L. Coutant

Q: Today is February 3, 2010. This is Kathy Staley with Linda Coutant. And how I usually start is asking the demographic questions. And then stop and check. OK. So, could you give just a brief overview: name, age, where you were born and raised?

A: Sure. My name is Linda Coutant. And that's C-O-U-T-A-N-T. I am 42 years old. I was born and raised in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. West of Knoxville. Lived many years in Johnson City, Tennessee, and then came to the North Carolina mountains in 1994.

Q: So you're from Oak Ridge.

A: Yeah. Do you know people from there?

Q: Yeah, I have a real good friend and she's -- I don't even know how old she is. But her family were snake handlers. And yeah, it's really fun talking to her because she's a lesbian and she has gender variancy as well, and yet she has maintained this very traditional Appalachian belief, you know, when she was living up here, she once a month would go to the church and drink strychnine and handle snakes. And -- yet, she has this partner that she's been with years and years and years. And she's a biology major and she says, yeah, I'm having this really big religious

struggle because I don't believe in evolution but I do. Oh, gosh. She really had -- yeah.

A: I don't think I know her.

Q: She's probably my age.

A: How old are you?

Q: I'm 38.

A: Yeah, four years difference, that could mean a lot as far as here we are in school and whether our paths crossed.

Q: Right. And I think her sister was younger, so you wouldn't have even been connected that way. OK. So you grew up in Oak Ridge, which is also in the Appalachian Mountains. So, I was wondering how did you first learn about homosexuality in general. When growing up?

A: In general. Well, I think within myself I was aware in kindergarten. I was very attracted to our student teacher who came into the classroom and I remember I'd get kind of nervous if she was standing near me. But as far as whether there were others out there, I don't really remember when I first learned of it, but I do remember being about six years old and being on a canoe trip with my family and some other community members and there were these two women and they were on the trip. They were older. Of course, at that time, they may have been at most 50. But they rode back in the car with us, back into town, and I remember

being very fascinated by them. And I knew there was something different about them. And I knew there was something in me in them. But I don't think I could have necessarily identified it. But I very well remember that moment of riding in the car with them and it was a VW Bus. I was actually sitting on the floor looking up at them and -- long before seatbelts. And yeah, I had this awareness, and I thought there was something different about them and I could tell that they were special to each other. And then, I guess, in elementary school, kids would talk to you about fag and all that. It was very much a male awareness, I think, when the term homosexuality was understood. I remember, for some reason, my mother commenting -- and I don't know how this conversation got started, but she said, yeah, men try to get each other pregnant through their rear end. And, it was an odd way, I thought, to explain it. But for some reason that had come up in conversation when I was young. But I guess, by junior high, I knew that there were lesbians, but I didn't know any and for a long time I thought that I was the only one. Even though I didn't talk to anybody about it or act on it, I knew that I was different in that way and I knew I was attracted to other girls, but I didn't really have an outside context of --

are there other people in Oak Ridge who are gay and do they get together and hang out. That was totally foreign to me.

Q: Were you hearing things through the media about like Billie Jean King or, I guess, Martina [Navratilova] was around at that time coming out.

A: Yeah, I remember Billie Jean King coming out, but that was with some drama with this woman in a wheelchair and I remember sensing judgment in other people about this and that this really wasn't OK. And there was something that felt uneasy within me to hear about that. I remember I would have that mix of excitement and embarrassment when a made-for-TV movie would come on and it was about two lesbians. I can't think of the actress's name right now, but she starred in one. I remember wanting to watch it, but also being afraid that my mother would realize what I was watching and there would be implications, then, about me.

Q: Did your parents talk about it or any community members? Church or school? On a less condemning than saying fag and --

A: Yeah. I think it was talked about in our church, which was very progressive. You know, Oak Ridge had a lot of scientists in it. These were very-well educated people. Our church, you know, mirrored that. And so while they

were very socially aware people as a congregation, we talked about it as a social issue, but again, it was never really like a personal issue and that same couple that I mentioned having been on the canoe trip, one of those women did go to our church. And so I always suspected, but she never really came out and was a role model. I think I lacked role models growing up. I must say that -- because the type of community that I grew up in, it wasn't like a religious condemning attitude about homosexuality. It just wasn't really talked about. Or, if it was talked about, it was on an intellectual level. But yeah, these people exist, but no names and faces are really coming up.

