

INTERVIEW WITH LESLIE COTHREN

Q. This is Michael Howell from Appalachian State University and I am with Leslie at Leslie's home, so I am going to ask Leslie to introduce himself and tell us a little bit, a little bit more about yourself...maybe your age. I know you're from North Carolina, so how you ended up in Morganton. That kind of thing—where, how, where you migrated from, how you ended up here and, then, we'll just sort of go on from there.

A. My name is Leslie Cothren. I am 35 years-old and I'm originally from Taylorsville, North Carolina. I've lived in North Carolina all my life. About three and a half, to four years ago, I moved to Morganton and I moved here because I met my partner, Mark Patrick, and I moved in with him. I've stayed in North Carolina mainly because of my family and my children.

Q. Mmm. Okay. Alright. So, definitely I want to come back and, and talk with you in a couple minutes about meeting Mark and, and settling down in Morganton...so, and I want to ask you about being married, too, but let's move back just a little bit. So, which I think may lead us into some of this. Leslie, when you think back on it now, how would you say that you first came to really think about your sexuality or come to, to understand all that?

A. It was...probably...middle school. I just remember being on, like, the school bus...field trips, riding the bus to school and hearing the other guys talk about girls and crude stories about, about being around girls and stuff and I just never felt the same. It always kind of excited me to hear about them talk about, about being with girls, you know, about themselves, but never really had any kind of feelings for girls or women, never, never—it just never felt the same as what I felt like they were feeling.

Q. Umm hmm.

A. And I, I can just remember...I really don't know the age I was, I was, like, probably 14, sitting in a Lutheran church, in Taylorsville, with my parents and seeing a man walk in that I knew from the community, and just thinking, "Wow. I'm gay." I

mean that was like, like a, a brick, a ton of bricks fell on me and just all of a sudden it was like, "I'm looking at him and I really like what I see. Oh my gosh, I'm gay."

Q. Umm.

A. And, and I don't even know that I really knew what that meant at the time. It just—I knew that I liked what I was looking at.

Q. Umm hmm. How old were you then?

A. I'd say 13, 14.

Q. Hmmm.

A. I think I was probably a little bit, a little bit of a late bloomer, somewhat, when it came to, to any kind of sexuality.

Q. Hmm.

A. I think I really tried to repress, repress the feelings I was, I was having, honestly.

Q. Hmm. Well, thinking back now to Taylorsville and, I guess, and your family as well, what were messages that you heard about gays or being gay when you were growing up?

A. Wow. I can't...I can't say that I really ever heard anything terribly negative from my parents. I mean my dad just never felt like he would be the accepting kind of person for, for anything out of the, anything out of the norm. I can remember conversation about other race, races and things, so I just kind of grouped the homosexuality with, with the other prejudices I felt like he had. And the funny thing about that is that he is the most accept-, one of the most accepting people in my life, now, now that he knows. But, at school there was just always a negative connotation. I mean anytime anything was bad, the guys would say, "Oh, that's so gay," or, you know...There was just always the, the—I guess the peer pressure. That, that was probably the worst thing, thinking that I was so different from everybody else and that they were gonna find out and they were gonna treat me bad and that kind of, that kind of thing.

Q. Hmm. So you said you sort of tried to repress it, so how, how did you do that or how did you try to fit in as a kid?

A. How did I try to fit in? I, I was shy. I still am. So, it was easier just to kind of slink into the background and not be noticed. In P.E. in middle school, I just would get into a corner and change clothes so I wouldn't see anybody else and nobody else would see me. That was always very traumatic, was being in the locker-room with, with other guys cause that's where all the, a lot of the negativity spilled out.

Q. Umm.

A. As far as other ways that I tried to repress it, just kind of kept myself, I mean I always kept myself hidden and just didn't—wasn't out there, wasn't social or anything, but I just...I tried looking at pictures of girls, thinking that'll change me. I remember buying a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition and, and just trying to make something happen with, with the *Sports Illustrated* and I thought, "You know, oh wow, I can actually do this." [Laughs] But it, it never really worked, but I, I just had this kind of grand plan in my, in my mind, you know, "Mom and Dad are gonna want grandkids." There's...there's issues, you know, I got, I got to be the family person, I've got to provide children for my, for my parents to have grandkids, and I've got to do all of these things just to be "normal."

Q. Umm hmm.

A. So I kind of just developed a plan of, "Okay, I'll find a female. I'll find, I'll find a girl and try, try to make it happen." And, so, I had, I had a friend, Amy, that we went to the prom together and I guess, when, when we get to that point where we talk about the fact that I got married, it was all just, just a sham, really. I mean I just did it—I used her, more or less, for-to try, to try to look normal.

Q. umm. Okay. So, this would have been while you were still living in Taylorsville-

A. Yes.

Q. -and younger. What happened when you, I guess, when...you went away to college? Or, what did you do after high school?

A. After high school I went to CVCC-

Q. Okay. Alright.

A. -Catawba Valley Community College. So I didn't actually go away, I still lived at home.

Q. Okay.

A. And then I did, after, after I was already married I went to Lenoir Rhyne [University] usually in the evenings-

Q. Okay.

A. -so I never "went away" to college. I really feel like I probably missed out in a way in that, in that experience.

Q. So, how, how long out of high school was it before you got married?

A. I was 23 when I got married.

Q. Okay, so just a couple of years out of high school.

A. And I had never had, up until my wedding day, I had never had a sexual experience with anybody.

Q. Wow. Wow. So, did you marry Amy?

A. Yes.

Q. Oh, you did. You did marry Amy. Okay. Alright. So, but you sort of knew going into it that you really were feeling strongly, that you were gay-

A. Absolutely. I knew that I was gay when-

Q. Yeah.

A. -I was-I mean, just like I said, I was probably 14 in church when I realized that I was gay and, I mean, I knew from that point forward that-

Q. Hadn't worn off in those years?

A. [Laughter] It had not worn off-

Q. *Sports Illustrated* couldn't, couldn't do it, huh?

A. *Sports Illustrated* could not do it.

Q. [Laughter] Okay. Well, what was that like, then, being married?

A. Wow. I mean, I just felt like that was the answer.

Q. Hmm.

A. I just knew that that was gonna be what "fixed" me.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. I don't...I don't really know, I mean it...

