

M Farmer

Q: Today is April 29th, 2010, and I'm with Michael Farmer. Do you want to start with your full name and your age and where you grew up?¹

A: My name is Michael Pendry Farmer. I was born in Wilkes County in 1970, and I'm 39 years old right now. I was raised in a pretty -- my mother was adopted, so I spent time with my adopted grandparents on the weekends some, and they were very religious. And it was always unspoken that you didn't talk about being gay. You just didn't talk about it, because it was against their religion. Very, very rigid, very much so. But I always knew something was different about me, but I didn't know what it was until I got a little bit older. Because I remember growing up watching, like, the news, and gay pride marches, and they always commented that they were sick people, you know, that they were sinners and were going to go to hell. And so the older I got, I got more confused, and we grew distant over time. Now, when my adopted grandfather died, my adopted grandmother totally just told me that she didn't approve of my mother being married to my father. And so it was a pretty shaky relationship there, and eventually it got to

¹ The interviewer became friends with Mike Farmer while attending Woodward Junior High School in the mid-1980s.

where I just didn't go back around her. And she's dead now, and I never was invited to the funeral or anything. But she did know about me at the end -- as I understand from my cousin, who I still talk to -- and she never seemed to say a harsh word about me though, that I was never -- I was told not to go around her, because it would be too much for her, because she was so old.

Q: From your mother?

A: My cousin. That it'd be best if I'd just stay away from her. So I just never went around her, never did. But my other side of the family, blood side, the Farmer side, it was the same way. It wasn't spoken about, and when we saw it on the news they were sick people, you know, and so that put me in a hard place. But when I hit about puberty, I started to realize, "Hey, I know something is -- I'm gay."

Q: How did you first learn about homosexuality? Do you remember how old you were? Or were the feelings there and not the terms?

A: The feelings were there. I knew I was attracted to boys. You know, I liked playing with girls, too, but I just preferred to be with -- being around boys, I just found them more attractive. (Laughter) It's hard to explain, but that's just the way it was.

Q: By what age were you conscious of this?

A: Oh, I can't remember. Probably about 14, 15. My first sexual encounter with another guy was when I was 16. This guy I'd met at a party, when I was still in high school. He was the first guy I ever slept with, and we still talk today. (Laughter) We're good friends. He lives here in Hickory now. In fact, we ended up dating for a year, because, when I turned 16, I moved out and we got an apartment together. And before I -- and not even telling Mom and Dad I was living with him as a boyfriend, you know, a couple, just that we were roommates. Which I think everybody uses that nowadays, "He's my roommate" or "She's my roommate," and people know, but they just don't talk about it. But we eventually split up, and I moved back home, and I moved in with my grandparents.

And I met my boyfriend who I have now, which we've been together 21 years now, and I decided it was just time to tell my family. So I wrote, like, a 10-page letter to my parents, and I got a book, and I can't remember the name of it now. I think Mom threw it away, because she was upset. But I settled down in the bedroom and I talked to them and told them, "Hey, you know, this is me. I'm gay." And after I sat there and I cried and told them. They just told me -- they said, "We knew all along." (Laughter) And I think it was shortly after that they told my

grandparents, and my grandmother didn't take it really well. I mean, it was just really a tense time for me at this period. So I left home and moved to Hickory and moved in with Robert, where I live now. Things have been -- I've got some -- I mean, I've been harassed, and some people, you know, it's either one way or the other. They either harass you, or they're generally understanding. And I would tell you some instances, like I was telling you to begin with.

Q: Do you want to go back to your childhood and talk a little bit more in depth about growing up, or do you want to talk about your adult life first?

A: When it comes to my childhood, I... (cough) I don't really remember a lot. It was very confusing. My father was an alcoholic, so I had to grow up in that, and then trying to figure out what I am. But I was never a sporty type. I never played, like, sports. I tried and just didn't fit in.

Q: You were in band.

A: I was in band. I was in marching band. I played clarinet. I still can, after all these years. And childhood was just pretty rough. That's why I left home so early, at 16. As soon as I hit 16, I was gone. I just couldn't handle it any longer.

Q: How did that affect your relationship with your parents and grandparents? Were you still visiting them sometimes?

A: Oh, yeah, I would still visit. I'd go over daily and see them. Every day.

Q: And you were attending Woodward Junior High, and then Wilkes Central High School. How would you describe the overall attitudes of the teachers and the students towards gay issues?

A: Well, when I was in junior high, I really -- teachers never gave me a problem. I was bullied some by other students and, you know, laughed at and giggled at, but -- and I think it was just an awkward time. Kids were cruel. Kids were really cruel. And I think sometimes that they have changed a lot, because I see a lot more younger youth that are out than when I was their age, which is really -- I think it's a good thing, people becoming more understanding. But I was bullied, and I hung out mainly with girls. I had a few gay friends, like, you know -- like we talked about earlier -- but the teachers never gave me a problem.

Q: How was it having friends that were gay? You had befriended one person in particular, I know, in junior high. Did y'all come out to each other gradually, or was it one of those immediately recognizing kinsmen?

A: We both knew what we were in junior high, but we didn't talk about it. You know, we'd poke fun at each other and say things, and we hung out a lot together. I spent my night at his house a lot. I'd ride the bus over and spend the weekend with him and then go back to school Monday. But we were just, like, good -- we're still friends to this day, you know? Have been since seventh grade. But we never really talked about it, not until we got into high school, so...

Q: How did that evolve? (Pause) You can't remember?

A: No, I don't. I don't.

Q: I'm remembering conversations that happened during band competitions, there were some pretty anti-gay comments being said by some of the older folks when we were in ninth grade, travelling. Do you remember specific instances? Did bullying occur in certain locations in the school, or specific people, or was it more generalized bullying?

