



STILL UNBROKEN

Jim Carmichael makes something beautiful

By Steve Mitchell



Jim Carmichael looks at a painting of his mother hanging in his home off of Lake Brandt Road in Greensboro.

When Jim Carmichael was in fourth grade he had a playground argument with two friends, Carolyn and Bill. He can't remember what the argument was about, but he remembers that they made up and, in the relief of the moment, he hugged Carolyn, then hugged Bill.

"My teacher spotted me like an eagle. She tore across the playground, snatched me up, and nearly shook the teeth out of my head. 'What would Bill's father think if he saw you doing that?' she kept saying. But that never occurred to me."

Sitting in his kitchen with me nearly 60 years later, Jim's eyes still widen as he tells the playground story. He's settled now, though that took a while. And happy. That took a while too. He's made a home in Greensboro for nearly 30 years, teaching Library and Information Science at UNC-G. But the shock is still there. It's not the shock of persecution; it's the shock that something so small and so honest might cause such a furor.

Jim has lived through a period of

revolutionary change in America's perspective on sexual preference, a period that has seen homosexuality move from being considered a mental illness and prosecutable offense to a Supreme Court decision affirming same-sex marriage. His story is an object lesson in the terrors of oppression and a testament to the ways society can shift to embrace its outsiders. It's also the story of how we slowly come to terms with who we are.

He lives surrounded by art, antiques, books and clothes. His home is a gallery of the things he loves, collected over many years, and a celebration of self. I'm hardly in the door before I meet Fabia, one of three life-sized mannequins who share his space, each dressed to the nines for some fabulous and exotic future party.

Jim is slender, with a moustache that curls up at the ends, an elfin grace, and a nearly constant mischievous twinkle in his eye. He always has a story and he seems to remember the names of every single person he's met since 1948. He appears to know everyone in Greens-

boro and, perhaps, everyone who's ever lived in Greensboro. He has that kind of archivist researcher's mind that retains names, dates, and facts. He is, after all, a librarian.

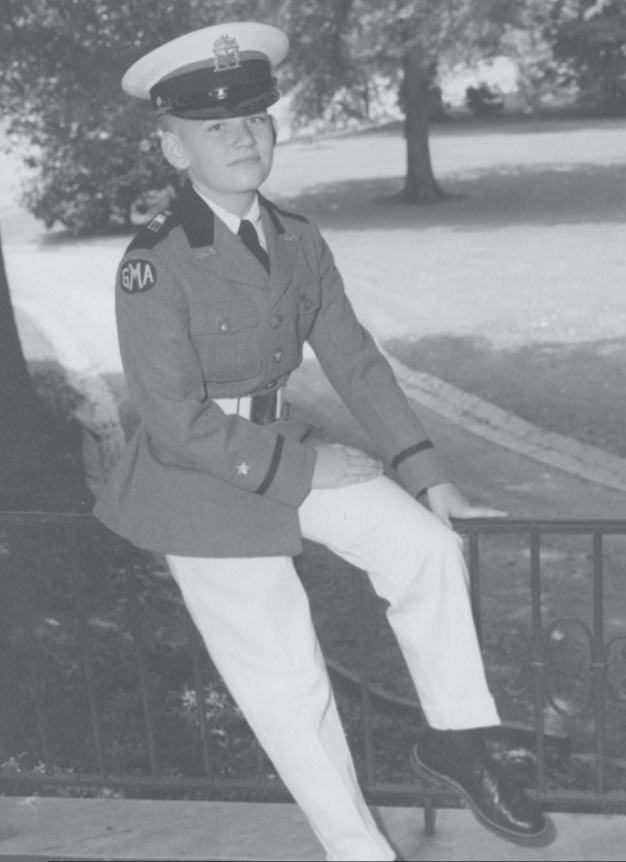
Jim has the best clothes. He favors vests and the occasional ascot. Sometimes leather pants. He's the kind of person you want to meet tomorrow if only to see what they're wearing.

"I just decided, you know. If I can't be honest, if I can't just tell the truth and be who I am, then I don't want to be anything. But I really had to go through a lot of crap before I realized that's the most important thing in life to me."