Q. Were you...were, were you and Amy both particularly religious growing up?

A. She was definitely religious...*is* definitely religious.

Q. Okay.

A. Her family are members of the Church of God-

Q. Okay.

A. -and my family was always, have been lifelong members of Friendship Lutheran Church in Taylorsville. And, so, my parents were, were religious, not *devoutly* religious. We, we read the *Bible* some, we went to church on Sundays, but that was pretty much the extent of it. I felt like I was forced to go to church a lot though.

Q. Ahh. I got you. So, during this time that you were dating, cause it sounds like you dated quite a while, then, before you got married-

A. Umm hmm.

Q. -so that, that there wasn't any pressure about sex or anything would really sort of fit with being from religious families.

A. Right.

Q. So it never, there was never any question about, maybe, why you weren't initiating, or if you weren't...

A. Right. Right. We, we tried to initiate and she would always kind of get "the cold feet"-

Q. Uh huh.

A. -and use the religion and the family to, to get out of it, I guess. [Laughs] But, yeah, there was not any terrible pressure to have sexual relations.

Q. Okay. And, so, how long were you married?

A. I was married for-when we finally got divorced-about 10 years.

Q. Wow. That's a long time.

A. From the time I was 23 until...I think I was 32 when I was divorced.

Q. Wow. And you're 35 now?

A. I'm 35 now.

Q. Gosh, you haven't been "not married" for very long, have you?

A. [Laughter] Right. Yes.

Q. So...so, then, Leslie, how did things go being married?

A. Everything, everything was fine for a lot of years. I never had any kind of...performance issues.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. I mean it was always there in the back of my head: "I want to be with a guy." The internet, of course, is very helpful in that respect when-

Q. Hmm.

A. -she wasn't around and...I would look at books in the bookstores and things. I would always try not to get caught.

Q. Mmm hmmm.

A. But the internet was, kind of my savior, I guess...or the demise of me, [Laughs] whichever you want, however you want to look at it-

Q. [Laughter] I don't know, you'll have to tell me. [Laughter]

A. -from whoever's, from whoever's perspective you're looking at it. If you're looking at it from Amy's I guess it's the demise of our relationship.

Q. [Laughter] Okay.

A. But marriage was fine. There were a lot of issues that were not related to homosexuality.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. She had a lot of issues keeping a job and, and that always caused some stress. There was always money issues that caused stress on the relationship so, in the end, though, it was me coming out of the closet that, that ended our relationship.

Q. Hmm. Okay. Before you go there, though, and talk about that, if you don't mind, so, so you have children.

A. I do.

Q. Okay. How many children do you have?

A. I have nine year-old twins-

Q. Nine year-old twins. Wow.

A. -a boy and a girl. Lauren and Christian.

Q. Okay, alright, awesome. And, you, they live with you and their mom? Is that right?

A. Right. They're about 50-50 custody.

Q. Okay. Alright. Okay, so yeah, you had your kids before your marriage ended so

A. I had my kids when I was 25.

Q. Twenty-five. Wow, yeah, I guess. So I'm terrible at math so that makes sense.

A. [Laughter]

Q. Well, okay, so, how did things lead to you not being married?

A. Okay, I was at work one day. Amy, Amy had a lot of health issues and she would be in and out of the hospital a lot with some health issues that she had. And I remember, specifically, her being in the hospital and I was at work one day and I had a hidden, a hidden e-mail address that she did not know about on yahoo.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And I had restarted my computer and I had Yahoo Messenger automatically open up on my computer at work and I didn't realize that that was happening. Don't ask me how an IT guy doesn't realize that-

Q. [Laughter] Yeah.

A. -Whenever it started up, I didn't realize that Yahoo Messenger was open and Yahoo Messenger and that e-mail address was how I connected with the gay world. And I had a co-worker, a lady, come into my office and she wanted me to help her ship a Fed-Ex package and she came and stood over my shoulder while I was typing in the information for the package and an e-mail message popped up about...well, it was from justusboys.com-

Q. [Laughs]

A. -and the subject had something to do with gay men. And, you know, I tried to play it-and I know that she saw it clearly. It kind of appeared at the bottom in a bubble and, because I had Yahoo signed on. I tried to kind of play it off as junk or whatever but I, I-as soon as she saw that she just walked away from standing behind me and went over the the front of my desk and sat down in the chair while I finished the package. So I knew that it had made her uncomfortable.

Q. Umm.

A. And I felt that she wasn't buying my explanation. So Amy was in the hospital at that time and I remember going to the hospital that evening and just sitting there and contemplating "Oh my gosh. Okay. Somebody knows. Somebody knows. What am I going to do?" I was just in kind of "damage control" at that point. I didn't want to hurt Amy even though I knew that our relationship was hurtful just from the basis of it. I didn't

want to hurt my children...just a whole line of things that I was trying to fix and so I sat there and I stewed on it and stewed on it, but when she finally came home like a day or two later, I just sat down and had a conversation with her.

Q. Mmm.

A. And I initially told her that I was gay in that conversation and this was 2005, in September, 2005. And we tried for-and I said, "Okay, Amy, I'm gay. I really don't think that I can make this relationship work any longer." But she was determined. She said, "No, you're not gay. You haven't had any trouble-you haven't had any issues in the bedroom. You haven't had any issues being with me or whatever." So, I kind of said, "Okay, well, maybe I'm not gay, maybe I'm bi-," you know, but I still liked looking at men. So over the course of 200-, from September, 2005, until September, 2006, we kind of looked at men together. [Laughs]

Q. Oh, wow.

A. We discussed, you know, we discussed me we would see in the mall or out on the street or whatever and we looked-I'm sorry, Amy, if you ever see this, we looked at gay porn together-

Q. Uh huh.

A. -and she, you know, she tried her best. She really did.

Q. Huh.

A. And I give her props for that. But it just, it just never worked for me and I still wanted that connection with a man that I didn't have and you can look at all the pictures and stuff that you want to, but it's just not the same as being able to actually put your arms around a man.

Q. Hmm.

A. I've-it was just like this-for me, it's something about the strength and the masculinity of a man that turns me on. You can't get that from a picture. So, in September of 2006, a year later, I went back to Amy and I said, "Amy, we have got to work out a plan here." She did not have a job at the time-or she had a part-time job at the time. I'm sorry. And I said, "We've got

to work out a plan so that you can become self-sufficient and I can leave and pursue my own happiness and maybe in the end, we can both be happy." So I told her again, in September, 2006, "I'm gay. I've got to get out." And I gave her, like, a deadline. I said, "Okay, six months from now, I've got to leave. I've got to move out, so prepare." And...October came, October 2 of 2006, I was at work and she called me. She was supposed to go on a job interview and she called me and said, "I'm sick. I can't go on this job interview." And, it was just kinda like the--every job interview or something like that she had--she was always--there was always a reason she couldn't go, almost like she was stalling.