Q: Right. And you were probably in high school when Rock Hudson came out.

A: Yeah. The whole AIDS things started when I was in high school. But, I guess I didn't really identify with him so much because he was a man. I identified more with Billie Jean King, but that was when I was a little bit younger and hadn't quite come to grips with what was going on inside me. Just that it felt weird to hear about on the news.

Q: And then you went to college in Southwest Virginia.

A: Yeah. Emory and Henry College. It's a small, liberal arts school. There were about 800 students when I was there. It was very small. Methodist owned and operated.

(laughter) I didn't come out in college. Some people did and it was met with, I guess maybe a mix of hostility and, "how dare" you kind of thing, and kind of freakish. You know, these people were really different. They weren't really welcomed as part of us. Diversity wasn't celebrated like it is now.

Q: How were they different? Like in their dress or were they just interpreted by people?

A: Oh, interpreted by --

Q: OK.

A: Yeah, thanks for clarifying that. No, they seemed very normal, and it was interesting. There was a group of us -- we're all very close friends. We all came out after graduating. Some of us -- well, I should say some of my other friends; I had gone at this point -- they had come out like their senior year. But it was interesting. It was like, oh, he's gay, she's gay -- oh my gosh, no wonder we were all such good friends. (laughter) We connected, but we didn't really understand on what level and in what way. So, that was interesting. And as we were able to mature a little bit and see things in a clearer vision and hindsight -- but, you know, the only people who were really out were either the female basketball players who were very butch and I guess in some ways not real likeable. I mean,

we didn't really connect in other ways. So those were the only people I saw as out lesbians and I didn't connect with them. And so, yeah, I didn't -- I didn't want to be like them, which was a self-condemnation I'm aware of now, but yeah, it wasn't really a safe place to explore that side of myself, which was good in a way in that it kept me focused on school and academics and I did very well. I was an overachiever putting lots of energy into being a good student and being a campus leader.

Q: And then you moved to another Appalachian --

A: Yes.

Q: -- area.

A: My first job out of college was in Johnson City, Tennessee. So I moved back from Virginia to Tennessee and that's where I did have my first relationship with a woman. And I was so excited about that. It was kind of like, oh, now I can be me because no one knows me. Yeah, I didn't have this past or some sort of campus reputation to keep up or anything, so it was kind of like a clean slate and I could start fresh. And, yeah, I had a job where I worked night shift -- this was at a newspaper and so there were other people who also worked the night shift, and as it was custom, you worked 'til deadline, go out for a beer, or go to someone's house and hang out and talk for a while and go

to bed at like 3 a.m. So it was a very social kind of work environment. You know, we were young. We could stay up late and so in the course of mixing with lots of other young people I did meet a lesbian on staff and, yeah, we started dating each other. And it was kind of this awareness of, "oh my gosh, there are other people like me." And she had friends who were lesbians and suddenly this whole community emerged, which I had never experienced before. And it was nice. It was eye-opening in that it wasn't what I had assumed a lesbian community might be.

Q: What had you assumed?

A: I had always thought that lesbians were somehow independent and self-sufficient. So it was a bit of a surprise to realize that my assumption didn't ring true and I was seeing co-dependent relationships. Things that I had totally stereotyped as being heterosexual and realizing, but from an immature standpoint and a judgmental standpoint that these types of relationship issues are universal. So, yeah, I was disappointed in a way. I wanted lesbians to be strong woman. And independent. Self-sufficient, which is how I had been up to that point. But I was also stuffing all these other things and letting independence kind of take dominance as I compensated for weaknesses in other areas. So, you know, it was a mix then -- that excitement

of finding community, coming out, but then realizing, oh, this isn't what I thought it would be. (laughter)

Q: How do you think living in the Appalachian region, when you were having your relationship, definitely, but possibly as a college or high school student, how it affected your development of your sexual orientation?

A: Well, I definitely think the church played a role, or maybe I should say my perception of the church. You know, I went to a small Methodist college and I was actually Presbyterian or raised in a Presbyterian church. So, in some ways, I didn't know that much about Methodist theology, but it seemed rather conservative in that this wasn't really mentioned or talked about. So, I think from that age, you know, 18 to 22, I was formulating that the church doesn't view this as OK. God doesn't view it as OK. And viewing God, of course, as separate from me at that point, I was always judging -- judging me.