He introduces me to Cosima, his 19-year-old cat, named after Richard Wagner's second wife. She hardly notices us as she stumps by with a death rattle of a squawk. Then he leads me to his favorite painting, an oil by Barry Gordon. It's a diffuse figure walking toward me from a gray-blue background, everything about it willfully indistinct.

"The artist didn't title it," Jim says. "I call it 'Still Unbroken!'"





Carmichael's parents sent him to military school at a young age hoping to "toughen him up."



Outsiders know they're different from a very early age but don't really have a language to articulate it. They learn their difference from others, from the way their family, their friends, their community, respond to their temperament and interests. They learn to be careful. They learn to be guarded. They may even learn to be invisible.

Even before his fourth grade experience on the playground, Jim was convinced that he wasn't like everyone else. His father had warned him.

"I think he knew, like parents do know, from an early age, that I was different. He'd say, 'Jim, don't be a sissy,' and he once told me, 'If I ever see you with another man, I'll kill you.'"

Jim knew he was different, he just didn't know what that 'different' meant. The language was coded and simple gestures, like a hug, could get him in trouble without anyone explaining exactly why. He only knew he was somehow outside the norm. He was too young to understand sexuality and the adult obsession with it.

Jim was born in Atlanta in 1946 but grew up in Marietta, Georgia. His father was prominent in Georgia politics in the 30's, becoming General Manager of Bell Aircraft during the war, then Lockheed, then Scripto Pens & Pencils. He grew up 'the poor little rich kid who lived in the house on the hill.'

They were a kind of new Southern nobility. "By the time I was a teenager, I'd read *Gone with the Wind* 15 times. I thought it was about my family."

His mother was a distant woman. "Mother was a refrigerator," Jim adds, to make the point.

"But," Jim grins slyly, "I took all of my personality cues from her. I wanted to be able to smoke a cigarette like mother. You know: inhale and 10 minutes later have the smoke trail from my nostrils and bound across the table into a bowl of snapdragons."

His father was busy. His parents traveled a lot. Jim's family were his sisters, who he dearly loved, and the servants at home.

When he's nine years old, his housekeeper takes him to the movies to see *Tea and Sympathy*. The film stars Deborah Kerr and John Kerr. Released in 1956, it's the story of a young man at a prep school that doesn't fit in with the other guys. He won't play sports, he wants to read. He won't go out drinking, he prefers to listen to classical music. Fellow students mock him for being unmanly, calling him 'sister boy.'

The wife of a football coach attempts to shelter him, and, in the problematic climax, which can arguably be read a number of ways, she sacrifices her virtue and 'makes a man of him' by sleeping with him. Soon, the student is happily married. The love of a good woman has eradicated his homosexuality. This becomes important to Jim's story later.

Homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), the preeminent diagnostic tool first published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1952. Jim was six years old then.

In the 50's and 60's, the FBI kept lists of known homosexuals and homosexuality was enough to preclude you

from a government job. It was considered a security issue due to the perceived blackmail risk. Police departments in larger cities regularly swept parks and bars, arresting anyone deemed homosexual. The risk of exposure was real and terrifying. Homosexuality was not removed from the DSM until 1973.

As they leave the theatre, the housekeeper leans down to nine-year-old Jim. "If you don't watch out, that's what's going to happen to you."

What she means is the abuse by his peers, the merciless bullying and humiliation, being shunned by society. What she means is, if he doesn't somehow change his ways, he'll have a painful time of it. She's right.

"Everything you've heard about the South is true," Jim explains. 'Everybody had a gay person somewhere in their family, they were usually in a mental institution somewhere (or they used to be), or in a room upstairs by themselves, or we just didn't talk about Brother Joe. But, everybody had one.'

Not long after the playground incident, it was decided to send Jim away to a military school. Small and scrawny now, he'd be taught to be manly, begin anew. Being surrounded by boys, not sisters and servants, would somehow turn him around. Instead, at the school, he was systematically raped and abused by the other boys there.

"I was passed up and down the hall. It was just considered 'boys will be boys.'"