Q. Hmm.

A. So I kind of, at that point, attacked her via the telephone, and said, "Amy, it's over. I mean, you've got to, you've got to decide that you're gonna, you're gonna help yourself cause I'm leaving." And I was ugly, of course, I was mean to her and told her I've got to get out of here. So, after I was so ugly, she said, "Okay, well just don't come home tonight." And, I took that, I took that opportunity and I did not go home that night. I went home to an apartment that--during the course of that day I went and leased an apartment and moved that evening after I got off from work I moved just enough furniture of--out of our home together to be able to survive in an apartment.

Q. Wow.

A. Did I move too fast there?

Q. No, no, no, no, no, not at all, but that's, that's something. And, so, how did you handle the kids?

A. The kids, actually, I took them that, that evening. We both sat down with them and said, "Okay, Mom and Dad have issues...adult issues and we're not going to be able to live together anymore." So, they were six at the time and I guess they didn't grasp it.

Q. Hmm.

A. So I wanted to make sure they were okay with what was happening as best they could be so I actually took them with me

to the apartment to show them where I was gonna be living, and how they could visit me, and, and set that up. They, they handled that pretty well. They're pretty resilient little creatures.

Amy and I decided on a schedule in 2006 of when they were gonna be with who and we haven't deviated from that schedule.

Q. Wow. It sounds like you and Amy have worked things out pretty well.

A. No. [Laughter]

Q. Okay, I could be *wrong* in that. [Laughter]

A. No. For some reason every once in a while we'll be e-mailing or talking on the phone and "You did this to me" will come out. "I can't believe you did this to me and I can't believe that, that you don't still love me and..." I try, I try my best to only communicate with her in regards to the children, mainly communicating via e-mail because that takes the emotion out of things and...Unfortunately, she still does not have a job. So, I mean, there's, there's a lot of issues there but we, we deal with, we deal with one another only in respect to the children.

Q. Mmm. And, so, do the kids understand now?

A. The kids do understand now. They're gonna be 10 in August and, probably, almost a year ago, together—I, I had been hearing things from them like [sighs]. They were talking about other kids saying, "Such and such is gay" at school, or whatever, and I had just heard little things like that from—when I heard them mention something about their mom saying that "Dad is gay." And I didn't want Amy to own that. I wanted to own that myself. I wanted to be the one to tell my kids "I'm gay" and I wanted to be the one to explain it to them, so, together—I don't remember the date, but it was about a year ago, together, Mark and I sat down with the kids and I explained to them that we were a couple and I explained to them what that *meant* and told them that—explained to them what "gay" was, even though they already kind of had this preconceived idea in their heads about what it was, and I also told them how to deal with any kind of hatred that would come their way from the fact that Mark and I don't hide

and that we're openly gay and that people at their school know that we're openly gay.

Q. Hmm.

A. So, I told them just to avoid confrontation if they hear something or somebody, you know, makes negative comments to them that they need to tell me immediately, tell their teacher immediately, or just remove themselves from the situation, not, not to start any kind of argument or anything over it because I- They're gonna, they're gonna hear negative things.

Kids are cruel. So, I just want to make sure they stay safe and that this is not an issue for them anymore than it already is going to be.

Q. Hmm. Well, so, you moved out, you leased the apartment. What was it like for you to adjust, then, to being a gay man?

A. It was almost an immediate relief. I had this freedom that I had never had to be myself. And, in the same, at the same time that I told Amy, the September, 2005, time-frame, I also made a point to tell my mom. And, I had, I had that conversation with her. She was very upset. Her immediate reaction was, "What did I do wrong?" "Why are you like this?" And, and then she just kind of- She was sick the day I told her what happened. It seems like everybody's [Laughs] sick when I tell them, but I don't prey on sick people. I really don't. [Laughs]

Q. [Laughter]

A. She was, she had stayed home from work that day and I just had gone to her house, not even to tell her this. She lived right next door to me, to me and Amy, they-I, I, I had family land-

Q. Mmm.

A. So, I just went over there to talk with her and I felt like the time was right, for some reason. I just... "Mom, I'm gay. That's why Amy and I are having trouble."

Q. Mmm.

A. She knew, I had told her before that, that there were issues and I was gonna leave...and, and "I'm gay. This is why we're having trouble. This is why I'm gonna leave." And, so, I, I don't know how I got to that. I'm sorry. Going back to the apartment, it was just a-an immediate feeling of relief 'cause I was out.

My momma, my mom knew. I never told my dad in person. She got— Mom actually told him. I asked her to because I was terrified of how he was gonna react. But, he says now that "I always knew anyway"— He said, "I knew you never talked about sex the way, the way normal guys do."

Q. Were you an only [child]?

A. No. I have a, I have a four year older brother.

Q. Okay. Hmm.

A. So, I was out. I was not proud at the moment yet. I was just *relieved* that everybody that was close to me knew. No one at work knew at that point—I—they just knew that I was having issues with my marriage.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And, I was kind of like a kid in a candy store, I guess.
[Laughs]

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. It was just a—it has continued to be just a great feeling to be able to be myself.

Q. Wow. And, so what's it—you were still in Taylorsville?

A. Yeah.

Q. What's it like to—

A. I moved, I moved—I did skip that, I'm sorry. When I moved out of my apartment, I worked in Hickory so I moved from the house with Amy to an apartment in Hickory.

Q. Oh, okay. Well, then, I'll ask you this way: What's it like to be a gay man in Hickory, then?

A. [Laughter] Wow. There's not a whole lot...[Laughs] There's not a whole lot going on in Taylorsville, Hickory, Morganton, any of the places that, that you can express your sexuality-

Q. Hmm.

A. So I didn't...I, I, I've always had the kind of, the fear in the back of my head that somebody's gonna be ugly to me. I don't really fear for being a hate, having a hate crime against me or anything. I've never had that fear. I just...I *don't* like confrontation and I don't want people to, to find out that I'm gay and hate me immediately because of it.

Q. Mmm.

A. But, really, there's not a huge gay life in the, in the area. Of course now, looking back over the past three, four years, I've connected with a lot of the community and know a lot of the community now. So, it's—in that respect, it's great. There's a lot of us here.

