

Jill

A: -- red light.

Q: Oh, you can see one on that side?

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: There we go. This time it started.

A: (laughter)

Q: Hi, this is [Michael Howell?]. It's April the 29th, 2010, and I am with Jill [Ehnenn?].

A: Ehnenn.

Q: Ehnenn! I did exactly what I said I was going to try not to do. I'm sorry, Jill. Talking with Jill, and I'm going to ask her to introduce herself and to talk a little bit about where she comes from, if she's a native of North Carolina or, if not, how she came to be here, and then we'll just sort of go on from there.

A: OK. I'm Jill Ehnenn. I've been told to tell my age, so, I'm 43 years old. (laughter) I just turned 43. I am not a native of North Carolina; I was born in Brooklyn, in New York City, and moved at the age of one to a suburb of New York City, to Rockland County, where I grew up. My family is still there. I've lived all in cities, other than living in Boone. I did my undergraduate work in Baltimore, Maryland, at the Johns Hopkins University, where I actually

studied science, and it was pre-med. My father wanted me to be a doctor, and I -- interestingly enough, I think you'll find relevant to this -- is, right after college, I really didn't know what I wanted to do, career-wise or anything else, so I got married to a man. And so we moved to Chicago, where I worked for a while and he attended medical school -- that's why we went to Chicago. And, while we were there, I realized I hated my job, so that was my first sort of coming-of-age, "coming out," if you will. And --

Q: What were you doing?

A: I was working in a lab. I had decided I didn't want to go to medical school, so -- and I knew I didn't want to be a doctor. I'd realized I didn't really like sick people.
(laughter)

Q: (laughter) That would be a problem. (laughter)

A: So that probably wouldn't be a good thing. But I was working in a lab with the shingles, the virus that causes chicken pox and shingles, and doing experiments with radioactivity and blood and all kinds of really technical things. But I really didn't like it, so I did a master's at Northwestern in English, which was this first little light bulb that went on in my head. And so I did that. And then I applied to PhD programs, because I knew I wanted

to be a professor, at the same time that my then-husband was applying for residency programs. And so he got matched at Johns Hopkins, back to Hopkins, for his residency, and I had gotten accepted to the George Washington University. So we moved back, lived in Baltimore. I commuted to DC. While I was in graduate school, I came out, got divorced from my husband, changed my name back to my maiden name, Ehnenn, and, you know, completed the work in English, and started doing academic work on gender studies and queer studies as well, and applied for an academic job as soon as I -- you know, in my last year of my degree, when I was finishing up my dissertation -- and, as academics in my field do, applied to, like, 85 jobs. (laughter) Because the job market is really, really competitive. And got a couple job offers, and the one here at Appalachian was the best, and so I moved here in 2001. Interestingly, I actually had been here already, although I didn't realize it. (laughter) Because about five years after I finished my undergraduate degree -- where was I living at the time? I guess I was back in Baltimore at that time, and not yet divorced. But a bunch of us from undergrad who had been really close -- we all did theater together -- decided that we were going to get together and take a vacation together. And so we decided whether we wanted to do beach or

mountains, and then my friend who was a physicist -- no, he was a chemist -- he did vectors, and he figured, "OK, there's three people in Florida, and two in Baltimore, and this many in Chicago," and figured out where the geographical center was, and it was North Carolina. So that was when we decided, "OK, beach or mountains?" and people said mountains. And a friend of mine who was in Florida worked for a doctor who had a summer home in Boone, as so many people in Florida do. So we came up here and stayed at that place, and, you know, saw the [Blowing Rock?] and went to [Lynneville Falls?] and all these things. And so I actually probably would not have applied for the job here at Appalachian, because I wasn't familiar with the university, if it weren't for the fact that it was in Boone. And I said, "Oh, yeah, I liked Boone! I remember that! Sure, I'll add that to the list of 85 places I'm applying." And here I am.

Q: So, you probably left with an impression of sort of the locale, and the beautiful surroundings of the area. Did you leave with any perceptions about the area in terms of the people or the community? That you recall?

A: I'm trying to remember. You know, we came down in a big group. We kind of kept to ourselves. We didn't interact much. I think we probably -- you know, being a bunch of

Yankees, we probably had those horrible, stereotypical, "Oh, you're going to 'Deliverance' County!" (sings "Dueling Banjos") (laughter) We actually watched "Deliverance" one night. It rained a lot when we were there, so we just, you know, hung out in the cabin and built fires and got silly. Yeah, mostly the beauty. I mean, I really enjoyed the vacation. I was already sort of beginning to think about coming out at the time, but everybody else perceived my ex-husband and I as very much a couple in that moment. There were a couple guys with us who were out gay men at the time, but, you know, we really didn't interact with anybody, you know, in terms of the locals, gay, straight, or otherwise.

Q: Did they have concerns about coming, or thoughts about what they might encounter here?

A: No. No, no, I don't think so. I think as long as we didn't meet the folks from "Deliverance," that would be fine. (laughter)

Q: (laughter) Fair enough. So, when you made your decision, or you really, seriously considered Appalachian as a possibility, did you have any concerns or thoughts about moving to this area, or...?