For some, the years of adolescence are the glory days, days of freedom and exploration before the responsibilities of adulthood. For others, for the outsiders, adolescence can be a circle of hell, a time when your fragile sense of self seems under constant attack, when there seems no stable ground and even finding one or two friends can be problematic.

When Jim talks about military school and his high school years, he's very direct: "My proudest achievement is that I lived through it."

In eighth grade he moved on to Choate, a prestigious prep school in Connecticut, still coming home for vacations and the summers. He was in the full throes of adolescence by then, beginning to grapple with his sexuality.

"It's so hard to realize now how there was nowhere to get validation for being gay. Nowhere."

"My best friend at school was my English teacher and dorm master. I knew, when I looked on his bookshelves, that he had to be sympathetic. I wrote him once and told him about a boy I was in love with and he was very understanding." It was 1964. Jim was 17.

It's in books that Jim begins to find some measure of validation: James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, James Barr's *Quatrefoil*, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*. Nearly all literature including gay people at this time ended with the gay person sick and dying due to their lifestyle or dead, having killed themselves, pining for an unrequited love. These books are different; they promise a kind of gay life that doesn't always end in tragedy. It's a life that seems very, very far away.

At a newsstand in Marietta, he discovers copies of Athletic Model Guild. In the post-war years, women are allowed to appear in print in various states of undress



Carmichael began his career as a librarian in Georgia before coming to UNC-Greensboro where he now serves as a professor of library and information studies.

but censorship laws prevent the same with men. Athletic Model Guild poses as a manual of fitness, publishing photos of scantily clad men exercising, sometimes wrestling. This is the magazine discovered in Jim's trunk while he's away on a trip. The headmaster calls Jim's father.

"By the time I graduated high school, I'd attempted suicide two or three times. With stupid things, like taking a bottle of aspirin, or drinking a can of Brasso. I was as miserable as an adolescent could be. I didn't know how I could be gay and be my father's son." It was 1965. Jim was 18.

The next year, at American University, a stranger invites Jim back to his apartment for a drink.

"I was on my way across campus. I hadn't been eating, I'd lost weight, I was miserable, but suddenly I wanted an omelet."

The stranger says hello. Jim stops. They talk for a moment. The stranger invites Jim over. As he hands Jim a drink, he asks, "How's your sex life?" This was the first openly gay person Jim had ever met.

"I was terrified," Jim exclaims, eyes widening again, "Terrified!" Jim put his drink on the table. "I said, I'm sorry I have to go, and I left."

He didn't know how to be gay and he didn't know how not to be. He'd suffered years of physical and emotional abuse and his parents were far from accepting. He didn't know how to be anything at all.

Sometimes he thinks it might have been easier to come out. "Maybe if I'd been handsome. Or if I'd had the Dong of Death."

He felt he could no longer try 'to pass.' He had a break-

down, though at the time he didn't think of it as such. He just knew he wasn't eating much, was isolating himself. When he went home, he couldn't stop crying. Day after day. His parents institutionalized him. It was 1966. Jim was 19.

"I never did get that omelet!" Jim remembers, with a chuckle.



"So there I was, in a booby hatch in Georgia for three months. And I hated the doctor there. He was so smug. I couldn't understand why I was being attacked or what I had done wrong."

One day, while out of doors on walking privileges, he escapes. He makes his way to I-85 where he catches a cab. The cab takes him to an airport. The plane takes him to Greenwich Village, where he has friends from Choate.

Greenwich Village is, at the time, a slummy and dangerous neighborhood in lower Manhattan but it's becoming a focal point in a new and tentative gay culture. Everything is tentative because any public display of affection can lead to arrest; it's still illegal for same sex couples to dance together.

The Mafia, seeing an opportunity for cash, open a number of underground gay clubs in sketchy buildings in the Village. They operate like speakeasies during prohibi-

tion, with a slot in a door and a password. The clubs sell watered booze but they give men and women a place to dance, a way to be social and open without repercussions.

These clubs are raided regularly, shut down for a few hours, then re-opened. The real money for the Mob is in blackmailing businessmen and socialites who frequent the clubs. The Mob extorts money, the police extort money, the clubs open, close, move.