And of course, it's a rural area. These were cow pastures all around the college campus. And, yeah, I think again there was this assumption that a rural community is going to be kind of backwards. Not real accepting. Although I didn't really have much proof of that, except for within the college campus myself when my peers were not accepting

classmates who came out as gay. And then in Johnson City, there was actually a big gay community, and there was a very large gay bar. In fact, in the five years that I lived there, there were as many three gay bars at one time. And, each one was a little different as far as the clientele and what they provided there as far as entertainment. But, that's pretty significant and so it was an interesting mix, then, too, of this rural conservative area. You know, fundamental Christianity with a lot of out people.

Q: But how would you describe "out?" I mean, is it the out where they would be wearing shirts and acknowledging to everyone in their life or is it the out where you play on the softball team and you're assuming that everyone realizes because you're on the softball team that you're a lesbian?

A: Yeah, out in the latter sense. There would be women playing softball. Men going to the bars. But in the workplace, it wouldn't necessarily have been talked about. Although where I worked, we did have a very high number of gay people, all the same age. So we had our little clique. But I would say probably universally, most of those people weren't out to families. The gay bar was a safe place. I remember there was a group of girls who would come down

from Southwest Virginia who were coal miners. And they lived together. I mean, they were very much a couple, but I don't think they really acknowledged that except in the gay bars. And, Johnson City was kind of a hub for Tennessee, Virginia, and I guess to a degree, North Carolina, too. So you had a lot of people coming from outside of town to have a safe place where they would be out.

Of course, there were some people who were very out in Johnson City in that community. We had two different nonprofit AIDS groups. And, as a newspaper reporter, I was plugged in with them and was covering the issue quite a bit. So I knew people that way. But, I also know that there was a lot of prejudice against these nonprofit AIDS groups and it was my job to cover the nonprofits in general for the newspaper I worked at. And so I spent time with these people going down there and I had a health situation where I ended up being out of work for about six weeks. And it was interesting when I came back I was hearing rumors, "Linda has AIDS. And she got it from going down to that storefront where they help people with that." And, you know, that's not how you get AIDS at all and my health condition was not at all related to that. But it was

interesting the jumps that people would make in their minds and these were some of the locals, you know, who worked at the paper. They worked in different departments than where I was. Generally, blue collar type of departments. But yeah it was interesting that they were talking about me that way and it was weird to be talked about. I had never really had that experience before.

But, I did for the paper write a series of newspaper articles about AIDS in the church, which was very enlightening, and I won an award for it and I had someone tell me at Johnson City's first gay Pride weekend event that I, as a writer, made such a huge difference in the gay community there, through that article and other articles that I wrote bringing attention to AIDS in the gay community and how people were responding, and it's really kind of neat because I never thought about it that way before. I mean, I never thought about myself as advancing the gay cause (laughter), but I did, just through my work. So, that was neat, and it was kind of neat to be acknowledged that way I guess. It's like, "wow, I made a difference?" I guess I did to some people anyway. But they did have a gay Pride weekend.

Q: What year was that?

A: This was like ‘94, ‘95. So yeah, in some ways, that was kind of early to be doing that. I remember there was a young man in my neighborhood who dressed as a woman. And of course, he dressed as a woman at the gay bar, but then I would also see him walking the streets. And I don’t mean that as -- yeah, just walking the neighborhood. And apparently he lived with his mother and his mother and her friends all accepted him as living as a woman.

Q: ~~would~~ Would you classify him as transgender or was he more of a drag queen?

A: I’d classify him as transgender. And he’d wear lots of make-up and carry a handbag. So, there was that kind of acceptance, which was surprising. But it was all kind of within the family I guess. I think what I’ve come to learn is that so much of what we fear the reaction from other people is merely the projection of our own fear and self judgment because when I’ve come out, really come out, not just to my family but to my co-workers and community, I don’t find any prejudice. People are very accepting, but I think I had to first go through the process of accepting myself and truly loving myself for who I am. And, yeah. And then that is mirrored back to me.

Q: Right. I wanted to go back to what you were talking about with the three gay bars and find out a little bit more about what they were, and their names and location. Were they like Charlotte (North Carolina)'s gay bars back in the '70s were in the not-safe sections of Charlotte? Was it also in the poor sections of Johnson City and how would you compare the bars, I'm loading lots of questions here I realize, to other larger cities of less-rural cities?

