d talk to them and find out what they were interest in and usually by that time we’d know them all anyway. By that point, we’d bring it up at a picnic, and everyone would know these people too, and then they were on the council and would start coming to meetings.

Student: What sort of differences were there in social norms and expectations in the meetings versus quote, mainstream society outside of that? Were there any differences in codes of conduct or dress or even sexual interactions or anything like that?

KB: We did specifically say that there's going to be no sex, no drugs, nothing illegal at any of the public Flint Hills Pagans gatherings. We were very specific about that. My guys would said, "OK, no flaming," which, in those days, meant no fighting. I don't know if it's still that way on the internet or not. Basically we did have our little rules. We full out had pages and pages of information we developed. We'd say, "OK, in public, you can't present Flint Hills in a bad light. If you have a grievance about one of the members or council members, if you are on the council and have problems with another council member, it doesn't need to be known by the public world. Bring it to my attention." The members, the regular populous members, they had to just be nice to each other. Be nice and be legal. Basically just societal rules.

Student: You left because you moved from Manhattan to Topeka because of a job. Before that, had you ever considered leaving?

KB: No.

Student: It was always assumed it was just something you were going to do?

KB: Forever. Yeah.

Student: You've also indicated it had a little bit of a slowing down and then it has picked back up again. How do you see this group doing in the future? Having cycles or continuing on?

KB: I see it as having cycles, but I think that's how society works. I used to be a member of the Society of the Creative Anachronism, the middle ages group. They're in Manhattan, and even they've gone through their cycles. It's a college town, you get the college influx, you've been there forever and have had to stand fast when time slowed down. You've got the military which goes through cycles. You've got the people which go through phases themselves. It's like, OK, hermit time. I don't want to talk to anybody, see anybody, it's just time for me. Time for me to do soul searching, for me to learn about myself as opposed to doing social things. All of that put together makes things go through more cycles.

I've gone through that myself after the Flint Hills Pagans slowed down and Capital City Pagans did too. I went through that myself. OK, I feel like I'm changing, what I'm supposed to do is changing, and I have to figure that out before I can get back into society and bring people together again.

Student: What were some of the best or worst things that you remember about being in the group?

KB: The best was just the people, the feeling. All these people I met from so many different walks of life with so many different stories and expectations with so much to learn and so much to give – it gave me a high. It was absolutely amazing. I can't even put it to words. The feeling of community, that community feeling. When you realize

you aren't alone, don't have to be alone. When you realize there are people who won't judge you for what you believe, for what you feel.

So many – society created bonds binding you and everything. It's just amazing. I think the highway cleanup was one of my favorite parts and just seeing the Flint Hills Pagans on the sign was kinda cool. The newspaper articles and just people asking questions and that light going off in some peoples' eyes, "Oh, so you don't worship demons and stuff like that." It's just great.

Low points was... There's always going to be somebody that wants something different. Someone who has a different dream and thinks you're getting in the way of their dream. And sometimes you got to move past that, agree to disagree, and move on. But you've got so many personalities that there are bound to be clashes. You do that and continue on your way. But sometimes people just get upset and there's nothing you can do about it. The low point is where you just reach that point and someone was just too hurt or too angry to try anymore.

Student: Do you still keep in contact with a lot of people from the group?

KB: Oh, yes. Definitely. Almost all of them. We've had – there's going to be a hand fasting coming up for a couple of the original council members. There's a couple more moving away, following some more dreams. There are people going through life changes, people who have gotten better, people who have left and come back. People who have disappeared and there are people in contact with me planning on coming back. It's just an absolutely wonderful group of people who have touched my life and I don't think I'll ever let them go.

Student: You already indicated a website, would we be allowed to link to that?

KB: <http://www.flinthillspagans.org>.

Student: Would you be willing to share any other documents that you have? You indicated newspaper stories.

KB: They should all be on the website. I believe even the minutes to the meetings are still available.

Student: Anything else you want to share? Any anecdotes or memories or funny people or anything?

KB: The whole thing was really memorable. It was just magical.

Student: Do you know of any other religious groups whose stories we should record? Or any other people we should interview?

KB: The Fort Riley group before me might be something. I can check with the young man who was participating in that. But that's – I mean you know all about the ones in this area.

Student: I've made efforts to contact Web of Oz and some of the other ones.

KB: Web of Oz and Dragonshire. Good people. This is for the whole state of Kansas, right?

Student: Yup.

KB: There's also Smokey Valley Pagans. It is also defunct. You might be able to find somebody. There's the Salina Pagans in the Park. It has died off but they're starting something different now. There's a group down by Pittsburgh, Kansas. I believe a couple people tried something in Hayes but I don't know if that one ever panned out or not. Also, Pagans of Kansas. They're drawing in people from all over the state which might be a good resource for ya.

Student: OK, I appreciate that. Anything else you want to close off with? Last minute thoughts?

KB: Nope, but I like having this documented.

Student: Certainly. And if you know anyone else who has participated in the group and is interested in talking we can arrange something else, too.

KB: OK. I'll check and see.

Student: Well, thank you very much for your time and for sharing your stories with us.

KB: Thank you.