Q. Mmm hmm. Mmm. And, and so, you actually found that in, in *reality*, but during your marriage you were sort of connecting to that through the internet.

A. Right. Right. And through, like, Gay.com, where there were local chatrooms—that's probably part of the catalyst for me coming out as well because I *did* meet some local people on the internet. I never met them in person-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. I just met them on the internet and knew that they lived in the area. So, I mean, that was, that was helpful as well, knowing that there were other, there were others out there in the same situation-

Q. Okay. Alright.

A. -Not the *same* situation, but other gay, gay men to connect with and be friends with and find that community.

Q. Mmm hmm. So, how did you, how did you end up finding it then in Hickory?

A. It's taken a long time for me. Meeting [laughs], meeting Mark. I left, I left Amy on October the second, 2006, I met Mark on October the twenty-sixth of 2006, so I didn't waste any time.

Q. No grass grew under your feet!

A. [Laughter]

Q. How did that happen?

A. We actually met on...a...gay website.

Q. Uh huh.

A. I guess kind of a sex-

Q. Okay.

A. -website. We [Laughs]...I guess I was supposed to be a one-night stand and I never left.

Q. [Laughter]

A. I didn't know...but it...

Q. And...so, then, Mark was your *first*...assumedly...?

A. No, there were, there were, there were others from October the second to October the twenty-sixth.

Q. [Laughter] Oh, okay. We can [unintelligible...maybe "skip this if you want"]

A. Remember, I said...okay. Nah, I don't mind, I was, I was a kid in a candy store-

Q. Hmm.

A. -you know, from October

Q. Well, I *thought* that might be what you meant, but I wasn't sure.

A. Yeah. I don't know how far, I don't know how far you want me to go-

Q. It's *your* story.

A. [Laughs] Okay. But, I mean, there were, there were definitely sexual encounters between October the second and the twenty-sixth when I met Mark.

Q. Well, so, I mean...in retrospect, then, prior to Mark, so was it, I mean...did you find in that what you had always thought you would find in that? I mean, when you were now with a man..so, you know, so it was...that different?

A. Oh yeah. Yeah. With, with the first guy that I was with, there was, for me, there was an *extreme emotional* connection immediately. For him, I'm pretty sure I was a one-night stand. But...it was...yeah, it was exactly what I had always hoped for, and dreamed about, I guess. It was, it was great.

Q. Well, okay. And then Mark, Mark comes along *very soon*.

A. Yeah. So, I did meet Mark on...[Laughs] it's Bear411-

Q. Oh, ahh! [Laughs] Yeah, I'm gonna ask you about the bears too.

A. Alright. Bear411.com and we, we just kind of chatted online. He had these pictures of...*masculinity*...up of him in a canoe and him on a motorcycle and him on a four-wheeler. You know, everything that *screamed* "masculine" to me and we, just, set up a date-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -at Fatz, of all places. He actually held my hand under the table the first time we met. You know, you can't really-

Q. Ohhh.

A. -At *that* time we weren't gonna hold hands across the table and he was *definitely* not out and I was newly out. So, we were both very...still reserved and we were in Morganton. He, he's lived here-and you just gotta-we just want to be careful that we don't make a huge statement right away, but went out for dinner then it kind of went from there...just found a, a real *connection* with Mark-

Q. Wow.

A. -completely opposite. Everything, everything about him is everything I'm not. He's loud and boisterous and, and not, not shy...very, very extroverted and I'm very introverted, so...he's, he's pulled me out of my, of my shyness a lot...helped me connect, helped both of us connect a lot with the, with the gay community from around here and Hickory.

Q. Was he...so I'm...no...you said he wasn't quite out yet, at that time, right?

A. He was not out at all.

Q. Okay, alright. So I was gonna say, did he pull you into the community? But I guess you all sort of had to find it together.

A. We found it together.

Q. Okay. Alright. Wow. And so, let's see, how long ago has that been?

A. We met October the twenty-sixth 2006-

Q. Two thousand and six. Okay

A. So, three years, eight months. [Laughs]

Q. Well, that's great. Well, congratulations.

A. October the twenty-seventh, I'm sorry. His birthday is October the twenty-sixth.

Q. Oh, okay. Alright. And then...now you live together...and how, how long was it until that happened?

A. I was...I lived in my apartment from October the second till some time in January of 2007, so...three or four months until I moved in. I mean, I really wasn't in a financial situation to have an apartment and have kids and still maintain Amy's household as well-

Q. Right.

A. -cause I'm still doing that. And I'd like to say we fell in love that, that quickly. I grew on him, I guess. [Laughs]

Q. [Laughter]

A. We wanted to be together but a lot of it was financially motivated at the time. And that's the story that we used with his family, because his family thought-

Q. Were you "the roommate?"

A. I was the roommate.

Q. Oh. Okay.

A. I was the "down on his luck, out of work"—not out of work yet, that came a little bit later, but—"guy who needed help" that was a friend of Mark's from college.

Q. Wow. Hmm. Okay. Wow. So, okay, again, another big *change* for you again. So, what was it like for you, sort of, setting up house with another guy?

A. It was what I wanted...it was perfect. It was *everything* that I truly had dreamed about was, was coming true in this very short period of time...which also plays with your emotions a lot 'cause you're like, "Can this really be happening?" And me being—I'm very—like I've said, I'm shy...my—I have very low self-esteem, just from trying to hide myself for so long-

Q. Hmm.

A. -so it's hard to grasp the reality that that was actually happening. And that something that I wanted for so long was actually coming to fruition and coming true for me.

Q. So, what, what were the challenges that you ran into?

A. The challenges were this house only had two bedrooms and I had nine year-old kids—not nine, sorry, however old they were then—six, seven year-old kids...nowhere for them to sleep.

Q. Hmm.

A. So, I mean, and at my apartment, I really hadn't—I only could afford a one bedroom-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -so I had said, "Okay, I have kids but they're not with me very often-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -even though they were fifty percent, I kind of lied on the apartment application because I couldn't afford a two-bedroom. And they were going to force me into a two-bedroom if they were with me any period of time and, so, I had already actually purchased an air-mattress that the poor things were having to sleep on when they were with me and just used the air-mattress in the bedroom of our-in the floor of our bedroom for awhile until we purchased a sleeper sofa and then they slept on the sleeper sofa and then we, we actually added onto the house later on.

Q. This house?

A. This house.

Q. Oh, okay. So, was there any challenge with two guys in the neighborhood or-

A. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Q. How has that gone?