A: I don't remember any comments being said, not directly towards me. I think sometimes I might have blocked it out, after all these years. Band was the most positive thing I remember about in high school, for me. I had a great time. I don't remember any comments, not directly towards me. I just don't remember it.

Q: But what about the other parts of the school, the bullying that you did refer to? Was it specific people?

A: I did get into a fight one time. After each home football game we'd have a dance, and my good friend was just head-over-heels in love with this other guy in high school. And because we were friends, I remember at the dance one night a guy came up behind me, tapped me on my shoulder, and I turned around and he hit me. Punched me, knocked me down. And I told him, "It's because of you." (Laughter) It wasn't because of me. I don't know why he targeted me, but I remember that, in the middle of the dance floor, right outside of the cafeteria. It was the student commons. They've got it blocked in now, where the dance floor was. I remember it happened right there in front of everybody in the whole school, and then my friend was there and he took me home and told Mom and Dad what happened, you know. And he actually ended up doing work for Mom and Dad on their house. Strange. (Laughter)

But I remember another time when I was in Anatomy and Physiology class. I can't remember what was said to me, but I said something back to the guy, and he was like, "I'll whoop your ass! I'll meet you after class!" And I was like, "You know what? You just need to grow up. Give me a break. I'm not fighting you, because you're so

immature." And nothing ever happened about it. And then I had another good friend, and I remember one time the guy was calling me a fag -- and I remember who it is -- and a girl friend of mine took her boyfriend's class ring and took a lighter and heated it up and burned his neck.

(Laughter)

Q: Oh my gosh.

A: Going down the stairs after class one day. He never did bother me again. (Laughter)

Q: Were there other people who were kind of looking out for you or standing up for you?

A: I had a close group friends. Most of them were the band members that were around my age, not the older students or the seniors. But they would take -- they would look out for me. They watched out for me. I remember being propositioned in high school, too, by a fellow classmate. It's kind of very -- honestly, what he said, it was very vulgar. I asked him for change for a dollar one day, and he said, "I'll give you change for a dollar if you'll give me a blowjob." True story. I'm not going to name who the individual is, but it happened.

Q: Was it assumed at that point that you were gay, or was it widely known and...?

A: I don't think it was known. I never flaunted it. I think it was more of an assumption by other classmates.

Q: Was there ever a point where you were like, "Yes, of course," or was it something you were just, you know, pushing off?

A: Well, there was a few people I was out to, and they were understanding. They didn't care. I remember telling one girl and she cried. I think she had a crush on me, because I remember sitting outside on the curb of the parking lot, and I told her, and she started crying. And we're still friends to this day. And I tried to get her to come to the class reunion, but she refused to, you know? She ended up being a lesbian, and lives in -- down towards Greensboro. And we still talk.

In fact, when I was 16, before I had moved out, I'd met this girl -- and at that point, when I was 16, I knew and I hadn't told a lot of people, and I thought, "Well, I'm going to try to date a girl." So I met a girl, we dated, we had sex almost every night, and we broke up. We dated for a year. We broke up. Almost a year, I think it was. And now, the girl I was talking to in high school -- that I told about me being gay and her crying -- she's dating the girl that I dated. (Laughter)

Q: During that time, what did you know about gays' lives in general? Like, what messages were you getting, that "this is what gay people are like?"

A: I always got the message that it was wrong, immoral, sick, and they were perverts, child molesters that were going down to hell. I don't believe that now.

Q: But at that time...?

A: At that time, that's when I tried dating a girl, because I did not want to be that person, you know? If it's so rough. If that's the way it's going to be, I was like, "I don't want to be this." But after a few years, you learn to love yourself and realize this is who you are, you know?

Q: What was that process like, coming to terms with your sexuality?

A: Just dating that girl and dating a couple of guys and deciding on which made me feel best, which made me feel better. You know, This is my life. I've got to live it the way I've got to live it. I'm not going to live it for my mom and dad. I'm not going to live it for my grandparents or my friends. This is my life, this is who I am. And I think that's why I dated a guy and a girl around the same time, trying to figure out what was going on. And I know the girl knew. I don't know why she dated me. I

don't know. I figured out later, when she came out of the closet, maybe she knew all along.

Q: I was going to say, do you think she was trying to figure out for herself as well?

A: I think so. I think so. I really do. Because she ended up getting married, and she caught her husband with another man one time, so they're now divorced. She's dating a girl that I came out to in high school, and they're living together and got two kids. But I don't know. High school's pretty rough. Also, as you know, I quit high school in 11th grade and came to Hickory, and...

Q: What made you decide? Well, talk about how you came to decide to just leave Wilkes County completely and then decide not to get your degree here in Hickory.

A: When I came out, I remember -- I had been coming up, taking weekend trips up here to see my boyfriend now, Robert, and I just decided that after -- you know, by that point I had told my mom and dad, and they knew, and they told my grandparents.

And my grandfather was always cool. My grandfather kept a cool head. He never said one harsh word to me about it. But my grandmother took it really -- well, she'd get into bouts of crying and saying things to me about being a fag, and going to go to hell, and hanging out with a bunch

of -- "You're going to get AIDS" -- and I just couldn't handle it.

You know, I had a boyfriend, he had a house, and I said, "I just can't do this anymore." So I just quit school. One night I called him and said, "I can't handle this anymore. Come and get me." And I left Wilkes County with a garbage bag with my clothes, and that's it. That's all I came to Hickory with. I didn't have a car, I didn't have a job, or anything. He came and got me, and I snuck out of the house, left them a note. And when I moved in, I tried calling my mother and talking to her, and she was upset, crying on the phone, and told me that if I couldn't come home with a girl, to not come back home at all.

