
Q: Today is May 1st, 2010, my name is Kathy Staley and could you give your name, age, where you're from?

A: My name is ****. I'm 40 years old. I currently live in Arden, North Carolina.

Q: Where were you from -- when you were growing up?

A: It's a little town called [Covern?], Virginia. Nobody usually knows where it's at. It's about 45 minutes west of Bristol, Virginia, Abingdon. It's probably about 15, 20 minutes north of Big Stone Gap in that area. The southwestern part of Virginia.

Q: Is it a small community?

A: (laughter) Yeah.

Q: Near any other big communities like 15 minutes from the county seat?

A: The county seat is very small too. Everything's small. It's much smaller now. It wasn't as small then. I mean it was small then but it's smaller now.

Q: What's happened to make it smaller?

A: The coal business went down and the coal business just now starting back up but people moved from that.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about how you first learned about gays, lesbians, transgender issues?

A: (laughter)

Q: Growing up in a small town --

A: It wasn't growing up. My earliest memory is, and I don't know what grade I was in or really how old I was, but I know that there was a new kindergarten teacher and all I remember is people made fun of him. People said he wore hose and he was different. And I don't know if he lasted a year or not but he got fired. So that was kind of connected to that. Nobody that I can remember ever called him gay in front of me but I was just a kid. And I can remember being at my paternal grandparents' home and they would kid around with my dad and aunts and uncles and stuff about a very distant cousin being different. And I don't know if he is or not. That was just always kind of what the community said.

Q: And is different a code word for?

A: They would talk about him, they would use the word (inaudible) but talk about his traits that way.

Q: So could you describe what your coming out process was then?

A: I didn't come out in Virginia. I think it started, of course looking back I can connect the dots and know what I didn't know then, but when I came out I was in Chicago. And that started, I went to college in Kentucky (inaudible)

Memphis College [Union College?]. Had a great experience.
I was a nontraditional student.

Q: How so?

A: I went straight to college out of high school and I wasn't ready. I went to a state school in Virginia and didn't take that seriously, got lost, didn't know how to study, played cards a lot, smoked pot a lot and drank and that sort of thing and flunked out my first semester. So my parents were willing to pay for my education until I flunked out and then they said, "If you want this you have to work for it." So I did a lot of jobs. I worked in a factory, gas stations, grocery stores, that sort of thing and I finally got my act together and knew that I couldn't stay there making nearly nothing. I got some information, found this college and went to college. Before I went to college, one of the main reasons I went to college is I had a great mentor who was my minister. And I remember having conversations with him about different things in the bible and homosexuality came up one day. He had been a superintendent of schools so he was a pretty educated man, has a Ph.D. in education. You know, he's like (inaudible) animals that have some attraction to each other and blah, blah, blah. Which was very enlightening to me because I'd never heard that. I don't think I knew, I didn't realize

at the time that I was a lesbian. So I went to college in Kentucky, met different people from different places. I had a really good friend who was a lesbian, an out lesbian, and I always swore oh, no, not that, gay, blah, blah, blah. You know, it was way, I was denying it way too much. So I think that was part of the coming out process.

Then I went to seminary in Chicago and met the seminarian and it was there, because I was a fish out of water, it was like (inaudible) to a foreign country. Because Chicago's huge and the little mountain towns, you know, no diversity, just a bunch of hillbillies and I hope I don't offend anybody with that term, I embrace that term but (inaudible). But I just blossomed there. And through diversity and through my classes things just started happening and I (inaudible) but I came out. And it was really hard because I was on the ordination track for the Methodist church. Before I'd even gone to the seminary and started the process and by the time I got to the seminary after my first year I was ordained in the Methodist church as a minister. And it was really before my ordination process that I really embraced my homosexuality. I got into a serious relationship. And so I knew before I was ordained, you know, that conflict and I knew I was going to

be (inaudible) I poured my whole self into that. And I knew I had a lot of people depending on me at home. I'm the only person that, I have two masters degrees, I'm the only person that went to college, let alone got masters degrees. So a lot of people were proud of me that I was going to be a minister. Some people (inaudible) speak to me because even though they're not supposed to be (inaudible). So I didn't want to let anybody down.