A: OK. Well, I guess in many ways, gay bars in the cities I've gone to and the ones in Johnson City were not that different. Of the three in Johnson City, there was New Beginnings. That was the largest. And I guess it's still there. And it used to be billed as the largest showbar in the southeast. And yeah, they had two drag queen performances every Friday and Saturday night. You know, three or four queens at a time. The other one was called the Meat Rack. (laughter) And it was more of a dancing, you know, shoot pool kind of place. The other one, I think may have been more of a lesbian bar, with pool tables and maybe a dance floor, but no great soundtrack like New Beginnings. I mean, New Beginnings had the lights. (laughter) The everything. And it was the biggest of the three, so that's where most people would go. There was some criticism that the family that owned it knew that they

had a monopoly so there was what we considered a high cover charge, especially then on like New Year's Eve, and it's like, as gay-friendly as they are, and their one son at least was gay, we also kind of felt like they were taking advantage of the population. They knew that we really didn't have many other places to go. They were it. So they were making a killing. When I say it's a large bar, it would probably hold 500 people. And it was located in North Johnson City on North Roan Street, which was a main, business drag. It was just a couple of blocks from the mall. And, it had one of those marquis signs, you know, with the flashing arrow and it was kind of hidden behind a fence and it was sort of a nondescript building, so just driving by you probably wouldn't notice it, if you were a straight person. But we knew it was there.

The Meat Rack had a more prominent sign. So did the lesbian bar. I think it may have been called Triangles. And it actually had a triangle as a tall sign outside the building, which was pretty bold at the time. But it was kind of like Johnson City as a community knew they were there and kind of left them alone. You know, all of Johnson City had a crime problem when I was there and I can't really say, though, that these were in particularly

seedy parts of town. I mean, they weren't the suburbs. They were either in downtown or the main shopping strip. But again, you know, compared to gay bars, say, in Richmond or Atlanta, I found pretty much the same things. The accents may have been a little different. (laughter) The attire may have been slightly different.

Q: Right. But the soundtracks and --

A: Yeah. The drinks. All that was the same. The purpose of hanging out.

Q: How has living in Appalachia affected how you behave with regards to your sexuality in terms of how you behave with your partners and --

A: Well, I guess moving here in '94 was a bit of a shock in that there wasn't a gay bar culture. The socializing in Boone was far more private and, I guess, intimate. Pot lucks and gatherings in people's homes and you had to meet people to introduce you to people to then get invited to parties, just as any group of friends would do.

Q: Was that difficult for you as a single woman?

A: It was. Yeah. And I was 26. So I was kind of caught in that age between the students and between the professionals. So even if I were straight, I might have a hard time adjusting. But yeah, where do you go to meet gay people. There's really not a place in Boone, so it was a

bit of a challenge that way. And also I was in that age where I was coming out of the party scene. And I had stopped drinking for health reasons and that created a different set of parameters, I guess. Who do you hang out with and what do you do when you hang out. That kind of thing. But I think as far as like going out with people, again, I may have in some ways assumed the worst about a rural area when that really wasn't true. It does seem like, though, even then, I did notice that the people in North Carolina were a little bit more open than the people in Johnson City, Tennessee. And I didn't know if it was a different type of university than ETSU [East Tennessee State University]. Because, I mean, Johnson City was a college town, too, but they were two very different universities.

Q: How would you compare them?

A: I'm not sure what the politically correct way to -- how I'd describe it at the time is that Johnson City was just more redneck. People in North Carolina seemed a big more refined and aware of cultural differences. But, yeah, I guess I was still hesitant at that point to hold hands in public, even in Boone. And I think it was a matter of being self-conscious. There was some degree of being judged or discriminated or having something said to me.