So for a year after that, there was no communication between me and any of my family members. None at all. They knew I was in Hickory, but they didn't know where I lived, or my phone number, or where I worked, or anything, you know? And I was working, and one day me and Robert and his brother -- who's now deceased; he got killed in a car wreck -- we were in Wilkesboro, and I said, "Enough is enough. I want to see Mom and Dad." So we went to the house, and I told them -- I said, "Stay in the car." And I got out of the car, and they came running out of the house into the driveway. They hugged me and said they missed me,

and I said, "Well, this is me. He's in the car. Treat him like family, or I get back in the car and I can leave."

You know, "I want you in my life, but I'm not going to discount him." You know, "He's part of my life, and he's taken me in and treated me good."

He's 43, I'm 39, so, you know, he was a little bit older and more experienced in the gay community, and that's where I met most of my friends I have now around this area. They just took me in.

Q: Was he from Catawba [County] originally?

A: Yeah.

Q: Could you talk about how you met him? Because, you know, Wilkes County doesn't have gay bars. (Laughter) How do you meet other gay people?

A: Well, we had a small group of friends. You know, when I moved out and got the apartment together, it was me and a couple of other guys, and we knew Hickory had a gay bar. So on the weekend, I remember coming up here -- well, actually, at the time, Hickory had two gay bars. One of them is still open [Club Cabaret]. The other one shut down after a few years after I moved here. But we would come up here. We were 16, we weren't of age to get in, but we'd come up here, and I remember just sitting in the parking

lot in the car, just talking to guys. We never had sex with any of the guys, we'd just come up here and talk.

Q: And "we" being?

A: Me and my roommates. And they were around the same age as I was.

Q: So, all a bunch of high school-aged kids.

A: Yeah. One of them was old enough to get the apartment in his name, and that's how we got it. And we rented a room from him, and that's where we lived. And then we'd come up here on the weekends. And I remember one time, when I was of age, I came up here and I went to the bar, had my friend drop me off. And Robert was there, and I met him. And they went to the mall, so I was at the bar by myself. And I wanted to go to the bar and meet a guy, you know? I was single at that point.

And so I went to the bar and they went to the mall, and Robert was there with his group of friends celebrating -- well, I didn't know then, but it was celebrating his birthday. So we met on his birthday, and I stayed with him. They came back and I was the bad guy. I was like, "OK, y'all? I'm going to spend the night with him." So (Laughter) I went home with him that night, spent the night with him. And then after that it was a weekend thing. I'd come up on the weekends and see him and spend the night

with him. Of course, they didn't approve, because I'd just met him, but I think at that point I just needed somebody in my life. I don't know if I'm codependent or (Laughter) what, or just wanted somebody. But that's how we met, and now our anniversary is on his birthday, January 6th.

Q: So there's no way he can forget it. (Laughter)

A: Mm-mm. And I'd better not forget it either. (Laughter)

Q: Neat. You did hit puberty during the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. How were your teachers and family and friends responding about AIDS, in conjunction to how it affected you? You've already mentioned that someone in your life was saying you were going to get AIDS. Did that come out in school as well?

A: I don't remember it being talked about in school, just hearing it on the news and from -- you know, it being a way to get rid of the gay people. And I don't remember them talking about it in school, just -- mainly, through educating myself was how I learned about it. And hearing about it on the news, seeing what a fatal disease it is, you know? It's killed thousands and thousands of gay men and women. And not even gay men and women, but, you know, heterosexual people is, you know, at risk for it too. So it's just not a gay disease. It started out everybody

thought it was, but everybody's at risk now. And I'm in a good relationship, and we're clean, you know?

Q: How did you educate yourself about it? Because I don't know which health teacher you had, but the health teachers I had all said, "We're not going to talk about sex, period." So sex education at Woodward Junior High wasn't necessarily existent at all. (Laughter)

A: I can remember sex education in elementary school, you know? I don't think everybody went through it. I don't know if you did, but in my elementary school they would take the boys in one room and take the girls in another room, and I think the girls watched a video. I know the boys did. We watched a video about your sexual organs, and how they work, and how children are born and everything. But I don't remember them talking about AIDS. I remember them talking about going through puberty and how your body will change and things like that. Your voice will deepen, and...

But it never mentioned -- I don't remember it ever mentioning homosexuality. Every time I saw them on the news, it was always portrayed as them being sick, you know? Flamboyant, and... But I know gay people in this town right now who you would never know. My dentist is a lesbian, and I love her dearly. She's the best one in Hickory.

(Laughter) She's the best in Hickory. And I don't remember them talking about AIDS. I mainly had to educate myself from talking to other people and watching the news and reading.

Q: Did you find books about gay issues?

A: I've got one right now that I bought at Barnes and Noble. I can remember what it's called. *Is It a Choice?* It's a blue book. I can't remember who wrote it, but the guy who wrote it...²

Q: It's either Paul or Mark or something like that.

A: I can't remember. I've still got it on my bookshelf. And I had one that I got when I came out to my mother and my father, that I gave them to read, but it was positive stories about, you know, "Your child is your child no matter if they're gay or straight." Because this woman had wrote it about her son who came out. And I can't remember the name of the book now. I wish I could. I would like to get it again and read it. But Mom -- I think she said she threw it away because she was so upset.

Q: Where did you find such a book? Was it at Walden's Book at the Wilkes Mall, or were they down here [in Hickory]?

A: I can't remember. I can't remember. The blue book, *Is It a Choice?* -- I bought that at Barnes and Noble. I don't

² Eric Marcus, *Is It a Choice?: Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gays and Lesbians*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

know why I bought it, but I did, and I read it. In fact, in college -- I did go on and get my GED, and I did go on and go to college and earn a degree in criminal justice. And I remember my sociology professor; he was talking in sociology class about homosexuality one day. And it wasn't a negative experience, but after class I went up to him and told him that I was gay and that I'd been with the same guy for numerous years, and I think by that time it was, like, 19 years. And he found it fascinating. In fact, I sat and talked to him about extra credit one day; he gave me extra credit for just talking to him about what it was like growing up, you know? He found it interesting. And now, when I see him, every time he still stops and speaks to me.