A. Yeah, yeah, and I'm sorry, I got off on a tangent there-just the kids.

Q. It's okay.

A. There were lots of challenges. His family was a challenge...still continue to be a challenge...the neighborhood challenge...he's really close to our next-door neighbors, he actually calls them "Mawmaw" and "Pawpaw" even though they're not related, but they've been, they've been great. They've never said anything about us, but some of our neighbors across the street have, you know, been, been "weird" around us.

Nothing, nothing major though. I mean people here in this particular little development are not, just are not...we don't communicate that much. Just our next-door neighbor we communicate with and we just now told them, probably three months ago, that we were a couple and, even though obviously, they knew but they, we've had, we've had no real issue of that.

Q. That's good.

A. But his family do continue to be an issue and that was, that was one of the challenges of living together. Finances are a challenge of living together. Me having children has been a huge challenge for Mark.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. He's a teacher that's never had kids so he doesn't understand how to pull himself out of the teacher mode to be a parent. But, he has done a great job, even still.

Q. He, he also has an ex, then?

A. Yes. Yes.

Q. Hmm. Wow. Lots of challenges. What about with living in Morganton as a couple, being out in Morganton? Is that ever...problematic?

A. It hasn't been really. [Laughs] I mean there's nothing to do here. We go out to eat. We go together. People look at us weird. You know, here are two gay, two gay men that, I mean, we're too fabulously dressed-

Q. [Laughter]

A. -to NOT be gay men. I mean we may not be going into the restaurant holding hands, but we're having dinner together, and look at us-I mean, *really*.

Q. And you're not near a hotel, so you're not from a conference or...

A. Exactly. [Laughs] Just kidding... I mean, so, I mean no real huge issues. I have, I said before I wasn't confrontational, but I've become a little more confrontational as a defense mechanism, I guess. I'll see things in the newspaper, the local *News Herald* here...letters to the editor about why homosexuality's so bad and how it's destroying the moral fiber of America and, you know, I just can't keep my mouth shut anymore. I want to write letters back and explain why, you know, try to get people to look at the other side, which has caused us some issues as well. [Laughs] I actually outed us, I guess, to the community that way and some of Mark's friends and people that he considers family but are not really family-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -and that's how we got outed to them and that caused us a little bit of turmoil for, I don't know, three or four days until they got over it and finally decided that they need Mark in their life more than they cared about the homosexuality issue...as long as we don't talk about it.

Q. Mmm. Well, I know that you mentioned to me that this evening you all are going to an organizing meeting to try and develop a Pride organization down here to do something along the Pride like in other areas of the state. So that's definitely, that's a way of getting out there.

A. Yeah, I'm not sure how, how it's going to go over in this area. I'm looking forward to getting together with the other people in the community and trying to decide how we can make this happen for-it's going to be called "Unifour Pride."

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. That, "Unifour" kind of covers Alexander, Burke, Catawba, and Caldwell.

Q. Is that a common nickname for this area?

A. It is.

Q. Okay, alright. I hadn't heard that.

A. I'm not sure that I've got the counties right, but I, I believe it's the four counties-

Q. Okay.

A. -Catawba, Burk, Caldwell, and Alexander-that kind of touch one another.

Q. So, were you surprised about people expressing an interest to do this?

A. I'm very surprised.

Q. Really?

A. They, they, they're doing it on the heels of the success of High Country Pride. They felt like that was very successful and they wanted to kind of build on that for our area.

Q. Great. That's awesome. That's great. Wow.

A. It's very good.

Q. So you said you're not sure how it will go. What do you think the response around here will be from outside and inside the gay community?

A. I have a friend that I told about it that's non-homosexual...that's a straight person and he was very apprehensive about...just the fact that it's called "Pride" and how Pride apparently is a bad thing in the *Bible*, perhaps that being prideful is, is not, not something you can be and still be Christian, apparently, so..

Q. Hmm

A. I tried to explain what "Pride" actually *meant* to him and he said, "Well, maybe you should call it 'Out and About' instead of 'Pride.'" And I said, "Well, you know, everybody calls it 'Pride' everywhere so who are we to change what it's called?"

Q. Hmm.

A. So I just think that there are gonna be issues. They're gonna have to, they're gonna have to set up some safety--some way to deal with, with protests or something. I guess it would depend on how, how, how out and in the community we actually are. I mean if it's, if it's just, like having a, such as High Country having the Bingo or having symposium that's not so much in people's faces-

Q. Uh huh.

A. -then I don't think it'll be an issue, but if there's some kind of parade or a march or something then I think there's gonna be a huge issue. Too much, too much Christian-based hate in the area.

Q. Hmm. So, okay, talk about that, then, for a minute. That's probably pretty common in some areas of, of Appalachia and maybe

not as common in some places. So what is, what is your sense of the religious community's perceptions or...?

A. I considered myself a Christian up until two years ago when I started questioning because...I still believe that there's a superior being. I still believe there's a god. I just-religion, organized religion has just stood for nothing but negative for me, especially in this area. My mom, actually, last year in August, gave me a newsletter from my lifelong church, Friendship Lutheran, that was talking about how the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America had, had accepted gay people into their, into their organization and my, that church, my old church that I considered *my* church, wrote a letter back to the ELCA and told them, "We don't want to be part of this and gave all the reasons why homosexuality is not accepted in the *Bible* and "love the..." whatever the line is, "hate the sin, love the sinner." And around here, in, in Morganton, there's very few Lutheran churches so I don't, I don't know that much about it here, but the Baptist component around here is what's very, very oppressive to the community. Mark's family is, is Southern Baptist and they've used every line, every one of the...normal...scriptures that are always used against homosexual people, against us. I mean, they've actually had, he actually went to his mom and dad's house and saw them, saw them meeting with their pastor about him, you know, without him, trying to pray it out of him, or whatever. I've been a huge thorn in their sides, that's for sure. They can accept the fact that Mark is gay; they cannot accept the fact that Mark has a gay partner. [Laughs] It's like the tee-shirt that says, "I'm not gay but my boyfriend is."

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. You know, they can ignore the fact that he's gay because they love him so much, but they don't want him to be with a man and embarrass them in the community. So, I mean, it's, it's huge here and it's-

Q. Hmm.

A. It has really got, made me think and rethink Christianity. It just seems to me like so much hate comes out of, out of organized religion more than, more than love does. And to me

it's all about loving other people and accepting people for what they are and...I just don't see it.