A: Absolutely. Absolutely. I very much identified as an urban person. I liked doing nature things; I was active

with hiking and whatnot. And by that time I had been divorced for maybe five or six years, had had several girlfriends, and lived a very kind of outdoorsy sort of lifestyle, but lived in the city, lived in Baltimore and traveled elsewhere to go do those active things. And I was used to, you know, the things that cities have to offer. Multicultural things, lots of ethnic restaurants and shopping and gay bars, and definitely being in the bars in the '90s was a big part of my identity as a lesbian. And having, you know, a big community of women that I hung out with -- also a lot of gay male friends, but very much involved in sort of, like, the "urban scene." So, when I came out, I kind of came storming out of the closet, I guess. Kind of made the decision -- it took me a while to come out, just because I wanted to make sure that I wasn't making a mistake, and I, you know, didn't want to hurt my ex-husband, who, you know, was a nice guy. And so the debates were more about that. I didn't have any sort of long period of self-hatred, or religious issues about, "Oh, I'm going to hell," or anything like that. I was concerned about what my family would say, but not because I thought that they thought it would be morally wrong, just because I thought they would be uncomfortable. Which they were, initially. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is I was

really used to being extremely out and active and vocal, and the work that I was doing academically was on these 19th-century women involved in these -- what we would now call lesbian relationships. And so I pretty much decided when I applied for jobs that I wasn't going to hide anything about myself, that I was going to start as I meant to continue -- as actually somebody had advised me -- and that I wasn't going to hide what my work was about or who I was, because I figured that I wanted to be out and I didn't really want to be working someplace where I couldn't be myself. So I figured, well, I was going to introduce myself and be the person -- on my campus visit -- who I was. And if they didn't like me, and if they felt I didn't fit, well then I probably didn't want to work at that place anyway. And I think that was a very wise tactic for me to take. Being me, my personality, the things that I value, that certainly was the right decision. So, yeah, I was concerned about things like, you know, would I suffer discrimination at the university? I wasn't so worried about the English department, because English departments are pretty notoriously progressive, but I was worried about the administration. You know, what would that be like? I was happy to hear that there was a non-discrimination policy. It has since been expanded, but even then there

was one, I believe. I did ask questions about partner benefits, although I wasn't planning to move with a partner that I needed to cover under those benefits. But I did ask, and I was dismayed that there weren't any substantial benefits. But, I mean, I don't know, I think I made it in such a way that I was out enough that I knew that, if it was going to really be a problem, I probably wouldn't be offered the job. That said, the market was so competitive -- I mean, I did get a few job offers, but, you know, I knew that I was possibly facing a situation where I might have to take a place where I wouldn't feel comfortable, and I would just have to take it because I needed a job. But fortunately all the pieces came together, and I didn't have to make that kind of personal-sacrificing situation. And I felt comfortable moving here as a gay person. I knew somebody who was here on the faculty, and she had told me that there were a lot of community events, women's events going on in the community, and so I felt like I was moving from a place where there were a lot of kind of ready-made social circles to another place where I would have access to those kinds of social circles. And so, even though I knew I'd be giving up a much more urban lifestyle, I felt that I'd be in a place where, in terms of meeting other lesbians, it wouldn't be a lost cause. (laughter)

Q: So many ways to go, so many things you've said that I want to follow up on. Partly, I know that -- I don't know a lot about your work, but I know that it's around gender, and also around sexuality?

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: OK. So, given that that's what you focus on now, thinking back -- growing up, in your family -- do you remember any messages around gender or sexuality that you picked up, in your family or in your sort of local environment, that you think about now?

A: Yeah, I guess a lot of stuff about -- messages about being a lady, about the way you're supposed to be a girl or be a boy. I grew up Lutheran, but in a very Jewish area, and sort of culturally identify more as a secular Jew, I think, because that was what half of my family was and most of my friends. So, even though I went to church with my family, sort of the -- kind of Jewish masculinity, i.e., not very jockish -- sensitive, very verbal, expressing one's emotions -- that was kind of what I learned about masculinity, I guess. Which is very different, I think, than the dominant forms of masculinity that I encountered later, in college and here, just around here in Boone, where being less verbal, less emotionally forthcoming, more physical, more athletically inclined, is more the norm.

And I actually sometimes wonder if I hadn't grown up in a family and in an environment where it was perfectly OK and encouraged to be a "sensitive guy" -- I wonder if I might have come out sooner, because I was surrounded with so many "girly" guys -- (laughter) and I'm using scare quotes here -- that I guess the real traditional sense of heterosexual masculinity -- that was not a message that I received. However, I did receive a lot of very strong messages about traditional heterosexual femininity, you know? I was constantly being told, "Don't walk like a truck driver." Right? (laughter) You know, and I'm -- you know, in terms of my own gender presentation, I think of myself as being more feminine than masculine, I guess. You know, I do wear skirts, I wear jewelry, I wear makeup. I kind of resist doing that sometimes at traditional times or in traditional ways, but nevertheless, you know, I did get lots and lots of messages about how to be a lady, I guess. And I notice that still, when I look at my family, as progressive as they are -- and they are quite progressive politically, morally, et cetera. I have a little niece and a little nephew now, and the little boy, when he does little kid things, people say, "Oh, he's such a busy little boy." But when my niece does pretty much the same things, my family is just, "Oh, she's a bruiser." You know? So that's

really being gendered, there, in ways that I think are very unconscious on their part, because, you know, I know for a fact that they would probably be horrified to think that they're sort of instilling these gendered values. So, I don't know. It's interesting, you know? My father hates sports, and so, you know, we didn't watch sports. My brother didn't grow up watching sports. I think he later acquired a fondness for it in college. We weren't allowed to play with guns or anything like that, so a lot of the traditional masculine messages that had to do with aggressiveness and violence were downplayed in my family, and indeed in my school and amongst all of my peers. I think a lot of my friends were raised the same way. So, kind of a softer, gentler, kind of masculinity, but these very, very strict messages about how to be a girl and how to be a woman. And heterosexuality was pretty much just presumed. Which is interesting, because when I meet other people who grew up in much more conservative areas, more rural areas, more religious areas, there was always an awareness of, "Oh, this is a lesbian. Oh, this is a gay person." That never really even crossed my mind, maybe until I got to high school and I had some male friends who I kind of wondered if they were gay, just because they were, you know, sort of stereotypically effeminate in the

way that, let's say, Jack is on "Will and Grace." That kind of thing. And they did turn out to be gay. I didn't know any lesbians growing up. I mean, I'm sure I did, but I just wasn't conscious of that. I was conscious of having very intense emotional relationships with my best girlfriends, but I always dated guys, and... I don't know. I just never really saw it as an option.