So I went and (inaudible) ordination because I wasn't ready to come out and I was worried that it would affect my family because it's such a small town, the church and all that kind of stuff is so connected. So ordained in June, went back to Chicago, came home for Christmas that next December and went to the appropriate person, it's called (inaudible), came out (inaudible). Basically he was like, he had a counseling session with me with hey, you know, one of my good friends that I went to seminary with, he's gay and now he's got a church and I feel like he's messing around with these teenage boys and blah, blah, blah. You know, he was telling me all of his junk and here I am doing the hardest thing I've ever done. So I was like oh (inaudible). It was a hard situation. So finally through that conversation and after he told me his stories the

decision was I could either be quiet and go on with my ministry, because the conference had already chosen a church for me and had all these plans for me, or give up my orders. The thing they didn't mention that I already knew about was if anyone suspected I was gay, if anyone knew, if I came up to somebody and they knew and they were in church then they could be stripped of their orders. I could be stripped of my orders, been on trial, it's just a huge nasty ordeal.

So I made the decision to give my orders up and it was probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my entire life. So, went back to Chicago, gave my orders up. The church wasn't too nice about it, it got complicated. I'd already come out to my mother and she was upset but -- she cried and the funny thing was she said she wasn't surprised, that she kind of always knew when I was growing up. She didn't want to admit it and then she said, "You know, there goes all my dreams for you --"

End file 1

(file 2 and file 3 appeared to be from a different session, not transcribed)

A: It's a really different church and very active and very supportive of the GLBT community. But that's what

(inaudible) Asheville because it's so (inaudible) and that hasn't changed.

Q: Do you (inaudible) Arden and (inaudible) then?

A: We live in Arden but that's part of Buncombe County where Asheville is the county seat. And we live there because the housing prices in Asheville are outrageous. So the kind of the farther out you go the better prices you get and that's what we did is we finally after we rented for a year we went and bought our own home. So we're really settled here.

Q: Could you describe how your neighbors respond, if you live in a neighborhood?

A: We live in a development. We never will live in a development again. Not because it's been bad, just because I don't like the homeowner's association which is mainly a bunch of retired people that don't have a lot to do except complain about where the garbage can is sitting and that sort of thing. And I just don't, you know, coming from Chicago to that is like, geez, get a life. But anyway that's a different issue. We moved into this neighborhood, it's a really middle class. The surprising thing is it is diverse. Across the street lives a Greek family. The parents are very fluent in Greek. I don't even know if the father can speak English. I know the mom speaks some

English. The kids always translate and they're great kids. There's a lot of African-American families that live in the neighborhood, retired people, young families with kids. So (inaudible) since we like that diversity coming from Chicago, we really like what diversity we can get here. Nobody really made a big deal. It's not like we put a big huge rainbow flag out and had [grape?].

People know that two women live together and they have a kid. We've had people in the neighborhood [eating out of the home?], we've gone to HOA meetings. Before we had the foster child we had (inaudible) dogs. We had two other foster kids and you know, we walked them around the neighborhood, they were two and three years old, pulled in a wagon, everybody loved them. Took them trick or treating so they were big in the neighborhood. And now the (inaudible) the same way. We put him in a wagon, pull him around. Our dog, when he gets out, because we don't (inaudible) dog and everybody knows he belongs to us. So it's been pretty accepting. There's a guy that kind of lives across from us, when we first moved in we bought the house and **** had to go back to Chicago to take care of some stuff and so the weekend that we were supposed to move in it was me and my parents (inaudible) **** got lucky

(inaudible) partner. Got out of the work. So a neighbor came by and was like, "Welcome to the neighborhood, where'd you live (inaudible) and he's like I'm from Michigan and I go to this church and you and your husband should come to the church" and blah, blah, blah. And he said the name of the church and I said oh, I know you're not going to like us. So I said, "Well, my partner JB" and then you could see he's trying to back up. I did that on purpose because I knew what he would do. So he's been kind of standoffish but the way I look at it that seems (inaudible). But really that's been the only time I've felt like some people were awkward.