Q. Ah. So there aren't really any gay-friendly churches or religious institutions?

A. There are some gay-friendly churches here—not here, that I know of, but Catawba County, and in Asheville, both of them are at least 35, 40 minutes away for us. But right here in this town I don't know of any, any church that says "We welcome gay couples or gay people."

Q. Wow.

A. There may be and I just haven't discovered it.

Q. Hmm. Well, now what about, just sort of, safety. Do you hear anything about it being unsafe for gays in this area? Is there any harassment or bashing stuff that you're aware of?

A. Not that I've heard of. Of course, we're not—Mark and I are not gonna go into downtown Morganton and go down the street holding hands. As long as we don't put it in their face, there's not too much, too much backlash, I don't think.

Q. Mmm.

A. I don't think anybody's really seeking us out to, to try to hurt us or anything as long as we leave them alone and kinda hide ourselves within the community—

Q. Mmm.

A. —then there's not been any issues for us.

Q. Wow. How about the school? How has that been?

A. My kids' school?

Q. Uh huh.

A. My kids go to school in Alexander County still—

Q. Okay. Right.

A. -so they're still in Taylorsville in a school called Whittenberg Elementary. It's actually been...very well received--not really talked about.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. But Mark has become a very integral part of my kids' lives and he helps with the, the education. Lauren has some special education needs and Mark is a special education teacher so he's helped me formulate her IEP the teachers and the teams at the school and...we go in [together]. So, anyway, we've been well-received in, in, in the school. He's helped me in meetings. Actually, what's this, June? Probably March, in March the principal at the school actually called me--and we had never just came out and said, "Hello, we're the gay couple-

[delete from 47:55-48:13.8 from part 1] -was this done?

Q. [Laughs]

A. -you know, here are our kids, treat them..." you know, or whatever. We never had just come out and told the teachers that--never hid it either. But I received a call in March from the principal of my children's school and I could tell she was very uncomfortable, at first, on the other end of the phone, just from her tone. You know, I had been to meetings and things with her, but never really had sat down to talk to her or had a long conversation with her, and she said, "Mr. Cothren, I know that you and Mark are a couple..." And she said, "I'm pursuing my doctorate degree and I'm in this class about diversity and we're supposed to do a paper on--or a research project on diversity in the community and how it would affect education" and she said, "I know that there are gonna be people in my class that, that pick out the Hispanic community and the other, all the races." She said, "But I don't think anyone in my community, in my class, is gonna have a homosexual couple." And she said, "I would really love to, to have an interview with you and Mark and, and just discuss what it's been like for you all." And, so I mean, it was...it's, it's been awesome. Could we get a copy of that tape?

Q. You guys are going to end up being the spokes-couple for Morganton, aren't you, by the time this is over. [Laughs]

A. [Laughter] Maybe so.

Q. So do you think she learned something from that?

A. I think that she did. She was very open with us and she told us everything that she felt like she knew. She also told us that there was a lesbian couple that had a kid in the school. So, we're not alone in little Alexander County, in Whittenberg Elementary School where there's three or four hundred kids, we're not the only gay couple... But, I'm sorry, what was the question.

Q. I have no idea now. I think you were talking about, I guess, what it's like in the community and what you've found it to, to be like. I was listening and I lost track of that one too.

A. I'm sorry.

Q. No, it's okay.

A. But, yeah, I mean, it's, it's been absolutely great at the school. No one has said a negative word at all. I could only hope that all areas of my life were like that. Teachers, I guess they're just used to diversity anyway and it's, it's been great.

Q. That's good. So, saying what you said a second ago about you wish that all the areas of your life were like that-

A. Mmm hmm.

Q. -Are there areas of your life that, because of where you live in this region, or where you live in this county specifically, that you can't fully...live those aspects or do things...? You know, is there some pressure, or has it forced you to behave or do things in some way-

A. *Absolutely.*

Q. -being around these parts?

A. *Absolutely.* You know, Mark and I have visited New York City, some of the larger cities, and we can be ourselves.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. We can walk down the street and hold hands or we can go to the clubs and the bars and, and be out. But here, I mean, we're obviously not going to the Walmart and gonna hold hands. And, actually, you know, I mentioned Walmart. We were at Walmart probably two or three weeks ago and we, we saw a, a lady Mark went to high school—he's reconnected on Facebook with—and they just stopped to talk and he introduced me and [Laughs], going back to my "You can't be this fabulous and be straight in Morganton..." We were dressed really nice. We had just come from seeing [the musical] *Wicked* in Charlotte so we were dressed nice. And we were standing there talking to her and right beside of us were, were these four teenagers, three boys and a girl, looking at the posters and one of them came right out and said, "Oh, that poster is so gay" and, you know, we just whatever, you know, we don't say anything to them. There's no sense in, in trying to, to create conflict, but as they walked away I overheard one of them say, "You silly faggots, don't you know there's a disease for you?" or something like that and I knew that they were talking about us-

Q. Umm.

A. - I mean, obviously they had stood and had mentioned the poster just because they saw us standing there. Again, we're not, we're not trying to hide it and Mark had introduced me to his high school friend as his partner and they were standing there, so, I mean, they knew that we were gay, and they just...But we let them go. [Laughs] I mean, there's no sense in us...I would love to try to change somebody's opinion, you know, but why, why am I gonna go out and specifically try to, try to cause conflict? You know, as long as we kinda—I don't want to say we're staying in the closet in that manner, but around here we're—as long as we keep a low profile and we don't, we don't put it out in people's faces, we're okay.

Q. Do you think that's pretty typical for people who are gay and lesbian down here?

A. I do.

Q. Do you know of really out people?

A. I mean, we're all out...

Q. Right, but, like *really out*?

A. Really out and living loud ...I mean all the friends that I have that are gay are not...none of us are hiding it but I, I don't know anybody, any of the couple friends that I have that would walk into the, any Walmart, and hold hands, whereas, in New York City—Even in Asheville, we can go to Asheville and walk down the street and hold hands, but not here. It would be asking for a bashing, I think. In my opinion.

Q. Hmm. So what, what is it that keeps you here? I mean if it weren't for your kids—

A. That's it.

Q. —is there something that keeps you in North Carolina or in this area?

A. Nothing. Nothing. Just my kids and my family. I mean Mark, Mark didn't want to move away from his family. I don't think there's anything holding him back now except for me and my children. If it wasn't for my kids and their proximity to my mom and dad and their proximity to Amy, I'm sure that we would possibly move somewhere else.