Q: When did you go and get your GED? Was it in your 20s or early 30s?

A: (Laughter) Mid-30s. (Laughter) When I moved to Hickory I got a job and worked. I didn't have a car; I walked to work. And that's all I did, is work. For years and years and years, I just worked. And I wanted to go into management, where I work now, but I didn't have a high school education. I hadn't completed it yet. So I went and got my GED, and when I was there the ladies were talking to me and they said, "You know, if you're doing this, you might as well go on to college. You can get a

Pell Grant." So I applied for college, was accepted, got a Pell Grant, and completed a two-year degree. And I never had any problems in college, either, that I remember. I don't know why. I had more of my problems in junior high, when kids were just cruel, and they eased up as I got into high school. I still had a few problems. And in college, you know, I went to college with other openly gay kids and never had a problem, you know? I had some looks and sneers from some of the jock-type guys, but most of the people were really cool with it. They didn't care as long as you didn't force it on them, which I'm not that type anyway.

Q: (Pause) Could you talk about what you or any of your gay friends in high school experienced depression or to trying to deal with their sexuality by self-medicating, or -- I talked to one young woman who was cutting as well as self-medicating. Was that something that was going on in the '80s and '90s as well?

A: For me that happened, too. I didn't go through depression, I don't think. I did drink, almost every day. I remember drinking a wine cooler before I'd go to class each day in high school. And then the guy who propositioned me in my first period class, who was sitting next to me -- he sat next to me every day. And I remember sitting in the parking lot of Wilkes Central, drinking a wine cooler in

the car, and then going to class. Maybe that helped me at that point, I don't know. I think maybe some of the alcoholism had ran over into me from my father, because I found out it does run in my family, so I have to be very careful when I do drink. But I do remember drinking.

I don't remember cutting myself or taking pills, but drinking was -- you know, and smoking pot. I would party. (Laughter) Go to my friend's house and party and stay out until three or four o'clock in the morning, and somebody would take my drunk butt home and I'd sneak into the house and go back to bed, and get up the next day and do the same thing.

Q: Were you aware of this as being a mechanism to help you deal with everything? Or were you thinking of it as something else, having fun?

A: I was thinking of it as just having fun. Just being a kid. I mean, not every teenager drinks, I think, but I think sometimes they experiment. And to me, it was just having fun. Doing what I wanted to do. I never thought of it as a way of self-medicating. I never did, but, again, it makes sense now. (Laughter)

Q: What were other ways you coped with being different?

A: Hanging out with the same kind of people. Hanging out with the same kind of people, I remember that. Almost all of my

friends I had, after I quit high school and before I moved to Hickory -- see, I quit high school and I still lived at home, but then I moved out. And, you know, all of my roommates were gay.

And I remember one guy who lived in the neighborhood would go to Winston, to this place they called "The Block," and what it was was just a square block where all the gay guys would go and socialize and hook up and meet each other. I went down there; I would just go to be with him. We were not a couple. He would go down there to try to meet guys. I never did. I went down there with him just to hang out, because I wanted to be around somebody like that, and just to see. So I saw a little bit of the good side of the gay community and a little bit of the bad side of the gay community, and it still exists here in Hickory. There's places you can go and cruise for other guys, but it's so dangerous. Because you see it in the paper all the time, you see undercover cops. Thank God I don't have to deal with that. But I did go through a stage like that, where I wanted to go hang out in places like that and see.

Q: How did you meet all of these other roommates of yours?
How did you all recognize each other as gay?

A: I don't remember, to tell you the truth.

Q: Were they people that all went to Wilkes Central, or were they from different schools?

A: Wilkes Central, and a couple of guys from West Wilkes that I knew were gay, that I'd met through other people. I think how I met them, now that I'm thinking about it, is I had friends that worked at Burger King. And by that point, me and my friend that I still have from junior high, we knew we were gay, and so we'd go out on the weekends, and I think he worked at Burger King and he introduced me to some other gay people, and that's where I first met the first guy I ever had sex with, when I was 16. It was through him. Because it happened in a car, in the parking lot of Wilkesboro Elementary. (Laughter)

Q: So, was Wilkesboro Elementary the gay hangout? (Laughter)

A: No, it was just a place to go. I don't know why we went there. (Laughter)

Q: Well, no one was probably there in the evenings.

A: No. No, it was late at night. And we'd started dating. We messed around there, and it got to where he would write me notes, love notes, and we ended up dating. And then we moved in together. We were together about a year, and then he started cheating on me with another guy that lived with us, so I packed up and moved back home.

Q: And at that point your parents had not known that all of your roommates were gay?

A: No, no, mm-mm. No, because there was -- one, two, me -- there was about four of us that lived there. Me and the guy, and we rented the other room out to another two guys. And they claimed to be straight, but I found out he was sleeping with one of them, because I caught him laying on the bed one day when I came home from work. And we're friends now, we talk. He still tries to get me to sleep with him, but I won't. (Laughter) It's like, "Are you crazy? What are you thinking?"

Q: So you definitely have had experiences with the seamier side of gay life.

A: Mm-hmm. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Q: Have you ever considered relocating from Hickory? And why?

A: Moving away from Hickory? I mean, I've thought about it, but it's so expensive to move. And I'm rooted here right now, with, you know, my boyfriend and his grandmother, and she's, like, 80 years old, and she stays with us. And it would be just a hard move, and I've been with the company 11 years. So, I mean, I could go somewhere else, but I just like it here.

And it's close to home, but it's not right in Wilkes County. I mean, I can take an hour trip up, see Mom and

Dad, spend the night if I have to, if I want to, and then come back home. It's not like I would have to pack up a suitcase and climb on the airplane, you know, and take a six-hour flight, or, you know, drive for numerous hours to see them. I mean, I think I'm at the perfect distance, what I like, and Hickory is the perfect-sized town right now. I would like a bigger town, maybe Atlanta, but it's such a far drive. Like I said, it's expensive to move, too, so, you know, we're pretty well-grounded right here where we're at.