Q: Have most of the people that you've met been people who are native to Buncombe County or is it a diversity with that or because people aren't from the area and moved in?

A: I think with Asheville, well, I'm a social worker so I work for Buncombe County so I deal with all kinds of people. People that live in the city. I do children's protective services. So I deal with people that live in the city and I deal with people that live in the county. I would say that Asheville is like a hub for everybody to come to. I mean I have friends that are natives of Asheville and Buncombe County but the majority of people have moved here. It's kind of weird but Asheville's kind of a weird place

compared to the other parts of western North Carolina that I know of. So --

Q: How would you (inaudible)?

A: Asheville, you know, we have all these hippies, we have all these gays and lesbians and transgender people and all these people that have come in from other places. The city's kind of, you know, they're real progressive. Now the county is totally different. But because I'm from Virginia and I grew up that way I can go to the county, I can drive up in my (inaudible), sit in somebody's little house and talk about how's your garden doing. I can slip right back into that because I know it and I'm comfortable with it. So I'm kind of, I can do that or I can go to the city and hang out with hippies and have a good time but I really (inaudible). But it's just these two different worlds that sometimes they get along great and sometimes they don't.

Q: What do they get along with and what don't they get along with?

A: I think it's kind of this just be and let people be, that kind of attitude. I think that Asheville has this, and Buncombe County, you know, respect the environment, that sort of thing. What they don't get along with is gay and lesbian issues for sure. There's been some protests

(inaudible) things. You know, you always get these evangelical Christians coming in to say the gays are going to hell and then you get the more liberal progressive churches on this side and it's always that (inaudible). And even in the city I have to say, you know, just not too long ago, a few months ago, the city of Asheville tried to bring up the issue of domestic partnership for insurance and I think that it eventually will pass but the mayor at this point (inaudible) does not agree with it at all. She sees it as a choice and a lifestyle and her religion is totally (inaudible). So that's the major holdup there. It's been kind of interesting because there's one African-American church in the city that protested it big time but it was the other church in the county that came to the (inaudible). But really the majority of the churches in the city were for it. Like our church had a press release about 13 or 14 other ministers from other congregations (inaudible).

Q: So right now that whole concept of domestic partner benefits is on a stand still?

A: Yeah, we really want it because what we've been told from day one here is once the city does, then the county will do it and then the hospital will do it. And where I work at there's tons of gays and lesbians, I mean from upper

management down and everybody's treated basically really well. I mean there are some people that I work with that are a little older that are very country that say stupid things because they just don't know.

Q: Are you a county employee or is it --

A: County employee.

Q: Do (inaudible) training?

A: We have diversity training. Since I've been there I've seen that it's grown and we talk about it more now than we ever have. In fact, I'm in a diversity group and that's one of the topics that we hear (inaudible). A lot of the kids that we work with are in the process of coming out (inaudible) who they are and the things are totally (inaudible) and sometimes they take them to these churches and, you know, it's just hard stories, how these kids are abused through the church counseling and some of the abuse they go through at home with relatives and they don't have resources.

Q: So how does DSS address those types of situations?

A: Very carefully. We try to respect where the parents are coming from --

End file 4

A: -- respect where the kids are coming from, give them the service they need. But we walk very softly (inaudible).

It's a tricky situation so very carefully. Sometimes it depends on the social worker because some of the social workers are (inaudible). So when they go into a home like that it's like, you know, of course you should take your son to this counselor and it will change him or that kind of thing. But I would say the majority of social workers that I work with are very open and respect. And like I said, there's a great population of gays and lesbians that I work with. I was surprised when I started work because I was so (inaudible).