Q. Where would you go?

A. I don't know.

Q. In your perfect, in your perfect world.

A. We have discussed moving to Asheville.

Q. Uh huh.

A. I mean, it's more open. It's just we both like the mountains. We both love Asheville because it's such a beautiful city. But to get completely out, it would probably be a bigger city. You know, maybe an Atlanta or something like that, but he, Mark is not going to move to a city because he likes the country life too much.

Q. Mmm.

A. Me, on the other hand, it's, it's solely about the kids and my family.

Q. Mmm. But what is it that living in one of those places would allow you to do that you can't do here?

A. Just, I mean, there's so much more to do, so many more people to connect with and...just the opposite of what you all were talking about at the symposium and High Country Pride, but just so much more...life to be had in a place where we don't have to go, you know, kinda... "Are they gonna see us" if we, if he brushes my hand or...and I really don't think that Mark would live that way and not—He wouldn't care to walk into Walmart holding hands 'cause he's just like that, he's out—*finally* out—and he's finally over the, the, the...trivial stuff of being in the closet and he doesn't care what people think. If he was shy, low self-esteem—I do care what people think still and that's one of my weaknesses.

Q. Hmm.

A. So, I mean I think it would just give us a—a larger place would just give us more freedom to be who we are—

Q. Mmm. Okay.

A. —and maybe learn more about the culture and other people. I'm not sure.

Q. So, yeah, it's hard to know. In different areas people feel differently about that. One of the communities that you might find larger, in a larger place that we've talked about already, is this "Bear" community and with Bear411 that sort of is a way of tapping in to that community, so...You're the first person that I've had the opportunity to talk with for this project, sort of around that community, so I—Can you talk about that just a little bit?

A. Sure. An explanation of what it is?

Q. Yeah, sure, that would be great. How would you define it?

A. I guess in the gay community, there are different subcultures of, of, of people. There are "bears" and there are "twinks" and bears are the hairy, bigger, meatier, meatier guys, and of course there's the "bear chasers," the, the guys that...other bears or "cubs..." I mean, just "bear" brings to mind the, the

bigger, the hairy...I guess the hairy aspect is really what made people call them, call them "bears." But, unfortunately, I have to identify as a bear because-

Q. [Laughter]

A. -[Laughter] because of my size and because of my, my hair. It was with great...caution...that I accepted that label.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah.

Q. Is that more about the community, or is that more about what it says in terms of "norms" for...?

A. Nah. I think it was more about the community. I didn't want to be perceived, I mean, gay life is all about-unfortunately, a lot of gay men are only interested in, in young, good looking men-not a-lot of people don't seem to be interested in--

Q. You mean "twink-y" kind of...

A. Exactly. The twinkie, no-just smooth, muscular, jockey...

Q. Muscled...

A. Yeah.

Q. Yeah, I got you.

A. ...guys, rather than the beer belly, [Laughs] the hair. I had trouble accepting that I was *that*, that I was that label, but once I found out that, you know, through Bear411...

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. Actually, it was my first sexual encounter in October of 2006 that the guy that I hooked up with said, "You're a perfect bear."

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. He said, "You should check out Bear411."

Q. Oh, so you hadn't found him that way. You had not come across that yet.

A. I had not.

Q. Oh, got you. Okay.

A. I met him on Craig's List.¹

Q. [Laughter]

A. [Laughter] So, in my head I'm so ashamed. [Laughs] I hope my mom don't see that. But I found him on Craig's List and he just said, "You should check out Bear411. I think the guys in there would really like you" and so I created a profile so I guess A.R.'s really responsible for me, me meeting Mark because I met Mark on Bear411. But it's just...a label, another label-

Q. Hmm.

A. But now that I have seen there, there are people that truly are, guys that truly are attracted by other bearish guys and, and the cubs, you know, the smaller, the smaller guys that identify with bears, and the bear chasers-

Q. The "otters."

A. The otters, exactly. What is an "otter"-less hair? Is that what it is?

Q. Big, tall, skinny-

A. Skinny. Skinnier bears, I guess.

Q. Yep.

A. Skinny, hairy.

Q. The Ally McBeal of bears probably.

A. [Laughter] So, but, yeah, I had heard of otters before but I was having trouble connecting that in my brain. But since I see that there's a whole community that kinda revolves around that, it's okay. I, I've come to accept another label more in my life...besides gay.

¹ Craig's List is a free online site to locate multiple local services, people, jobs, and organizations. Some individuals use it to locate dates.

Q. Well, I noticed when I met you, you were wearing the, the necklace that had the bear paw.

A. I still, I still, this—I don't know if you can see it or not, but this one has the bear flag on it-

Q. Oh, the brown and, got you-

A. -The bear rainbow flag. So I do, I have, I have kind of grown, grasped that now, and accepted that and...it just, I guess, kind of gives us another community to feel a part of.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And Mark identifies as a bear as well.

Q. But there's not really an *active* bear community right around here now, you're saying.

A. There is. There's Carolina Bear Lodge, but I think they just kinda go out to dinner maybe once, once a month or something and we've never really had any success connecting with that.

Q. Is that the Hickory group?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay.

A. They go to Golden Corral. [Laughs] Can't roll my eyes far enough there, but...our schedules are just so crazy. I have my kids a lot through the week... and my kids know I'm gay; they know Mark is my partner, but as far as any kind of display of affection or anything, going to any kind of Pride event, I just don't feel comfortable taking my kids because of their mother. If she found out there would be a huge backlash, you know. She may try custody stuff with me and I just don't want to go down that road so...I let them know who I am; I let them know that I'm out but as far as us being able to go to any kind of, like Carolina Bear Lodge or anything through the week, a lot of time it's, a lot of times it's impossible because I have the kids.

Q. Mmm.

A. So we haven't really connected around here other than through Bear411. We've made some friends that are, that consider themselves bears as well.

Q. Okay. Let's see here. Well, I've asked you quite a number of questions. You've, you've answered a lot of stuff I wanted to ask you about too, but what else do you want to talk about? What else do you want to talk about with your story, Leslie?