Q: You mentioned -- you sort of characterized your family as rather progressive, but then you also mentioned a little earlier that, during the coming out process, you were a little concerned about how they would react. What was the basis of your concern there?

A: Well, I think one always worries about, "What's your family going to say?" They really liked my ex-husband, and I know -- as a matter of fact, talking about it with them after the fact -- that, you know, they really, when I announced five years into the marriage -- finally, after pretty much having my mind made up a year before that -- but when I went, "OK, I'm going to get divorced, and here's why," they were quite upset. And in hindsight, you know, my mom has told me that part of that was because they were losing somebody they loved, you know? They were losing my ex-husband, who was a member of the family. And so that did make them happy. I think it also just really kind of came

out of left field for them, because I hadn't shared the period that I went through of questioning and wondering and coming out, trying to figure out what was going on and what should I do. I didn't share any of that with them, and so I think it really struck them out of the blue. But I came out to them in a letter, which had been the suggested mode (laughter) of a friend of mine from college who had come out to his family, and so I wrote my mom and my dad and my brother -- it was the same letter, but I sent them separate copies of it, and my brother was not living at home at the time. And he was fine, but my parents were, you know, upset. And they said things like, "Oh, it's such a tragedy." And I'm like, "No. No, no. Cancer is tragedy. This is not a tragedy." And my mom wrote me back, you know, sort of a typical letter about, "I'll always love you, but I don't want to know anything about that part of your life. I don't want to meet your partner." You know, "I don't want to meet anybody that you're dating. I'm afraid you're going to die of AIDS." I mean, just all of this kind of ignorant stuff that really shocked me, because I had always gotten all of these messages about, you know, "Be who you are. Be true to yourself." I had had some teasing as a child because, you know, of being brainy and also, you know, we didn't have as much money, maybe, as

some of the other kids. And so, when I was at the age when I wanted designer this and designer that and the obnoxious little junior high girls teased me about that, I got all of these messages about, "It's OK to be different." So I was -- "OK, I'm being different," and that really wasn't -- I was shocked that they had that kind of negative response. But, you know, they worked past that, and they are extremely accepting of my current partner. They were also very accepting of my previous partner. So it's taken them a while, oddly enough. My partner and I joke about the fact that George Bush has helped with that, because my parents hated Bush so much, everything about him, that I think it made them a lot more political and, you know, moved them even further left on a lot of issues. And I'm quite proud of them, so...

Q: And is sexuality even more of -- a little difficult in Jewish families? Is that sort of a tougher issue?

A: Well, as I said, I mean, my family -- well, I'm technically Jewish, because my maternal grandmother was Jewish, and I did have an uncle who was Bar Mitzvahed. But I think the concern in Jewish family -- well, first of all, we're talking about secular Jews here. So it's an interesting phenomenon, where people don't believe in God but they believe in Jewish identity, you know? And there's sort of

a lot of cultural values, and I think just a lot of ethnic things. A manner of talking, a manner of valuing intellectual attitudes towards things, a kind of political progressiveness. Very Woody Allen, you know? (laughter) You know, think "Woody Allen." And even among people I know who are Jewish, who practice and observe the Jewish holidays, etc. -- but from that point of view, yeah, oftentimes there's a concern about queer kids only in the sense that family is so important and there's sort of these cultural messages -- I guess post-Holocaust -- about having children. And so there's a concern that, you know, well, if you're gay, you would be less likely to have children. And a lot of the gay folks that I know who are from Jewish families, when they are progressive -- you know, when they are very liberal -- the families are really happy when the gay couple -- you know, if they decide to have their own children or to adopt children, because then they can do all of those sort of family, kid-oriented things that are very central to that particular kind of ethnic identification. You know, which is -- I mean, obviously every -- you know, lots of ethnic groups value children. But there's a particular sort of emphasis within Jewish culture on the family and on reproduction, because of, you know, the fact that six million Jews were slaughtered during the

Holocaust, and that you're somehow supposed to, you know, meet other Jews and get married and make up for...

Q: It's almost like a cultural obligation to continue to --

A: A cultural obligation. That's a good way to put it. You know, and so, you know, that didn't apply in my family. You know, my ex-husband and I didn't have any children. And I think because I got married so young -- I got married at 22, and my parents were not thrilled about that, you know? They wanted me to go on, if not to medical school, to law school. To some kind of professional job. You know, they knew I was very bright, they knew I could do basically anything that I wanted, and so they really didn't want me to do that traditional wife-and-mother thing right then. So my parents did not put any pressure on us to have children, and I was never really interested in having kids anyway. So when I did decide to get divorced, it was like, "Pow! Don't own a house, don't have any kids, don't have to -- I mean, this is really very simple." (laughter) You know? I mean, of course it wasn't simple, but it was a lot simpler than it could have been. I am glad that my brother has children, because it takes the pressure off of me. My partner and I actually sometimes wonder what it would be like with our families if we had kids. Neither of us have ever been interested in that, so we don't feel that as a

lack in our lives, but we -- I'm curious about whether or not that would then be a problem. I wonder if my mom would have sort of, like, throwback to some kind of conservative idea of, "Oh, it's so hard for the children, and therefore you shouldn't do it." You know, life is hard. (laughter)

Q: It's true, that's true. And, you know, now it seems that -- you can tell me if you have felt this or not, but it seems to be that there's also a sense of pressure within the gay community to start having kids, adopting kids, being sort of a family through having kids.