Q: How did his grandmother respond to your relationship?

A: His grandmother responded really well. His mother took it really bad. She's deceased now, but I remember when I moved in with him, she was battling depression. Now, she knew about Robert, and when I moved in, I think in a way -- and we've discussed this -- I think in a way she kind of thought that I was taking her son away from her. Because he had a silver ring -- I can't wear it now, but he gave it to me, and she pitched a fit. She cried and cried for like three days, just because he gave me a ring. I moved in with him around January -- the end of January, I think it was -- and right around May, she passed away. So, she took it pretty bad.

But his grandmother didn't. You know, she lives with us. She doesn't mind one bit, you know? His brother, who's now deceased, he didn't mind one bit, and we all partied together, you know? We'd go and get some beer and sit around all night, you know, on certain nights, and drink beer and we'd smoke pot and hang out. Watch movies, listen to music, have a cook-out. But he never had a problem with it either. The family's been accepting.

Now, my family is accepting now. At first, when I would go see Mom and Dad and take him with me, we couldn't even barely sit next to each other on the couch, or hold hands, or we couldn't kiss each other in front of them. They were like, "It's too soon. We can't handle that." But over a period of years -- you know, like I said, we've been together 21 years now. I go to see them; Robert and my dad will sit out in the garage and talk about cars, or they'll sit out on the porch and cook out, or have a few beers together. Me and my mom will sit in the kitchen and talk about how things are going with me and Robert and Nanny-- and that's Robert's grandmother; we call her Nanny. You know, when first we'd spend the night, I'd have to sleep on the couch and I'd let him have the spare bedroom, but now we sleep in the same bed. They don't have any problem with it. And sometimes he goes up there and sees

Mom and Dad and I don't even have to go with him. They treat him just like a son. They get him Christmas gifts, birthday cards, everything.

Q: What was the turning point for them?

A: I don't know, I think it just took a period of adjustment for them. Because I was always -- you know, when I moved out, Mom and Dad saying, you know, "fag" this -- but Mom had a good friend that she worked with who was gay, and behind her back, I would go to his house and see him. Just to talk to him, because, you know... I'd call him and talk to him. And --

Q: This was when you had started placing the words to yourself?

A: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah. Uh-huh. And Mom says he still asks about me every so often. Of course, they don't work together anymore, but they see each other around town, because Wilkesboro's a pretty small town. They run into each other, and he's like, "How's Mike doing?" and she always tells him that me and Robert are still together. I've been to Wilkesboro a few times and tried going by his place, but I never can catch him at home. I did go out to eat here one night, years ago, and I went in and sat at the bar and ordered my food, and I heard some guy holler my name, and I looked over my shoulder and there he is sitting

there with another guy he used to hang out with that lived in the neighborhood. Now, he was openly gay. I remember, growing up, he was openly gay.

Q: How old was he? Like, how much older than you?

A: Oh, he was in his twenties. He would come up to Mom and Dad's, and, you know, he had a few drinks with Mom and Dad, and I would hang around him. I remember him taking me and my brother Chad to the movies, and some other little kids in the neighborhood. You know, nobody spoke harsh words about him, and it was openly known that he was gay, and he didn't care who liked it or not.

But when I went out to eat one day, he was there with my mom's friend, so I went and sat down and had dinner them, you know? Got to be who I wanted to be, finally.

Q: Do you feel like they were good mentors for you? Someone to look up as to "This is what my future could be?"

A: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yeah. They were honestly good guys, you know? I remember Dad and I even being like, "Oh" -- I remember one time we were watching TV, and I forgot what we were watching, but I was like, "That guy is nice. I want to be like him." And Dad was like, "You know he's a fag, right?" (Laughter) And I didn't know at that age. I'm like, "What?" And he was dancing or something. I can't remember what we were watching. But that's the kind of

stuff that I heard growing up. But they've eliminated that from their vocabulary now, obviously, because they have a 39-year-old gay son, you know? And I go up there and see some of the people that used to come around when I was a kid, and they was the same thing with them. They would say, "How can you stand a nasty fag or a queer," you know, but now I'm there and sometimes they'll come over and they see me, and they don't say that now. Mom and Dad won't let them.

Q: Did your parents raise you in a church?

A: No.

Q: So it was just your adopted grandparents being very religious?

A: Oh, very religious. But, you know, that's another confusing thing. Because I'd go to church with them, but my grandmother was so prejudiced about black people, the only word that she knew how to call them by was the n-word. And I remember confronting one of them, and I go, "Why do you go to church and then talk like that about people? That makes no sense to me. Church teaches you one thing, and then as soon as you get in the car, you start running your mouth and saying 'fag' this and 'nigger,' and..." And, you know, that's the type of person she was, and that's why eventually I just quit going around, because she

was just a mean woman. She was mean, mean, mean. She really was. After my adopted grandfather died, things just changed, and I never went back around.

Q: But your parents didn't take you to church or tell you, "This is how you should believe."

A: Mm-mm. No, there was nothing -- no religion.

Q: It was just the secular homophobia?

A: Yeah. Now, my real grandparents, they occasionally went to church. Occasionally, whenever the urge struck them. But Mom and Dad never went to church. They still don't go to church. I don't know what their religious beliefs are, but, no, they never went.

Q: So you weren't getting that part of the homophobic [belief] -- it was more the "sick perversion" rather than "you're going to hell."

A: Yeah. For my mom and dad, you know, it was sick perversion. On the other side of the family, it was sick, perverted, and you're going to hell. (Laughter) You know? You were going straight to hell for being gay.