A. Gosh. I don't know. We've covered so much. I mean we've covered—I've talked for way more than, way more than I expected that I would be able to. I don't think that I have that interesting of a story, so...other than, I think there is acceptance out there. Even here, you hear so many bad things but there's so many more people that are, that are willing to—you know, "I know somebody that's gay," that are willing to come into that and still be friends with us. We just actually reconnected with another high school friend of Mark's. We saw him—I mean he lives like three minutes from us and we saw him at a gas station not too awfully long ago and Mark introduced me as "my partner" and, I mean, he's the typical redneck. You would never expect that he would be okay with that but he actually has invited us to go to the lake, you know, and do things with him and his girlfriend. I mean, I think that people are becoming more accepting but you still have the, the, the extremes, the extremes of any, any...I guess religion, maybe are, are the problems, and those people are—the squeaky wheel always gets the oil. You, the louder—those people are louder than the people who accept.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. So around here that's been my experience anyway.

Q. Okay. So I guess this sort of need to, to protect yourself, does that sometimes mean we assume the worst of people?

A. Absolutely.

Q. Yeah. Hmm.

A. Absolutely. It's always a scary thing if you've been around somebody for a really long time and, and you think, "Okay, now's the time." They're gonna, they're gonna know, finally gonna know

that I'm gay. How are they gonna respond? I always assume the worst, you know. I assume the worst, hopefully best. I always go into a situation where I'm gonna out myself to somebody thinking "Okay, I may lose this person."

Q. Mmm.

A. "I may lose something because of this." So, you know, I mean, I always assume the worst.

Q. Has, has it—I hate to take us in another direction again but something I did come back to...Has it been an issue around work?

A. Not at all.

Q. Good, okay. Because you're out at work, aren't you?

A. [Laughs] That's a funny little story. Yeah, I'm, I'm definitely out at work. I was like...four, four days after I got my job or something—Mark and I always talk to—he, he works in the school system, you know—

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -so he would call me when he went to lunch.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And I was, I was at lunch one day, working, and he was at lunch one day, and I was still working--'cause I don't really have a set lunch time that I take and my new boss was sitting there beside of me and Mark called me on my, on my cell phone and, you know, you don't expect somebody to hear a conversation on a cell phone but if you're right beside of them, I guess—I was the stupid one for not moving but Mark was making all sorts of inappropriate—

Q. Not a whisperer, is he?

A. [Laughter] Not a whisperer. Mark doesn't whisper.

Q. [Laughter]

A. He was making all sorts of inappropriate comments to, to me about my new boss—

Q. Ohhhh! [Laughter]

A. Yes! "What does he look like?" "You said he has red hair. Would you, would you...?" do this and that with, you know, and he was being more, very much more descriptive than I'm willing to be right here-

Q. [Laughter]

A. -saying all these *sexual* comments and undertones and stuff and-

Q. That must have been uncomfortable. [Laughs]

A. It was very uncomfortable and he knew it. Mark knew that I was uncomfortable.

Q. Oh, he *knew* that the boss was there?

A. Yes!

Q. Oh, I see. Oh, I thought...

A. And he knew I was uncomfortable because I wasn't responding-

Q. I got you. Okay. [Laughs]

A. -and you know, I would say, "Yes, umm hmm. Yes, Mark. Yeah, that's nice. I think I'm gonna go now, okay?" and as soon as I hung up the phone my boss just turned to me and said, new boss, like four days, he said, "You can tell him that I heard every word that he said." And I was like, "Gosh, oh my gosh! Okay. Is that okay?" [Laughs] I said, "I'm sorry. I apologize for him. He's at lunch. He didn't know..." whatever, you know, so and-I was in Winston with my boss so I had to drive back to Burke County with him and we didn't really talk that much about it but the- you know, I thought about it that night and I explained to Mark what happened and he said, "Well you really need to, you really need to kind of patch that up and make sure that everything is okay." And I just went back to him the next day and I said, "You found out something about me yesterday by accident. I apologize for what happened but I just want to make sure that you're okay with me being gay." And he said, "Yeah, I don't care as long as you do your job and do it right." You know, why, why would somebody say something like that? I mean, I'm the same person, I

hadn't changed so of course I'm gonna do my job, but there—when I—that was about the same time that I was coming out to everybody as well. So, I mean, that was 2007-ish when I discovered that they're—my company is very open. One of our policies, actually, is inclusive to sexual orientation, so it's, it's a great company to work for. There are a lot of other—it's in the mental health field—so there are a lot of other homosexual people working around in the company as well. I'm actually in the IT. I don't have anything to do with mental health stuff but a lot of the people that are in that field, it seems—a lot—in my experience there's a good number of homosexual people in that field as well.

Q. Okay. Alright. Yeah, didn't mean to take us back around but I wanted to ask about that. Alright, so I guess I do have one last question for you.

A. Okay.

Q. You have said a couple of times that you're a little bit on the shy side—

A. Mmm hmm.

Q. —just sort of, really putting your foot out here, into the water, so to speak. Why, why did you want to do this interview?

A. I don't know...I've got a deep *desire* in me now that I have made this leap, I'm out myself, and have come out and found how rewarding it's been for me and fulfilling it's been. I've got this deep desire in me to make sure that this doesn't happen to other people.

Q. Mmm.

A. And I, I've, I have...I have lived a great life and...have great friends and my family's been very accepting. I don't know, I just feel *blessed* to finally be able to be who I am. So I don't see any reason why I need to continue to try and hide it.

Q. Mmm.

A. You know, and if, if just by doing an interview like this if it was to help somebody else to, to deal with what their—to deal with coming out, that are having problems with it, I would, I

would like for them to see it and know that it can be okay. I don't know, I really, I really want to do *something* for the community and I don't know what that is yet. I haven't found it. Maybe the Pride meeting tonight, I don't know. I just feel a desire to help the community somehow, the gay community.

Q. Well, that's great.

A. And help this area to, to learn acceptance, like with the editorials and the letters to the editor-

Q. That's quite a step right there.

A. Yeah. It is.

Q. I mean that's, that's...yeah, good advocacy.

A. [Laughs] I don't know. I just, I just need to do something.

Q. Great.

A. I don't know what it is.

Q. It'll find you.

A. I hope so.

Q. I think it'll find you. That's great.

A. So, I mean, if this is, if this is part of it, that's, that's great and I think this is a wonderful project.

Q. Well, thank you.

A. I'm very inspired by it.

Q. Well, good, well thanks. And I think your story is going to be inspiring-*entertaining* and, I think inspiring, too.

A. [Laughter]

Q. So, I appreciate you, you deciding to contribute an interview. I think it's gonna make a very...positive contribution to the collection.

A. Well good, good.

Q. That's awesome.

A. Thank you.

Q. Thank *you*. Okay, so, how's that?

A. That's great.

Q. Alright. [Laughter]

howellml

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