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the foster parenthood experience that you and your partner have had?

A: We became foster through Buncombe County because I'm an employee there and I (inaudible) so it's a huge compliment. So we came to Henderson County to foster him. And from what we were told we were like the first gay couple that really, they'd had gay couples before but they were not out and they did not want to be out. And we were just like this is who we are and we've always been out -- not always. The time that we've been together as a couple we've been out and we will continue to be out. We don't have anything to hide, we're not ashamed. So they said OK and we were the first out couple. And they told us it may be hard, you may face things, blah, blah, blah and we knew that going

into it. And different counties DSS, department of social services, are different. Buncombe County is one of the largest in western North Carolina and (inaudible) Asheville a little more open and diverse than other counties. The other counties around here are smaller, the departments are smaller and a little bit more conservative. Henderson County is a little bit more conservative, a little smaller and so some of the social workers we ran into, it's been interesting.

I was told at one point, the first, we had two little foster girls when we started fostering and the oldest little girl was three at the time, had a lot of medical issues, extensive medical issues, and she was deaf. And we didn't know sign language so we learned sign language really quick. And her sister was two. It was a really hard case and complicated and we (inaudible) and those kids came into our life and our lives changed. Really different. A lot of things came out with these kids, more abuse than they knew happened after they'd been with us for a while. And the oldest little girl we got very attached to. We got attached to both of them but the youngest went home and came back into the system. The oldest little girl stayed with us for almost a year I think and we got very

attached to her. She was awesome. Her medical issues were so extensive and her behaviors became so extreme she needed somebody to stay at home with her. And we really wanted to adopt her. We were hoping to adopt her sister too but we knew that she was probably going to go back to her biological parents. At one point --

End file 5

A: Sometimes social workers that we foster with expect a little bit more. So she said, "We really want to put you on [standing?] court, blah, blah, blah, you'd be a great witness but I talked to our attorneys and they don't think we should." And I was ready to testify and I said why? I testify all the time at my job in and out of court, I've been trained, I know what to do. And so she looked at me, she said, "Because you're gay." I said, "What does that matter? That has nothing to do with this child, nothing to do with her neglect, her abuse, nothing to do with her family, nothing." And she said it would be an issue and their lawyer would throw that up and blah, blah, blah. I said but there's nothing there, the judge can't allow that. You know, it has nothing to do with this case. So she started throwing up all these different excuses and so finally I was just like the real reason (inaudible) testify because I'm gay and your county doesn't want to have any

protesters and doesn't want to deal with that and so it's safer for you guys not to put me up there. And so she got kind of quiet and she said, "You're exactly right." So we ran into that.

The girls, because of the medical issues and the behaviors being so extreme, they thought they would do better with retired people who were at home all the time (inaudible) those issues. So they moved and it was really hard on us because we had a really strong attachment. And now we have a foster child that we've had since he was two and half days old and we're on the track for adoption and the social worker that we have this time is absolutely great. We've been treated totally differently. So it just depends on who you get and what's going on. But I'm a big advocate for gays and lesbians to foster and adopt. So I tell people, especially if you can do it, do it in Buncombe county, they're very open, they have a lot of gays and lesbians, very supportive. It's not going to be an easy process because if you want to adopt in Buncombe County, the courts, they will stop it, they won't sign. And then our agency has to come in and take it from there, take it to a judge who will sign, who's not (inaudible). But in Buncombe County it stops at the (inaudible) courts because

they're so conservative. And it's not just gays and lesbians. If you live together they won't sign. If you're not married and you're not a man and a woman then you're not, it's going to stop, it will be very complicated.

Q: (inaudible) racial adoptions?