Tensions finally boil over on June 28, 1969 with the famous Stonewall riots, considered a pivotal moment in the Gay Liberation movement. Hundreds of gay men and women begin to fight back when the police raid the Stonewall Inn. Soon, there are more people in the streets and the unrest continues over a number of nights.

Jim is back in Georgia by then. His parents had finally found him in the Village and brought him home. He's





Carmichael's life moved forward once he joined an AA program in the late 1970s. It was in Atlanta that he met Roddy, pictured below.



institutionalized again until he brokers a deal with his father to attend nearby Emory University, his father's alma mater.

"I met this 'drugstore johnny', I'd call him now, in English class. He brought me out. We were never much of a couple, but there was this little covey of gay folks. About five or us." They were tolerated, in a 'don't ask, don't tell' sort of way. It was his first positive gay experience. Still, he was constantly in and out of denial.

Jim attended Emory, majoring in French. He was required to register for the draft, the Vietnam War was in full swing, but he was rejected due to his hospitalizations. He had friends, but he felt adrift. He was drinking heavily.

"If there's one word that goes with my generation of gay people it's discretion. They wouldn't even say the word gay, they'd say *festive*, you know, with a soft 's', *Fessstive*. That was gay-speak of the 1950s." Jim had trouble with discretion. Flamboyance was Jim's style, even before his sexuality had anything to do with it.

His parents thought he just needed to settle down. He needed to meet the right girl. At Emory, he met Bunny. She'd seen him from afar and announced her intention to marry him.

"I had to propose 'cause I didn't know what else to do." They married when they graduated in 1969. Bunny knew Jim was interested in men. It was the late Sixties and she was liberated; they both were. They had an open marriage.

"I thought, well, I guess I can do this." Jim sighs, "We were married 3½ years and, uh, it was interesting. I consider it my time in Vietnam."

His mother is watching the Watergate hearings with his Aunt Cooter when he tells her about the impending divorce. He also tells her he's gay. With the separation, Jim moves back home.

"I was home with mother, honing my alcoholism." His father gets him a job at a local bank where he works for six years until they fire him for drinking. "Mother was a great drinking companion."

After the bank, he returns to Emory to get his Masters in Library Science, then begins to work in nearby Milledgeville. He occasionally reads his very bad poetry, in a three-piece suit with a purple tie, at a nearby coffeehouse frequented by members of the gay community. He's astounded by how proud and forceful some can be about their lifestyle.

"Someone would yell 'Fag!' at them from a passing car and they'd just yell right back at them."

This is a survivor's story. There were many of Jim's generation that did not survive. Jim had privilege, money, and a family who loved him though they didn't necessarily understand him. Jim had options others didn't have. These others were in institutions, 'or upstairs in a room alone', or just not talked about. These others were beaten to death in back alleys and on back roads, or lived in constant in fear.

Survivors don't often survive alone. They're saved by a kindly stranger, or the timely appearance of a friend. They're saved by a family member who says exactly the right thing at the right moment. These people are the

heroes. Jim's hero is his sister, who takes him to his first AA meeting.

Mary Emma was a recovering alcoholic. Jim had been trying to get sober through the church. "You know, I qualify for every 12 Step Program there is, bar none. I'm such a mess."

"I remember I was getting ready to go to church in my dark blue three piece suit---it was probably vomit splattered---and Mary Emma said, Jim, would you like to go to a meeting?" It was Christmas Eve 1978. Jim was 31.

In 1978, Alcoholics Anonymous was still a secretive, somewhat underground organization that kept a low public profile, unlike today when Facebook is littered with everyone reporting on progress in their current 12 Step Programs. Then, members maintained anonymity because jobs, reputations, families, were at stake. Alcoholism was still another thing that wasn't talked about in public.

Jim's home group was in Milledgeville but he drove into Atlanta every weekend to attend meetings. He'd sleep on floors or couches.

"At that time, AA didn't officially sanction gay groups. It wasn't until '91, I think, when they admitted there were gay people in AA. Still, there was Gay AA. It met on Thursday nights at the Presbyterian Church. But No Hugging! No Hugging or the Church will get upset!"