Q: How has growing up in a rural Appalachian area affected your gender expression and sexuality development? In other words, how you express yourself as a man, and how long it took you to realize what was going on inside.

A: You know, around this area, we live in a very masculine area, where men work a job, you know, construction, or -- you know, you have to be very manly. And I've always tried to maintain that. I have some gay friends who are really flamboyant, and I can only handle so much of them. Because I think if you're a guy -- I mean, I shouldn't say this, but if you're a guy, I'd like [you] to act like a guy. If you're a girl, I'd like you to act like a girl.

(Tape stops)

(long pause)

A: I think that if you're a guy, that I don't like to be flamboyant. You know, I have worked with people and they're like, "We never knew you were gay until we met Robert," you know? And other people pick up on it right away. I don't know, I just try to maintain -- you know, around this area, people just don't understand. Still, though, people are getting better. People are getting better. I don't know.

Q: What I find interesting is you work for Cracker Barrel, which back in the '90s had a boycott against it because they had fired gay people.

A: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, they did. Back years ago, they had fired some people for being gay, because it wasn't a "family atmosphere." You know, they wanted to create a

"family atmosphere" type of restaurant, and being gay was not. They didn't approve of it. So they did fire, they got sued. I can't remember what happened out of it, but I've read about it. I knew about it when I first went to work there. And I've had people ask me the same thing. They're like, "How can you work for a company that doesn't like gay people?" I work for gay managers, there's gay people that work there now besides me, and I remember the day that they voted to put sexual orientation in their policy that says that "We can't fire you for your age, race, gender, sexual orientation..." I remember I got a phone call from the home office. I have a friend that works there, and she called me and told me that the board members had voted unanimously to put it in there, and it's in the handbook now. They cannot fire you for that. And I think it's just a learning process for them, too, you know? But I've worked with gay managers. Doing a good job, doing great.

Q: So it was more of a store-by-store practice until the board had voted on it?

A: Yeah.

Q: Well, one of the bad things about being interviewed by someone that knows you -- I'm going to play Devil's Advocate. (Laughter) I remember you learning how to do

the rifle and the flag. And you don't consider that to be not being masculine?

A: No, I don't.

Q: OK. Tell me why.

A: Because you look at some of the drum and bugle corps, and they're all men. They get out there and they wear their tights and their little shoes, and they twirl flags and the rifles. Some of the best marching bands and drum and bugle corps out there are doing that now. They were all male, and they get away with it. In fact, when we were in high school, in the student handbook, it said boys or girls were allowed to try out for the rifle team or the flag team in marching band, but that was quickly removed when a friend of mine tried out and they wouldn't let him. So they reprinted the handbook.

Q: Why didn't you try out?

A: Oh, I played clarinet. It just wasn't my thing. I was afraid I'd hit my head on the rifle or something, you know? (Laughter) I guess that's why I didn't like sports, because it was so contact. I remember going to P.E. in junior high; I wouldn't dress out half the time, not unless we went swimming. I loved swimming.

And just being in the locker room, for me, was weird. And it doesn't bother me now when I go to the gym or I go

on a cruise ship or whatever. I'll go in the steam room and I'll sit there in the nude. It doesn't bother me. I think I've just changed over the years, but back then it was odd, you know? Because I was, you know, afraid to be caught looking or anything like that. And then, you know, when it'd come to playing sports, I just refused to do it. I just did not like the full, rough, tumbling contact. I just didn't like it.

Q: So, in the locker rooms, were the other boys uncomfortable with your presence and you had internalized that? Or were you feeling like this pull towards them that you didn't want to have? Or was it something totally different?

A: It just felt odd to me. I don't think they were nervous or felt uncomfortable around me, because I really wasn't out in junior high, but I knew. Because there was a couple guys that I really had big crushes on in junior high, and one of them was actually in my P.E. class, and I remember us changing clothes together in the locker room and I just couldn't take my eyes off of him. I was just fascinated with him. I thought he was the best thing ever, but I never could come out to him and tell him how I felt. And I remember him changing with me one time in the locker room, and I think he was flaunting. He was, like, walking around in his underwear. I think he knew what he was doing,

maybe, in a way. But I'll never know, because I haven't heard from him since.

Q: So he didn't go to the reunion?

A: Mm-mm, no. I don't know where he moved. He moved somewhere; he never even graduated junior high with us. His family moved. I can't remember...

Q: What do you consider to be the biggest differences between Wilkesboro and Hickory?

A: I don't know the biggest differences, but Hickory's just a bigger -- I feel more comfortable here than when I go to Wilkesboro. Maybe it's because I've lived here longer than I did in Wilkesboro, and learned how people are, but I think people in Wilkesboro are still struggling with a lot of things.

Q: Such as...?

A: Understanding homosexuality. You know, accepting things that we would accept more in a bigger city, that you would see and not even think twice about it. Like, when I went to New York, you know, it didn't matter what you look like. They didn't care. They weren't looking at you different. That's the way it is here in Hickory. I mean, I have been discriminated here in Hickory. I threatened one guy in the grocery store one time, because he kept calling me a fag.

Like I told you, I've been stalked. One guy tried to run me off the road, threatened to kill me.

Q: These are people that you knew or just regularly saw?

A: Regularly saw, where I worked at. I was a manager for Burger King, and one night I got out of work and this guy was following me around the grocery store calling me a fag, and I grabbed a can of something off the shelf and I threatened to hit him in the head with it. (Laughter) I'd had enough! Who was this -- well, what gives you the right to follow me around in a grocery store and ridicule me at, like, midnight? You know, I want to defend myself. You know, I'd been hit one time in high school, and I wasn't going to let it happen again.