But it was also just not being full accepting of who I was. But now, at 42, and being partnered and having had long-term girlfriends prior to the relationship I'm in now, I really don't have a problem with holding hands and I just am who I am and that's where I'm finding that people don't really care. I don't think everybody is watching me at a restaurant, whether I hold someone's hand or not, or reach across the table and touch them during dinner. Those things just don't bother me anymore. So I'm not expecting it to happen. I'm not expecting the criticism or prejudice. But I think, too, there's been a great resource in the lesbian community now, in the 2000s, since a particular couple had come into town from Florida and really galvanized the social networking here.[1] And I think they've been great role models in showing when you have love and fear and you don't expect something bad to happen, nothing bad will happen. So just be yourself and basically people don't care. And so that's how I've come to live and I think it really does make a difference. So, there are a lot of gay people in Boone. (laughter) We may not dress like gay people in other cities or have the social structures, you know, gay bar cultures, but we're

[1] See interviews with Carol Quintero and Laurie Weiner.

definitely here. And I think people are in very strong acceptance of that.

Q: Do you think that the locals are aware of the size and breadth and scope of the lesbian community and the gay male community, but that's a bit of a different creature.

A: Yeah. I don't think if it's in their awareness, they're really going to see it… I don't know. Again, when you say local culture, do you mean people affiliated with university or outside of that? Outside?

Q: Yeah, outside of that. Like when the women chat groups and the dinner groups go into public accommodations, are people aware that that's who this group of 10 to 20 women --

A: I think -- well, we usually get put off in a separate room. Not because we're gay but because the size of our group, which would happen with any large group. So I don't know if people are really so much aware of us being there except that we might be a little loud. The wait staff, I'm sure, know. But we really have not had any problems with that because we also tip well. I think in large part, people aren't really aware about what goes on around them, and in terms of where they go socially, you know, a rural church, they may not have someone go there who is gay, which means they're not going to see them there. That's a really good question. I guess I haven't thought about it from that

perspective too much anymore, because I'm very comfortable in my own skin and it's kind of like, you come into that awareness that we're all one anyhow. Those differences just kind of slough off and I don't think of them as being barriers. I don't think of there **being** barriers.

Q: Yeah. A lot of people at [Appalachian State] university also aren't as well connected with what's going on in the non-university world. It's very easy in Boone, I think, to surround yourself by a group of accepting people.

A: Yeah.

Q: And not be connected at all with the people who would have problems. Unless you have a child in school or you are a member of some civic organization.

A: I'm a member of a very progressive church here in town that's very open and affirming to gays and lesbians and transgender individuals, too. It's called High Country United Church of Christ. So, yeah, I'm not even running into conflict there. So, yeah, I mean, from this point in my life and at this age, I can say rural Appalachia is very accepting of gays and lesbians.

Q: What would you consider to be the biggest differences then between rural and urban? But you really haven't lived in a non-Appalachian urban area, but you've probably traveled some.

A: Oh yeah. I mean, I've traveled to, I guess, almost every state in the nation and I visited gay friends in cities. I've gone to parties with them or gone to bars with them. It's funny. I guess it's just probably the biggest difference is where you go to meet other gay people. Is there a physical building that you can go to? In cities, there are always the gay bars or even gay coffeehouses. I mean, there are so many businesses that you can actually be segmented like that. I mean, Baltimore, a friend of mine took me to a gay coffeehouse and deli and that was unusual. Yeah. You don't have that in a rural area if you only have one or two coffee shops period. I would say that that's probably the biggest difference.

Q: You had mentioned earlier in terms of moving to Johnson City that no one knew you there. Could that also play a factor in the whole rural-urban difference?

A: Yeah. Mm-hmm. You mean, how I perceived it? Yes. It would be my perception.

Q: Because I've talked to people who grew up in Watauga County and have stayed here and their concept of what they can do within the community at large is different than what you're describing. This particular person is more concerned about how he behaves because he doesn't want it to circle around

all these people that he's interconnected with peripherally.

A: Yeah, and I guess -- do you fear the people that you know? I've gotten to a point now where I don't. I have heard someone say, and this was a woman who is probably in her late 40s or 50s, who grew up here all her life. She said, there's no way you can be out in Boone. Well, I know a lot of people who are out in Boone and they do very fine. They don't get fired from their jobs. But this woman, I think, believes that you will and if that's what you truly believe, then that's what you'll experience regardless of your belief and whether you're gay or straight. Yeah. (laughter)

Q: So, I wanted to ask a couple of things related to your work at Appalachian. You came here in '94 and that was around the time they started the gay student organization (SAGA) -- started painting the tunnel for Coming Out Day and then every day after Coming Out Day, it would be painted over with slurs and it increasingly became more violent and was targeting individuals. And I was wondering, as a person who was an employee, did that ever affect your world?