A: Yeah. I mean, my own political positioning is -- you know, I definitely identify much more -- I'm much more left radical-identified, queer-identified, as opposed to sort of HRC gay-identified. I have a lot of critiques of a lot of the assimilationist rhetoric that seems to be the direction that the LGBT movement is going in right now. And so, you know, I'm not interested in getting married. I mean, I can understand, from a certain perspective, the argument of, "Well, we're normal. We're just like everybody else." But on the other hand, I think, "No, we're not, and that's not a bad thing, and we don't have to be like everybody else." You know, I kind of see one of the benefits of studying LGBT history as seeing how people have done things differently, and one of the things that is exciting about

being a member of a subculture -- I mean, of course, I'm privileged because I'm comfortable with that -- but one of the advantages, to me, or one of the attractions of being a member of a subculture, is that I don't have to listen to all of these cultural messages that you have to be like this or you have to be like that, you know? I don't want to be like everybody else, and I worry about, you know, the fact that it seems that a lot of the political energies of the various gay movements right now is towards normalcy. Because I think there's a lot about normalcy that could be criticized.

Q: A defined kind of normalcy.

A: A defined kind of normalcy. You know, I mean, if you -- you know, a lot of people want to get married; a big advantage to getting married are tax breaks or health care, being able to be covered by health-care benefits. Well, maybe we shouldn't be thinking, "Well, let us get married so you can have health care." Maybe we should have health care where everybody gets health care because you're a person, not because you're a person who is married, you know? So I think that there's a lot of productive ways to have a family. You know, in the queer community -- and we saw this a lot with the AIDS crisis -- there's a lot of emphasis on created families. And then there are -- in,

you know, all kinds of different ethnic groups, there's different kinds of families. There's, you know, families that are very women-oriented, if the men are not very present. Intergenerational families. There's all kinds of ways to do families. There's blended families. And the traditional family works great for some people, but, you know, is a dangerous, violent, abusive place for other families. So, you know, all of this focus on, you know, "Well, we should just have normal families like everybody else," as sort of a pressure to become normal -- you know, have what's perceived to be the normal family -- doesn't question the important ways that families perhaps should be criticized, you know, that there's a lot of bad stuff. You know, I, fortunately, did not experience bad stuff in my family. But, you know, we shouldn't hold up the nuclear family as being this perfect social arrangement, because historically it has not been that for many people.

Q: While we're on families -- I have a subculture question I want to ask you now, too, in a minute, but... So, you came here single, and you did meet a partner, or have a partner that you met after you came.

A: Mm-hmm.

Q: How long have you been together?

A: That's kind of complicated. (laughter)

Q: OK. OK, all right.

A: Seven years, about.

Q: OK. Well, speaking in terms of family, then, how would you describe the kind of family that you have, that you're part of now? How is it unique compared to other families, or how is it not normal? I don't want to use the word "normal," but how is it similar or different, or what would you say about how your family life is?

A: (laughter) There was a term that was used about ten years ago, "DINKs": "Double Income, No Kids." Right? (laughter) And then there was a joke, and I don't remember if it was "GINKs" or something. (laughter) You know, the "Gay, Double Income, No Kids" or something like that. I mean, I don't know. We own a house. We do -- you know, we shop, we take care of the garden, we go on vacations. We were actually talking about this the other day in relation to talking about queer theorist Judith Halberstam's book "In a Queer Time," where she talks about "queer temporality," as opposed to the way that time is normally conceived, which she calls "reproductive time." So, you know, in Western culture in this particular historical moment, we have a very sort of linear notion of time, that it moves forward in a linear progression, it's predictable, and a lot of it has to do with cycles of family. That you do things for

your future because you're doing them for the next generation, which for most people would be when you're doing things for your children. So, you grow up. Getting married is a sign of reaching a certain level of maturity; getting a house is another level of maturity, so there's capitalism mixed up in that. And then you have children, and then, if you are a responsible adult, you do things to make way for the life of your children and then the children that they will have. So there's sort of this expectation of what a normal life is, which is all bound up in reproduction and the next generation. So she calls that a kind of "reproductive futurity," and she talks about how gay people have -- they don't have to do that, right? There's -- and so, you know, sort of contra the accusation that, you know, gay people are immature because, you know, they don't settle down, or, you know, they might not have monogamous relationships or whatever, she wants us to think about that as just having a different relationship to time. We're doing time differently, and the way -- so, coming back to the conversation I was having with my partner -- was, you know, if you have kids -- you know, a lot of my friends have little kids -- there's a lot of things you can't do, right? You can't just, on the spur of the moment, decide to do things. You can't, you know, have

dinner parties and serve china, because -- (laughter) you know, or you can't serve certain kinds of foods, because it's not appropriate for children. You can't have dinner parties that start at seven. You might have ones that start at four and end at seven, so the kids can go to sleep. So --

Q: They're very powerful, those little kids, aren't they?