A: I'm not for sure about that because we don't really have a lot of those that I know of. But Henderson County on the other hand, their clerk signs it and everything's great. But we plan on doing the second parent adoption and we have an attorney, a lawyer who moved down here, because we decided we needed [wheels?] and that sort of thing, and we love our attorney. She's also a lesbian, she's well known in the community, is a great advocate. She's helped us with all of that and she's going to (inaudible) adoption we can't do it around here, we have to do (inaudible). But at least we can do it there. It's more complicated, it'll cost a lot more money but we can do it. And I've had friends, gay and lesbian, that have done that already so (inaudible).

Q: Have you found a circle of lesbian and gay friends in the area?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: How have you found them?

A: Through work and church. Through other, you know, our friends introduce us to their friends, that sort of thing. My best friend, she's straight, we met at work and she's just like my sister. I never had a friend that close to me. She's always, she's moved to Winston now but when she was here we'd go places together, whatever, she'd always be like, "Don't you have any straight friends?" and I do but, you know. And she was fine with gays and lesbians but sometimes she's just like, "Sometimes it's just all your gay and lesbian friends, dadada." We just make a big joke out of it because she is open (inaudible) she's very open and supportive. You know, she's even (inaudible) her and she's just the type to be like oh wow, you know, to be open to that. But I mean she's straight. She's married now but (inaudible) but anyway. But yeah, we have a lot of gay friends.

Q: Are you involved in any of the (inaudible) organizations and [extra?]?

A: Our church is very, it's a huge advocate for gays and lesbians, transgender people, so we do a lot of outreach and activism with the church. I wanted to be more involved with, they call it (inaudible), it's (inaudible) pride. It just started. But because my work is so intense and to have a baby in the house, family comes first. And it's

hard to, I mean I'm working today, I just came in here to do this and then I thought I'd go back to work and do some stuff. I'm on call today. But it's hard to do that. I just don't have the energy or the time. So we do what we can. I mean we're always at protests and all. We attend the pride stuff that they've got here every year. It's one thing about Chicago was the pride parade. I miss it so much. But we try to do as much as we can. We're not as involved as we want to be but we just, family comes first and we do what we need to do.

Q: Have you found any lesbian and gay parenting groups? Or do you go to other types of parenting activities?

A: We found one when we first moved here. We didn't have any kids then but we knew that we wanted kids. And we didn't get the right feel, I guess you'd say, from the group and since then I think the group's kind of disbanded. But we have a lot of gay and lesbian friends that have kids. And since we've just, and we're new parents, we're kind of making that transition from having friends that are coupled with no kids or friends that are single no kids, so now we're working through that hard transition, having friends with kids. And it's not easy so we're (inaudible).

Q: Given your age, I know you just (inaudible).

A: (laughter) Yeah, well that. My ten year reunion
(inaudible).

Q: Were you out at that point? Were you newly out?

A: Yeah, I was newly out. I wasn't with my partner then. In college my big buddy in college is from eastern Kentucky. (inaudible) and he's gay. I was the first one he came out to. He was brought up in a Pentecostal church. He has a horror story to tell about that. But I brought him to my school reunion. It's not like I was, I wasn't out at that point with any of the people there. I was out with my family and stuff. When I go home to Virginia and my small town I know how many family struggles with it and I respect that. I don't have to live there so I don't go around, I think (inaudible) everybody (inaudible) come out. Duh. You know, so it's not that I hide it. If somebody asks me then I will share (inaudible) but I don't go around proclaiming it from mountaintops either. But I have to say since Facebook has come out I've got a lot more connections with my friends from high school. I really don't, I mean we're not good friends now, it's just somebody I connect with on Facebook or whatever because we just don't have a lot in common. But I would say a lot of people in my hometown know now because of Facebook. So I'm (inaudible). I feel like my mom and dad, they had their own coming out

process and my brother and they need to (inaudible) that (inaudible) together with my son now it's going to (inaudible) that much more out, because we're not going to hide. We want to be healthy and not (inaudible).

Q: Have your parents or mom ever asked you --

End file 6

Q: -- down when you're back at home?