A: Not really because it seemed like there was a disconnect between the student population and the employee population and I don't even think I was aware of that going on. I

work in public affairs here at the university so we're promoting the university and of course we focus on the positive and not on the controversies unless they're getting picked up by the media and I don't think that particular case was. I don't think that I would have ever felt threatened. I think I felt as a professional, I don't need to be discussing my personal life. I did have a situation where other staff members were kind of making jokes about what they perceived as my homosexuality, even though I didn't cognizantly, consciously come out to them. (laughter) I was invited on a double date by a co-worker and a friend of theirs from church and I really wasn't interested in this guy who worked somewhere in town. I mean, even if I were straight, I don't think I would have wanted to go out in the situation. And so I declined and I said, I just don't date men right now. And it was funny that I felt like she could take that however she wanted. Either I just went through a bad break-up. You know, I'm just not dating period. But she took it as that I date women, which was an interesting conclusion. I wasn't expecting that. And apparently she said something to a co-worker which was overheard by a gay co-worker who then came back to me and said, "you know, they're kind of making fun of you." Oh really? I didn't even really come out to

them. But, I do remember trying to keep my private life private, just because I'm private by nature. Going back to your original question, I don't think what was going on with the students was really affecting me as an employee. And I didn't know students to be sharing that kind of information with me either. What it was like to be a gay student. And I, never having been an out student in college, wasn't really seeking them to have that kind of shared experience. I mean, I wasn't really used to be involved with a gay organization, so it was not like as an employee I was seeking to be an advisor or a mentor or something because it just wasn't part of my awareness.

Q: Right. I was wondering how you perceive the acceptance level as an employee. And I realize things kind of changed in the 2000s, so if you could compare your first six, seven years, and then when we started getting more activity on campus in the 2000s.

A: Yeah. I think it's very different. There does seem to be a greater acceptance and maybe I'm also aware of more gay employees. Like I said earlier, I came in at 26. I didn't really identify with gay people who were in their 50s who worked on campus. But then suddenly, when I hit like 30, there were young PhDs coming and getting jobs on the faculty who were gay and openly gay and I think it was

through their being here, they suddenly were taking an active role and forming things, like the gay faculty-staff group, and then building up the student groups and then building up the academic side, you know. I think it's amazing that we even have an LGBT Center now, compared to how it was 15 years ago. I think, too, probably with any organization, the old conservatives leave. You know, they retire out. They pass away. I think people are more accepting in general and these people are now coming into greater leadership roles at the university, so I think it's becoming more accepted from that sense. Because it's just the right thing to do. Now, I certainly value and appreciate all the work that went on behind the scenes to makes these kinds of things happen. Some people were really working hard when I wasn't really talking openly about being gay. So I really appreciate the work that they've done. It's helped all of us. But yeah, I would say it's definitely more accepting now on campus than it used to be. And I think that's reflective of probably a greater social acceptance of diversity, too.

Q: Of all forms of diversity you mean or specifically with sexual orientation?

A: I'd say with sexual orientation, yeah.

Q: What about gender identity? Has that changed in your experience?

A: Yeah, I think certainly -- I guess it's interesting how the gay experience has grown to encompass gender issues and transgender individuals and I know of several, well, a handful of transgender students, and we wouldn't have seen that, I don't think, 10 years ago. I don't know as a society in general if we would have 10 years ago. I think, as people talk about that more and young people more fully embrace the ambiguity of their gender, then we're all educated and are forced, maybe, to be more accepting because they're here.

Q: OK. I know that with your work with the news bureau you have written articles about LGBT issues. Not dozens or series, but you have written about it. I was wondering what has been the response of colleagues and the readers.