A: Yes, they're very powerful! And, I mean, certainly there are --

Q: How they control adults' lives. (laughter)

A: (laughter) I know lots of gay folks who have kids, but, you know, my life is very different from that of my peers in terms of -- I have a certain kind of independence and freedom and can do things on the spur of the moment, or can just do things differently. So, in terms of what my family is like, you know, my immediate family, we don't have a lot of those burdens or responsibilities. We may have other burdens or responsibilities, but... I don't know if that answers your question.

Q: I'm just curious, yeah. So, do you think your friends with kids -- do they -- oh, gosh, I lost my train of thought. Do they wish they have that freedom? Do they envy you for being able to just do that, be spontaneous? Or do you sometimes get the sense that people with kids give you

that, "Well, you just don't know," or, "You're not as serious as the rest of us, because you haven't had them"?

A: Sometimes, yeah. And, I mean, I think that's part of Halberstam's argument, you know, that there's sort of a kind of a selfishness or a -- yeah, or not-seriousness -- attributed to people who choose not to have -- I mean, to be quite honest, I think of having children as a lifestyle choice, you know? People talk about being gay as a lifestyle choice. (laughter) I think having children is a lifestyle choice, you know? If I wanted to, I could have children, but I've chosen not to. And I know, of course, that straight people choose not to have children as well. It's a less-frequent choice, maybe it's a harder choice for them, not to have children. You know, if I were still married, I don't know if I would have -- I know my ex-husband wanted to have children. I might have done it, because I knew that was something that he wanted. There certainly would have been a lot of pressure from families to do that. And I'm glad I don't have children.

Q: Well, now -- going back, then, to the subculture idea, which I thought was very interesting -- how does living here impact the way you live as part of that subculture?

A: Yeah. That's the thing that I dislike the most about living here. There are a lot of lesbians in them there

hills, (laughter) but a lot of them are not politically-oriented the way that I am, or... I don't know, I have a lot fewer people that I feel I'm truly simpatico with, compared to when I lived in a more urban area. My partner and I have some friends that live elsewhere, you know, but being not tied down by children, certainly there would be plenty of times when, you know, "Oh, you know, let's go out after dinner. Let's go do this, that, or the other thing." And if there were a queer bar, a club, or some kind of gathering place, as there are in cities, I'd be there. And it's just -- it's not like that here, you know? And I certainly have lots of friends, gay and straight, that I socialize with, either at home or out, but there's a certain kind of positive energy and a feeling of home, I guess, that I personally experience in a gay space. And those spaces happen within private homes here, because there aren't any public spaces that are gay spaces in that way. I also personally really dislike the energy in straight bars. You know, as somebody who I guess could pass as a straight female, I don't like being in straight bars, because I don't like the vibe. I don't like the way people talk to me or the assumptions that are made. I just find it really unpleasant, and so I avoid it as much as possible. And there are certain places that I don't want

to go and my straight friends don't understand why I don't want to go there, and, you know, to be fair, I haven't tried real hard to explain that. But that is a challenge. I very much enjoy the fact that one of the perks of doing academic work -- and the kind of work that I do, which involves traveling to archives -- is that I very frequently get to go to conferences or get to go to archives that are in urban places, and then I can get my fix. (laughter) You know, that said, I do enjoy less traffic, quiet life. I like my garden. I like those kinds of things. I get annoyed sometimes when I go home and visit my parents in New York and, you know, have to drive somewhere and you're sort of in a New York traffic jam, and I'm glad I don't have to deal with that on a daily basis. So, you know, six of one, half-dozen of the other. I'm happy with -- you know, I'm satisfied with the way my life has played out, and I just know that I'm going to travel, to go off the mountain, to go to places, to do the things that I want to do. And preferably take subways to get there. (laughter)

Q: (laughter) What would you say your impression is of the fairly broad community up here?

A: I mean, it's surprisingly broad. It's surprisingly vibrant. You know, I know people have said that Boone is not like the rest of the South and not like the rest of

North Carolina, which -- from my observation, living here for nine years now -- I think I can agree with. I think I'd be very unhappy (laughter) in most other places in the South. I don't feel like I'll ever identify as a North Carolinian. I will always -- well, I know I'll always be a Yankee. I mean, I still get, nine years in, "Y'ain't from around here, are ya?" (laughter) And, you know, that's OK, I guess. It's pretty diverse here. You know, there's other whole ways of being gay, of being queer. It's not an urban gay sensibility. There are people here who've moved here from other places, who maybe bring that with them and maybe miss it a little like me. But yeah, I mean, it's actually been very educational, because I think coming out in a city -- and a lot of our popular media representation of what it's like to be gay is what it's like to be an urban queer, right? -- that it's been educational in a very good way just to see that the LGBT community is extraordinarily diverse and that rural gay identity is a big part of that diversity. You know, it's not just about racial diversity or class diversity, or, you know, sort of a range of gender spectrums; that geographic diversity has a huge impact on gay identity.

Q: Would you say that -- after you moved here, did you have to develop any different skills in sort of connecting with

other gays here? The way of connecting, the way of finding each other, is it different in this area than in the urban areas you come from? How do people manage that?