A: I've always, I don't deny who I am. My partner, ****, on the other hand, she's out and she has a harder time not proclaiming it. She has a harder time not being demonstrative affectionately with me when we're out. Just because of who I am, I was brought up you don't, you know, no public displays of affections. So I don't always do h. and JB does and she has a harder time just overall. But now with our son we can't hide it. He doesn't talk yet but I'm mama and she's mommy and so, but nobody at home has ever said don't do this or don't do that.

Q: Some of the bigger broader questions that we're asking people, trying (inaudible) between rural life and urban life and also urban and rural Appalachian life. Because you all live in what I would consider to be urban whereas Boone, where I live, (inaudible) thousand people. So it's a lot different type of a situation having grown up in a

rural Appalachian town. What would you consider to be the big differences impacting LGBT life?

A: I couldn't live in my hometown because I couldn't be who I am there. You know, I think JB and I could probably move back there. I mean one, there's no jobs there for us and the jobs that are there wouldn't pay as much as we get here. But I mean it kind of evens out because it's more expensive here. But anyway I'm sure that there would be some people that would (inaudible) and other people are just, I think, live and let live. But we would always be kind of the sore thumb. Because I know there were some gays and lesbians back there. And it's funny because sometimes, like my cousin's wife, she's in the school system and one of her friends is a lesbian and she has a partner and they live back there and teach school but not everybody knows. It's one of those things. It's just oh, these two women who live together and they just happen to have a kid (inaudible). You know, they pass, they do what they need to do. because (inaudible) in Chicago, everything that's happened to me in my life I will never be able to go back to that small town and live and be happy (inaudible) at this point. If the small town changes, then sure. And it is changing little by little but it's just not, you know, the racism, the heterosexism, homophobia,

all of that is there and is raging. So it's just not GLBT, it's all of it. And part of it's just education. They do what they do (inaudible) just like my -- the funny part too is people that my mom goes to church with, a lot of those people will come up to her when she's (inaudible) and say (inaudible) is gay or my (inaudible) is gay. And it's like they're ashamed but all of a sudden they know somebody else has somebody in her family. So it's like oh, she's got one, let me go talk to her. And it's kind of nice that that's there. I feel sorry for my mom kind of because I feel like she's just this lone ranger type person and she's willing to stand up for me and my family but she doesn't have the support (inaudible) out there. There's no real other people that will back her. There's more people (inaudible) saying your daughter is going to go to hell. And that's the sad part. So no, I can't raise a family there.

Q: You said earlier that it was changing. What is influencing that change?

A: I think the media. I mean when I was growing up you didn't have Will and Grace. You know, like Pedro on MTV, all of that. I never had any of that. Of course you have some news every once in awhile but it was usually somebody had AIDS and they were dying. The media is huge. I think it's

people that are gay and lesbian, GLBT people, that are coming out more, saying this is who I am, saying I love this place, I love my family here, I want to be here, that feel like that they can be strong and be out and not necessarily be afraid. I mean I suppose they should have a healthy fear because you never know when a bubba's going to come up and do something. But it's just the age that we're in.

Q: (inaudible) wanted to talk about something that happened that was really good or something that wasn't very good that characterizes the area or (inaudible) in your life?

A: I can't think of anything off the top of my head. I mean I've already talked about the church experience and how painful that was. I mean it's been good and bad, you know? That's just the way life is. I've got to say because I've come out and accepted who I am, and it's always a process, I have to do it every day, but I'm stronger and I'm happier and I'm whole and I want to live that way. And I want to help other people live that way too. And I'm not against people being in the closet. Sometimes I have a hard time with it because I don't completely understand it but I know that we've all got choices and if that's their choice then I respect that but I wouldn't be able to do that. So that's what I (inaudible) and I want to advocate for my

people. You know, we talk of family and it is, you know, I learned that, that sometimes that family's all you got. So (inaudible) strong.

Q: Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

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