A: Oh, yeah. Well, for many years I was editor of the alumni magazine, *Appalachian Today*. So I saw it as the magazine's responsibility to report on all activities of the university, not just those that were deemed acceptable by however few or a conservative majority. So over the years, I had included coverage of the Queer Film Series and the LGBT Center and, you know, I wasn't pushing an agenda as a lesbian who was in charge of this publication. It was just

campus news. But I do remember getting a fair amount of negative feedback about a story -- it was actually about Women's Studies. The Queer Film Series just happened to be a brief mention as part of the larger Women's Studies activities on campus and I had a few alumni either call or write and complain that they can't leave their *Appalachian Today* on the kitchen table because their high school son is going to read about Queer Film Series. How dare you put that in my alma mater's magazine? So, yeah, and then that prompted a discussion within my division, my higher ups, well, why do we even put those things in the magazine if we're aware that it could create some controversy and that people are going to stop giving money to the university because they're upset. And so, yeah, I was privy to conversations where administrators, you know, mid-level administrators were saying, "I find it disgusting, too, but that's what is deemed a legitimate program within our university." And I was like, well, what a shame if you find that disgusting, but it's a part of the educational process to bring films to student's awareness. So, yeah, I guess in some ways I've received far more cutting remarks through my work than on a personal level.

Q: Have you felt constrained by the administrators in your division as a lesbian, specifically? If they're making

comments like this, are they making other, not maybe so direct comments.

A: You know, I had a boss for a while who had said a couple of things, which at that time I interpreted as demeaning and kind of pointed towards the gay-lesbian population, and I never knew if he knew I was gay or not, so there was always this, what did he mean by that, and I should have just asked him, but I didn't have the wherewithal then. I don't think it was ever personal. It was more, like I said, people were concerned that if people got -- administrators were concerned that if readers and donors didn't like what was happening on campus, they would withhold their money and therefore it's my responsibility then to help make sure they keep giving money by the information that we share with them. But coming from a journalist standpoint, I wasn't going to withhold news that we have a Queer Film Series or that we've created an LGBT Center out of fear that someone is not going to give their $1,000 or $5,000 or whatever. And it's interesting because in the time difference between the article on the -- and again, it was an article on Women's studies that mentioned the Queer Film Series, to the time that we announced the LGBT Center, I didn't get any negative feedback on the LGBT Center, and that was a difference of maybe seven or eight years. It

was just kind of a non-story. I mean, yeah, and we even had the rainbow flag as our graphic in the magazine. That was far more out there than what we had done with Women's Studies and the Queer Film Series. (laughter)

Q: Well, to flip my question, have you received any support or encouragement from your co-workers or supervisors to include more information about LGBT issues?

A: Yes. I'm trying to think of a specific example.

Q: Or readers.

A: I haven't heard many comments from gay readers. I mean, I know they're out there but they haven't been real vocal in support. I think there are some key administrators like in the Equity Office that were very thankful, you know, grateful -- thank you for putting that in the magazine. That really helps a lot. And they were both gay and straight. I think the chancellor was very pleased. Chancellor [Kenneth] Peacock was very pleased with the LGBT coverage. Prior to that, I think the feedback we'd gotten about the Queer Film Series was kind of a thorn in the side to the previous administration, but I never -- let me clarify that I never had any direct negative comments from Chancellor [Frank] Borkowski related to that issue at all, either personally or professionally. It was more, I guess, the people around him. But yeah, I think people generally

have been supportive and sometimes the support is measured by the non-response, because when people are upset, they're going to call. When they're not upset, they're not going to call. So, if we could get something out there and nobody raises an eyebrow, then I think they're saying it was OK. [tape recorder noise] So what I was saying is I think when people don't complain, it's sort of like this tacit approval.

Q: Have you ever thought about that the terminology may have been a difference in response? Queer, which is from some people's point of view, inflammatory, and then LGBT, which a lot of people don't even know what it stands for. (laughter)

A: It's true. That's a good point. I've never thought about it that way. And I guess that raises the question of we as a gay community chose to embrace the word queer, but people who aren't part of our culture probably still view it as a derogatory comment, one that they even may have created. So yeah, I guess in some ways it is inflammatory. I never thought about it that way, but when we had the headline, "LGBT Center opens on campus," maybe most readers didn't even know what it was. And if you don't know what a gay flag is, you wouldn't have gotten that either. I think --

yeah. That probably is very true. I don't know what you do about it as an administration.

Q: Right. I wanted to ask a couple more questions about ASU. If you think that there is -- do what is the relationship between having a liberal arts institution and then the in-migration of more diverse populations affecting the broader community acceptance of LGBT issues.

A: Well, I don't know if the liberal arts part would really have any connection, at least not as I see it. But I think, you know, the campus has certainly grown in its diversity in the 15 years that I've been here, and anytime you have people who are different from you, however different that might be, however you define that or can see it, it just, I think, increases the greater acceptance across the board. I think I forgot your question.