A: Well, I mean, for lesbians, especially lesbians of my generation, you know, there's always the lesbian potluck. (laughter) There were lesbian potlucks in the cities I lived in, and there are lesbian potlucks here. You know, that has been very similar, the fact that there always seems to be these organized communities, which are now even more connected because of the Internet, which wasn't such a big thing in the '90s, when I was coming out. And so one really big way to connect is to find out, "OK, well, where's the group?" You know, and then there's a mailing list or an email list or something like that, and so you -- and then there's another group, so somebody in this group knows somebody in another group, and then you can get to know members of all of these groups. And then after that, you know, you -- at least, I personally tend to stop doing the group things once I've found a couple people in this group and a couple people in that group that then become just my friends, right? So I think that happens in a lot of places, urban and rural, and so that was very familiar. You know, meeting people, again, in a bar space is different. That's not here. There's no bookstore. You

know, when you go to a new city, you find the bookstore, and you get the papers, and you meet people there. Well, I think, unfortunately, the small independent bookstore is disappearing regardless of where you are, so that's not as reliable a mode of meeting people. But, you know, certainly you can't do that here. I don't know, I think maybe for men it might be different, but I guess I didn't really have to modify my behavior very much that way. I have modified my behavior in terms of public displays of affection. And I actually don't know whether or not that's a matter of being a professional, you know, because it is a small town. Wherever you go, you see people from the university. My partner and I are both employed by the university. So I'm not going to be walking around campus holding hands with my partner, because that's not professional. It's my workplace. I miss being able to walk around, you know, just out on a nice Saturday afternoon, being publicly affectionate with my partner the way that you constantly see straight people doing. And I don't feel comfortable doing that anywhere here. I would feel it's a safety issue. You know, if I go to a city, then I feel -- even if I go to Asheville, I feel more comfortable doing that. But sometimes I'm kind of conscious of the fact that you get out of the habit of

doing that, and so even when you are in a safer space to do that, you're maybe not inclined to do that, which I think is a shame. I almost felt like I've been robbed of the simple pleasure of being able to hold hands with my partner in a public place.

Q: Yeah, and is there a different professional standard? I mean, do you get the sense that heterosexual faculty would not do that, wouldn't walk across campus? I mean, is it different for them?

A: I don't know. I mean, I've certainly seen plenty of heterosexual faculty couples -- or couples of faculty and staff or faculty and administration -- walking across campus, some of them holding hands, but some of them, I think, don't. Either because, I think, PDA is less accepted here than it is in other parts of the country, and also just because it is a very small, insular community, and I think people maybe do feel that they want to be professional. But I definitely think it would be more accepted for straight people. You know, I'm out in the classroom to a degree. Obviously, the Gay and Lesbian Studies classes that I teach, I'm out. If I'm facilitating the Queer Film Series, it's pretty clear where my identification lies. I've been interviewed lots of times for the school paper. You know, if anybody really cares to

figure it out, they know I'm a big ol' dyke. Which, you know, I'll say day one of my Intro to Gay and Lesbian Studies class: "I'm a big ol' dyke, and I don't care who knows it." I don't find it an effective strategy, however, in let's say my lower-level survey classes, to come out just for the point of coming out. I used to do that at other universities where I taught, and I did find that that was a useful strategy just to make people rethink their assumptions. I have experienced that as something that would be more likely here to kind of create the potential for a negative climate in the classroom, so I prefer to be inclusive and gay-affirming in other ways. If I give examples, I make sure for every straight example I give a gay example. If I'm talking about diversity, you know, you've sort of got the class example, the race example, (laughter) and the sexuality example. I prefer to, you know, use nebulous words like "partner." I don't talk a lot about my personal life, anyway, in the classroom, but I kind of do my in-person gay activism, I guess, in the classroom, by the texts that I choose and by being more -- making them think, "Well, is she or isn't she?" Or, "What kind of woman is she?" Or, "Just as I think I've got, you know, my finger on it" -- then, you know, I throw them a different curve. Because it's just not my style to be

constantly talking about, you know, my girlfriend this, my girlfriend that. When I was married, I didn't talk about my husband this, my husband that, so why would I change?

Q: Mm-hmm, that makes sense. Have you had any negative fallout with students, or other situations?

A: Yeah. And here, I think the resistance is sort of an intertwined resistance to feminism as well as a resistance to critiques of heteronormativity. So, you know, for instance, if I teach a survey class -- which is going to be a mix of male and female writers, and during the course of a semester we'll talk about all kinds of things, you know? But, "The class was all about feminism!" (laughter) You know? Which is not true. You know, "All we've read were women writers!" Look at the syllabus. It's not true. But that's the thing that pushes them beyond their comfort zone, so that's the thing that they remember and criticize me about, if they feel uncomfortable, you know. On the other hand, a lot of students become very empowered, or say that they learn a lot or their eyes are opened. Students tend to either really like me or really dislike me, and I know I'm very -- I have very high expectations, and I assign a lot of work. So, you know, students who don't do well because you're making them work harder than they want

to work are going to find all kinds of reasons to be angry at you.

Q: Yes, I'm a little familiar with that.

A: (laughter) And that's just part of being a professor, you know? So, the people that don't like you will find an excuse to say that, you know, "You're up on a soapbox," or, you know, "All you talked about was lesbian stuff," when, you know, really, there was a lot more that I didn't talk about because I wanted to give some air time to talking about race, or talking about, you know, metaphor.

(laughter) Talking about genre. So, you know, it's good to push students out of their comfort zone. That's why they're in college. If they left exactly the same way that they came in, I don't think we'd be doing our job. I have adopted a little clause that I put on my syllabus that says, "Some of these readings may contain material that you're not familiar with or that you may find shocking, and they reflect the culture that produced them. And you are required to read them, but you're not required to agree with them. You're not required to share my political views, should I choose to share them with you." Which I usually don't, actually. So, you know, I'm all about providing exposure and then letting students make up their own minds, and some of them will be affected by that right

then, and I think some students will maybe take five, six years down the road before it's like, "Oh, OK." (laughter) It's interesting.