This other guy came in the store, was coming in and he was harassing me. And one day I was going through town and he followed me. And I'd seen where he went, and I went into the store. I see him talking to a woman, I went in and I said, "Who is that?" She goes, "That's my son." And I said, "Well, he's harassing me, and he'd better stop or I'm going to have him arrested." And it was shortly after that, he came by the store and he, like, motioned for me, and I went over there, and he said -- he said something. He said, "But I'll kill you if you mess with my mother again." And I'm like, "I ain't messing with your mother."

Of course, my manager heard it, and she chased him off, and I haven't seen him since. I don't know what happened to him.

Q: Would things like that happen in Wilkes County? Have you heard of other people have things like that happen in Wilkes County?

A: I'm sure it has, I'm sure it has. I haven't heard first-hand. You know, I don't keep up with a lot of what goes on up there unless it comes through Mom and Dad or my best friend. But I'm sure it has. I'm sure it happens in every city, somewhere, to somebody. Everywhere. But, you know, I've traveled to Oregon, I've been to New York City, and this area, I think, is just a difficult area because of the country feel that we still have, even in Hickory. You know, they were farming communities, and, you know, people expect you to not be gay. They expect you to live -- if you're gay, you know, it's like San Francisco or somewhere, the big city. Around here it's just rough, because it's more of a masculine-type area.

Q: But less so than Wilkesboro somehow?

A: Mm-hmm, yeah. They're still very country in Wilkesboro.

(Laughter)

Q: So, you just had your 20th high school reunion. Could you talk about what your reception was by your classmates, and what you participated in?

A: Everybody was real nice. Everybody was real nice. Even people that I didn't really talk to a lot in high school, or were not close with, were very open and understanding. You know, they knew I took my boyfriend to the reunion. People that I normally never, ever talked to in high school or was good friends with, even in junior high, would come up and I'd introduce him: "Hey, this is so-and-so, Robert. This is my boyfriend." Nobody said a harsh word. But we went to a party afterwards, and he was welcome there. He went and done his thing, talking to people, and I went and done my thing and talked to people.

Q: Did you lose any of your friends?

A: No. No. Mm-mm. I think we've actually gotten closer with time. I really do. There was a lot of people that I didn't associate with in high school, because they had their group of friends and I had my group of friends, and now we're just grewed up and matured and learned to accept a lot of things in our lives, and we talk more. People that I never would associate with, because you know what it was like. I mean, they had the rich kids, and then I wasn't one of the rich kids. You know, I wasn't poor, but

I wasn't rich as some of the other kids, my parents weren't. But we just never socialized. We'd speak, have classes together. But now, when I -- like, when I went to the reunion, or I work on the committee for Larry Bauguess -- people, like, that are on there, that they were some of the most popular students, don't say a word about it. I took Robert to the fundraisers every year, and he helps run the booth, make money.

Q: Could you talk about what you're referring to, the Larry Bauguess Memorial --

A: Yeah, the Larry Bauguess Memorial Foundation.³ We raise money every year. Larry was a classmate who was killed in Pakistan, after a peace talk. They were arbitrating the war down there, and after the peace talk, he came out and was assassinated. So some classmates of his got together and formed a committee and set up a scholarship fund, and every year we have a baseball tournament. And we raise money through the donations, we have a silent auction, pancake breakfast, and we raise money for a scholarship. We give two scholarships every year to a Wilkes Central student, one for a male and one for a female, and they have to fill in an application from the guidance counselor, and they have to have certain qualities that we put down. And

³ Major Larry Bauguess was assassinated on May 14, 2007. For more information, see <http://www.majlarrybauguess.org/index.html>.

then the teachers or the counselors pick the winner. We don't pick the winner. That's part of the deal. They pick it, so there's no chance of them saying that we were showing favoritism. But it's a good foundation. We've already given away two. We just had another fundraiser and we raised over \$4,500, and we've redid the baseball field and had it resowed and planted and everything.

Q: Because he was an athlete.

A: Uh-huh, he was a baseball player. And I wasn't a good friend of Larry, but it's just a good thing to do, because he was a soldier and he fought for our country. I mean, I had class with him, and he never spoke one hard word to me. Nothing harsh. In fact, Robert goes to those, too. He helps with it, too.

Q: With the bullying that occurred, do you recall whether any of the teachers or the principal, Dr. [Alexander] Erwin, intervened or discouraged behaviors?

A: Not that I remember. Not that I remember. I never went to the principal about anything like that, or any of my teachers. You know? I just dealt with it.

Q: Did anyone go to the teachers?

A: If they did, I don't know about it.

Q: OK. Since you've moved to Hickory, you've become part of the gay community here. Have you participated in any

organizations here, such as the Gentlemen's Club? I believe you said you were involved with a dinner club. Can you talk about that?

A: There is a gay men's group here. We socialize, we go out to dinners and meet each other, and we have a cookout each year at this place over by the house. (inaudible) bought this big white house, and for \$20 a head we get to go over there, enjoy the pool, she furnishes the food and caters it, and we socialize. And then, after the sun goes down, we all go skinny-dipping. (Laughter) So, I mean, that's about all I do. I go to the bar once a year, maybe, just to have a drink and see what's going on, but I'm just over that. I'd just rather stay at home.

And I have friends I socialize with here that are gay. I tried calling one of my friends here on the way over here, but he must not be at home today. He's getting ready to move to Nevada, and he works in the oil industry. A payroll manager, yeah. And his boyfriend will have to stay here, because he has a house here and his kids are here. And in fact his brother's gay, too. But I socialize, but not a lot. I just don't, not as much as I used to. But I get out a lot more than a lot of people I do know.

Q: Have you participated in any of the fundraisers that have gone on, or the support groups that are around?

A: No.

Q: Do you know much about what ALFA [Hickory's direct service AIDS agency] is doing?