It was in Atlanta that Jim met Roddy. Jim's smile broadens and his hands begin to flutter. "My major *affairette*. He was a real sassy piece of baggage!" Jim was in love.

Roddy and Jim were together for a year and a half. It was in this time that Jim not only accepted his sexuality but embraced it. Suddenly, through AA, he was in a community that welcomed him, he was no longer drinking, he had his first real partner.

Jim's eyes light up. "It was wonderful. I dared anyone to say something about our relationship. I couldn't believe anyone was infatuated with me, even for a week. I was proud."

Eventually, Jim and Roddy went their separate ways, but Jim remained in AA. Soon, he moved to Chapel Hill, attending UNC-CH, then to Greensboro where he joined the faculty at UNC-G.

"Roddy was the real thing. And everyone should have one of those experiences in life." Jim leans back in his chair, sipping his Diet Coke. "That kind of thing. It only happens once, I think."



The Supreme Court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage has strengthened an existing backlash against gay rights across the country. Republican legislators in many states are attempting to repeal many of the non-discrimination laws enacted in the last thirty years, under the guise of 'religious freedom.'

This is the concept Kentucky Register of Deeds Kim Davis used to deny marriage licenses to same-sex couples, that to do so 'violated her religious beliefs' and thus exempted her. It's a new wrinkle in the fight for equal rights. It doesn't hold up in court, but this doesn't prevent the passage of the laws that serve as a type of legislative harassment of the targeted populations.

Jim sighs in disbelief when the subject comes up. "We

have to teach another generation all over again because they don't know the history."

Jim grew up as the Gay Liberation movement was growing up and he came out, essentially, as gays around the country were coming out of the shadows and out of their silence and fear. He's watched the people around him, and the movement itself, suffer devastating loss and exhilarating gains. He's seen members of the gay community come to respect themselves and each other.

"As horrible as it was, that's what AIDS did to the gay community. It made us people to each other, instead of tricks."

We walk around Jim's home again, our afternoon slowing to a close. In one bedroom he points out a stunning three paneled screen, an ethereal female figure on each panel. Jim fell in love with the artist's work and commissioned the screen. The artist was obliging and let him pay over time. Many of his pieces have been acquired that way.

"The real peace for me came with AA. I suddenly realized that the idea of a Higher Power waiting under the piano to shout 'Gotcha!' is false. I thought I had to be a certain kind of person. I could never get away from home in my head." I ask him if he still feels like an outsider.

"The sense of outsidership diminishes as your ego gets smaller. When you can feel connectedness, then it's an antidote to the ego. It happens when you realize other people have suffered too." Throughout the interview, I've expressed some outrage at the experiences he's had to endure. Jim shakes his head and a quiet, subdued smile appears.

"I think that, everything I am, I was made by all the ad-

versity I went through." Jim pauses. "So, I'm not a victim."

It's only in my second pass through the house that I notice Maisie, another mannequin, has been posed directly beside an oil painting of Jim's mother. In the painting, his mother wears a simple, pink floral dress. Maisie, on the other hand, is decked out in fur, a dainty hat topped with netting and trimmed also in fur atop her copper curls. Large antique paste earrings accent her ensemble. Maisie and Mother's sightlines do not cross.

"I'm not a very sexual person," Jim admits, adjusting Maisie's hat. "I don't fit the stereotype of the bars, Mineshaft, and all that, though I certainly did them. I was searching for emotional intimacy rather than sex. What I've wound up with is not a partner; what I've wound up with is all these loving friends."

He takes me into the guest bathroom where one wall is covered with a gorgeous mosaic of broken china. "One night during a dinner party," he explains, "the china cabinet just pulled away from the wall and everything came crashing down."

Afterward, he had to find something to do with the shards. He made something beautiful.



Out in the South will explore growing up LGBTQ by talking with five generations of Southerners from different ethnicities. While we'll frame these stories in the context of larger historical events, we'll focus primarily on the individual experience of each person as they navigate their own growing sense of who they are and how they find a place within their family and community.



At home in Greensboro, Carmichael reflects on friends that have meant so much to him in recent years.