Q: Well, I think that you're sort of in this really interesting position of having had the opportunity to sort of incorporate your sexuality and your life into your work here at the university. You've been instrumental in a number of efforts that really expose students and other people in the community and the campus community, other faculty as well, through your work. So I'd like to hear a little bit about the things you've been involved with, and hear how it's been for you to sort of bring that kind of active dimension to your scholarship and your work here.

A: Mm-hmm, OK. Well, I mean, my academic work that I write about, that I publish, is on, you know, 19th-century representations of sexuality. So when I teach the 19th-century literature that I've been hired to teach, that being one of my fields of expertise, that's something that students are going to get a lot of. And I think that, you know, with a lot of sort of contemporary debates going on and a lot of messages about normalcy -- as, "Well, it's always been a man and a woman!" It's like, "No, you look in history and across cultures and that's not the way" -- you can find -- and into the animal kingdom -- you can find

lots of examples of other ways to be. You know, and it's not the only thing that I teach about, because I do have other interests. I'm interested in visual representation. I'm interested in form, aesthetic form. So not everything that I talk about in the classroom, or even everything that I research and write about, is about sexuality. But a lot of it is, and that is an area of expertise, and students do seek that out. So that's the academic side. I've been active with the Queer Film Series, which had been started before I got here. I was here only a year when I got involved, and we now have three people involved, and we're hoping to make that grow. And that's been, I think, a very big service to the students and the faculty at the university, both straight and gay. A lot of faculty will use the films that we show, encourage their students to go see them, because the topics dovetail with something else that they're talking about in their classroom. And we try and choose films that are academically-oriented as well as being fun and interesting, and that talk about sexuality in intersection with other issues, international issues or -- you know, a wide range of things that are of interest, so they'll be relevant to what students are learning in classes in many different disciplines. That's a big thing for the community, too. I know a lot of community members

come to the films, and they see that as a gay space in an otherwise gayless (laughter) space. I even know summer people that stay late and come back early so that they can go to the films. The administration has been very supportive of that, for which I'm grateful, and we've been able to move into bigger venues and have bigger budgets, and we have plans for making that continue to grow. So that's been really exciting. I know that when the faculty who do gender studies -- or even faculty who are just gay-identified -- come here, they see the film series as something -- "Oh, well, that's really cool, tell me more about that. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to live in the middle of nowhere if you have a Queer Film Series."

(laughter) So, you know, that's a little nice advertisement to that segment of the population. We got an LGBT Studies minor approved just a couple months ago; it'll be in the catalog starting in the fall. That was a big achievement. It took about three years to get approved, not because of lack of administrative support -- I think the administration knows that this is, you know, a valid direction of academic study, and that lots of really good universities are doing it, so Appalachian should provide that, too, because it's something the students want. You know, there were just sort of bureaucratic and programmatic

issues that kind of slowed us down, but all of that is worked out. So that's been great. That involved getting some courses with LGBT content on the books, in the curriculum, on a regular basis. Which I felt was really important, to be able to have that visibility and predictability, so that students could plan a program of study. So I'm pretty proud of that.

Q: That's great.

A: And I know that there's been a lot of discussion on campus, various entities trying to get domestic-partnership benefits, which is made difficult by the fact that our health-care benefits come from the state, and so would either -- you know, our current health-care benefits either need to be expanded to include domestic partners, which would be a statewide thing for everybody in the system, or we as a university would have to offer another option of health care. And the first option is a very big hurdle, I think, given the somewhat conservative nature of the state. The second option, I've been told, is expensive. But, you know, we'll see. We'll continue to push with that. I think there's a lot of good things going on here for the LGBT community, but I think there could be more done. A lot of things are said; less things are actually done, and I would like to see more things being done.

Q: Makes sense. Another question I have for you -- you, I think, mentioned sort of -- not only sort of describing yourself as a lesbian, but I think at one point you described yourself as "queer." So I'm sort of curious about that. I know that "queer" has become a pretty progressive term, or it's become a more common term, and it seems to me to be a term that's used a little more freely in urban areas in different parts of the country. So I'm really interested in what you think of the use of the term "queer" here, where I'm assuming that it still has some more negative traditional connotations.

A: Yeah, and the term also signifies very different, generally, generationally. So people in an older generation tend not to like the term, or they see it much more pejorative. I use it in more of a reclaiming kind of way. Like, Judith Butler talks about "queer" as a term that you sort of critically reclaim, that, you know, it's a term that previously is used in a derogative way and that you say, you know, "Fine, you want to shame me using this term? Well, I'm going to use the term myself, and then you can't shame me by it." So it's sort of a radical reclamation in that way. And there are still people that are not comfortable with it. There are, you know, people

who want to know why we call it the Queer Film Series.

(laughter)

Q: I did wonder. I did wonder that.

A: Yeah. It's on our website, if you want to look it up.

(laughter) I use it as an umbrella term, because the whole alphabet soup of LGBTQ... I... QNQXY... (laughter) You know, it's just too ridiculous. So in part I use it as an umbrella term, in part I use it as sort of an activist, reclaiming term. "I will not be shamed by your hateful assumptions." I think it also, for me, signifies a political stance that says, you know, "I don't want a place at your table without sort of rethinking the shape of the table." (laughter) And, you know, I'm not so eager just to blend in with everybody else, because I think that, you know, the viewpoint of oppressed peoples of all stripes can... Considering those perspectives can shed some useful critique on the way that normal society operates and maybe things that could be redone a little better, or a little differently, or a little bit more diversely. So for me it's about all of those things, I guess. I don't know, I don't know if I've kind of lost track of the gist of your question.