Q: If there's a relationship between the liberal arts institution, but this is a comprehensive university --

A: Yeah. Well, take Appalachian with 16,000 students and you compare it with where I went to school with 800, by sheer volume of people, you're going to have more types of people. And, when you have then different types of groups and clubs and centers and everything is seen and is visible, then I think it all kind of gets watered down and it's all OK.

Q: And I wanted to talk to you about the faculty staff group here on campus because you have been involved with keeping it afloat. Could you talk -- were you part of the creation at the very beginning with Jill Ehnenn and Anne from anthropology whose name starts with a K?

A: I do remember her. I honestly don't remember how I got involved. Because at some point I volunteered to coordinate the lunches and I forget how that came about. Oh, I know, I did go to one or two, it was up at the Broyhill Inn. That's right. We used to meet up there. It was Jill and Anne who organized that. And it was fun. It was a great way to network and meet people who you otherwise wouldn't have crossed paths with, and for some reason, they stopped doing it or they had just gotten too busy to schedule something and so I kind of threw out the idea, you know, that group out to get together again and they said, well, schedule something if you want, and just send out an email because I guess at that point a Listserv had been created. So I just took it on for a semester or two to kind of schedule them. But I think it kind of comes in waves, depending on who wants to take that on. I wish more people would stay involved with it. I think it's a great way to network and build a community and just -- especially for newcomers. So we are here and we're in all

different offices and it's a great way to learn the campus. If you need an in to some department, you know, call so-and-so because they're part of the group. I guess what I was looking for at the time was more gay friends. And, yeah, just a greater openness within me to meet other people and expand my social networking.

Q: How do you think that the group has succeeded or what are challenges that they've faced?

A: Well, it seemed like a significant challenge was whether we were going to be a recognized group on campus and there was an actual procedure to go through and forms to sign and officers and then it was just like, this is getting too formal, but we were also limiting ourselves by not being an organized group because then we couldn't rent or reserve space on campus for our group. So we were limited in where we could meet, so I think that probably has cost us some membership, and of the few choices we did have, places to get together for lunch, some people didn't like they so they didn't come for that reason. I think part of the problem in not wanting to organize is that people don't want to put their name on paper, which indicates there is still a fear for being out, which was kind of ironic given the people who were in the group. Oh, you'll do all of these things but you won't sign on as an officer. Yeah, I

guess that had always been kind of curious to me, but then I know that we're all busy and, yeah, I think it was a matter of time. Time commitments and how important is it really and then I guess people, once they know certain gay friends, they're content with their circle staying that way, not wanting to expand it. I still think it's a great group. I mean, I'd like to see it become more active, but I also recognize the reasons maybe that it doesn't.

Q: Do you think it could do anything else besides having luncheons and then the Listserv.

A: Yeah, we talked about connecting more with students, but then that took initiative to make that happen, and I know I volunteered to kind of get that together and I dropped the ball on it because I didn't have time. And, yeah, I think it takes commitment from all of us to really stick with it. But yeah, there's lots of potential because the group can do lots of things. We've talked about funding scholarships. It's a great idea. Would it actually happen? I don't know. I think there is more that can be done, but I don't think it's been a priority for enough people to make it happen.

Q: And then finally, where do you think the LGBT population of Watauga County is headed? They recently had in the county -- no, it was the town making several statements in support

of LGBT people, including adding sexual orientation and gender identity into their employment clause and they're considering domestic partner benefits through the city as well. Where do you see, having been here this long, where do you see it heading?

A: Wow. I think it would be wonderful and I think it is probably inevitable that there will be greater rights granted to the LGBT population because it is a matter of civil rights, and I think just like the civil rights movement in the '60s, it's just going to evolve to something that's got to be, that will be more widely accepted. So domestic partnerships, I think, are going to come to fruition. I think, too, maybe in a sense, when we have greater acceptance, we might lose some of that cohesiveness that pulls us together, because it's us against them, you know. When it's not us against them anymore, we're all so ordinary. So I think it will be interesting to see, you know -- I think it's very positive in that we'd have greater acceptance, but you might lose some of that cause-driven energy that has propelled some of the things that we see on campus.

Q: Thank you.

END OF L. COUTANT