Q: No, no, not at all. (inaudible), how do you feel that -- or, what's your presumption of how people from the

Appalachia area, the -- you know, for lack of a better term, "native" people, or people who are transplants -- how do they sort of react to that word? Do you get the sense here that people use that word, or they sort of avoid the word, or...?

A: I think more urban people, people who are transposed from urban areas, who are more politically left, use the word. Who are of a certain generation, perhaps. You know, this is not necessarily something I'm proud of, but in terms of people that are native to the area, I don't really know if I -- I don't regularly interact with whole bunches of people that are native to the area. Most of my life is centered around the university. You know, I wish it weren't that way, but it just -- there's a pretty big "town and gown" divide here, and a lot of the non-university folks that I do know are transplants also, right? So, the real, generations-and-generations-back mountain folks -- I don't have much interaction, other than maybe through meeting people through colleagues who do Appalachian Studies. You know, I've developed a fondness and a respect for sort of the unique ethnic -- sort of the really interesting things about folklore, and Appalachian ways, and storytelling, and all that sort of stuff. I'm by no means an expert (laughter), and it's not my area of

expertise or my primary area of academic interest, so, you know, I'm pretty removed from that and ignorant of it. So, I don't know. (laughter)

Q: OK, all right. I notice the students seem to have adopted the term, or sort of throw it around pretty easily in class.

A: Yeah. I think this generation -- there's at least a segment of this generation of students who really don't like labels, and, you know, they don't necessarily see themselves as "lesbian" or "gay." They don't necessarily like the term "bisexual." Some of them do, some -- they just don't want to be anything. "I just want to be me!" Which, you know, has its own critiques, but... So I think the term "queer" is appealing to them because of the way that, for them, it symbolizes something less defined and more nebulous. And I think, you know, that's important for them. And, yeah, the SAGA group here and the [Trans-Action?] group here are very active. I've heard that they're the biggest/most active group on campus. I've also heard that they're the second biggest or most active group on campus, second only to the Christian students' group. And I think that's something special about this university. You know, and obviously I want to support them, because, you know, on the one hand, I can't imagine what my life

would be like if I had been as out as they are at 18.

(laughter) That's just so fascinating and almost liberating to me. But on the other hand, I think a lot of them struggle with stuff that I never struggled with, in the religion thing or being worried about being cut off completely by their family. Certain issues of vulnerability that maybe coming out a little bit later, coming out at 24, 25, 26, when I did -- I was financially independent and already had some things in my life figured out. It was less unsettling for me.

Q: Yeah, it's -- they sort of expose so much of themselves, just out to everybody all the time. It's going to be interesting to see if that sort of comes around on them in some way in the future, but... Well, I've taken a lot of time to sort of guide you talking about things in your story; I'm just curious what you'd like to talk about, that we haven't talked about, or you'd like to talk about more.

A: I don't know. I mean, I'm happy to talk about anything. I've talked about a lot of stuff. I don't know. I think one of the things that I've maybe enjoyed here is I've met a lot of older -- I guess my gay circle is much more intergenerational than it was when I lived in urban places. Maybe because it has to be. Well, I'm -- my friends circle, I guess, in general is more intergenerational, but

I think that's really interesting and valuable, and important in terms of passing on certain kinds of subcultural knowledges. So that's a neat thing. There's a lot of older lesbians who live in Florida who come and have second homes here. People I have very little in common with (laughter), actually, but it's really interesting to get to know their stories. So that's been interesting. I don't know, I think I'm kind of doing better in answer mode rather than proactive mode. (pause) I actually think, in a way, that it's easier being -- for a faculty member, not for staff, but for faculty -- I wonder if it's easier being gay than it is being of a different race. Because it is so oppressively white here. (laughter) When I moved here I was a little worried about the gay thing, and actually what kind of freaked me out was like, "Oh, look at all the white people!" (laughter) And now, when I go other places, I'm like, "Oh, my goodness," you know? "Yeah, there are other colors in the spectrum, and isn't that nice?" So that's kind of shocking and odd. I also think that, you know, in this particular cultural moment -- and, you know, in a university where you're supposed to be progressive -- if anything, I think there's more discrimination on the basis of gender, in those subtle kind of glass-ceiling-for-women ways. I think that's more of an issue than being gay here,

for me, because people know that they're not supposed to comment or discriminate in that way. They know they'd be a real cad if they said something if I brought my partner somewhere. But, you know, sexism is alive and well.

(laughter) In many circles, you know, there's still old boys' clubs, unfortunately. And just subtle ways that disrespect for women is shown. That's been an interesting realization for me, as well. I mean, I'm not trying to paint a rosy picture of, "Everything is OK for gay folks here." I mean, there's bullying. I'm sure there's all kinds of bad stuff that happens. And clearly I said I don't particularly feel comfortable, you know, just holding hands with my partner, when I see straight people walking around holding hands all the time. So, I'm not saying everything is all hunky dory and we don't need to change anything here. But all in all, I guess, for an urban Yankee it's not a bad place to be. (laughter) That might be a good place to end.

Q: OK, that sounds like a natural ending to me, too.

(laughter) So, Jill, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it, and it's going to be an important contribution for our collection. Thank you.

A: Great.

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