A: Sometimes I go to that Dining for Friends at the country club. Somebody will usually host a dinner at their house, and we pay to go to it. In return, we get a ticket, and then we have a gala night. Robert and I, we go to the country club at Rock Barn, and they have hors d'oeuvres and a silent auction and a dance. And it's just not gay people there, or men. There's doctors and lawyers that are supporting it, and we raise thousands of dollars to do that. And then usually you can take your ticket and go to the Cabaret, which is the local gay bar here, and they'll let you in for, like, five dollars off admission or something like that. And I haven't -- I didn't go to it this year. I don't remember if they've had it yet or not. They usually send me a letter, and I don't remember receiving it yet. Because I know I'm on their mailing list. ALFA mails me letters every so often about stuff going on. But I just haven't donated my time to that, you know? I should. I really should.

Q: How has AIDS affected Catawba County?

A: I know people that live here and have AIDS. But I don't know how it's affected Hickory. I really don't. In fact,

I just had a good friend call me and said he just found out he had AIDS. And this lady come to work with me, her son came out of the closet when he was 16, and he's 19 now, and sometimes he would come over and we would cook out and let him spend the night, and we would watch movies. You know, just kind of take him under our wing and try to show him, you know -- show him to avoid the mistakes that I've made, you know, by drinking and hanging out with the wrong crowd sometimes. In fact, he just contacted us about three months ago and said that he had met a guy online who slept with him, and the guy gave him AIDS. He's 19 years old.

Q: So he's HIV-positive at 19?

A: 19 years old, yeah. It's sad. I've been very fortunate. I mean, I haven't slept around a lot, but, you know, I think every -- I think sometimes in the gay community there's more sleeping around than there is in the heterosexual community. I don't know, because I'm not heterosexual, but I'm sure it happens all around. But I've been fortunate, because, you know, not every time I've slept with somebody has it been totally safe sex. But I'm clean. My boyfriend is too.

Q: What do you think are the good points of growing up gay in the mountains? Are there good points?

A: Growing up gay in the mountains?

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Good points?

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: Oh, (Laughter) that's a hard question. I don't know. That's a tough question, because I've not grown up gay anywhere else. (Laughter) I don't know what it would be like to grow up gay anywhere else. I really don't. I don't know if it would be easier or harder. I think it's tough to grow up gay here, because of the location.

Q: Why? But what about it?

A: The country. It's just out -- I mean, Hickory is a pretty big city, but it's still got that country feeling.

Q: That traditional America.

A: Yeah. And plus you're in the Bible Belt, too. That doesn't help, you know? I mean, there's a few places -- there's a church -- there's a couple churches here in town where you can get -- they're openly, you know, Unifour -- one church I went to for a while, you know, everybody that went there was gay, and they had some straight people that went there, too.

Q: So there's some affirming churches around?

A: Oh, yeah, mm-hmm. Yeah, there is.

Q: Are there in Wilkes County?

A: Not that I know of. Not that I've heard of, either. I know there's a church here in Hickory called the Unifour MCC Church.⁴ And I can't remember the name of the other one. There's three that I know of.

Q: There's an inclusive interracial church that's supposed to be in Hickory. I don't remember the name.⁵

A: I don't go to church, but maybe I should. But I just usually sleep in on Sundays and relax. That's my day of rest. (Laughter)

Q: (Laughter) Are there any other stories that you wanted to make sure that you had included?

A: I don't know. Not that I know of. I'm sure I'll think of something later, if you want to do another interview. I can drive up to Boone. But I can't think of anything right now.

Just that my family's real accepting. I mean, well, my cousin lives in Portland, Oregon. I went and saw her back in October, and her family, her parents, live in Virginia, and I'd go see them sometimes for, like, Easter or Thanksgiving. And I just felt things were a little bit tense, you know? It just didn't feel right. So when I went to Portland, Oregon, and saw my cousin, I asked my

⁴ Unifour Christian Fellowship.

⁵ Exodus Missionary Outreach Church.

cousin Sandy -- I asked her -- I said, "Am I the only gay man in the family, or the only gay person?" And she was like, "No," and she named off a couple other people that were gay that I didn't know about.

Q: But you knew the individuals?

A: Yeah, I knew them, but I didn't -- it was, like, never spoken. It was like, "Shh, don't talk about it." And I said, "Well, I just think that your mother has a hard time dealing with it." And she goes, "My mother loves you to death." She said she remembers one time, for Thanksgiving, me and Robert went up to Virginia to spend Thanksgiving with her, because my cousin was in from Oregon and I wanted to see her too. And my aunt's husband, my uncle, said, "I can't believe that they're coming up here," you know, made a snide comment like that. And she said, "Well, Michael's my nephew, and he's coming up with his boyfriend. If you don't like it, go eat dinner somewhere else."

You know, and I thought, "Well, I didn't know she was that cool about it." You know, and I would go see my other aunt, my dad's sister, Donna, who still lives in Wilkesboro. I'll go see her every once in a while when I'm up there, and I'll go in and she always asks -- if Robert's not with me, she's like, "Well, where's Robert? Where's he at?" It just takes time for people to understand it and

accept it, and it takes a little while to -- people need to educate themselves, you know?

Q: Do you think gay people should take it on themselves to be trying to reach out and educate the general population?

A: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Q: How could you see that happening in an area like this?

A: Well, maybe interviews like we're doing right now.

Educating, you know, coming up with publications. You know, a newspaper interview. They don't have to show the picture of the person being interviewed, just show them from the back, and, you know, general questions like you're asking me now, about what it's like growing up gay in this area and that it's OK to be who you are. Because so many people suffer. I mean, people that are adults, who are like, "I can't tell my employer. They can't find out." And I'm like, "Well, how can they not know? Because, you know, you live with a girl, or you live with another guy." You know? How do they not know? I would just rather deal with it instead of trying to hide.

I remember some of my worst times were when I was in the closet. I mean, I was trying to hide things, and I felt miserable and uptight and, you know, like I said, in high school, I was drinking, and I think that might have been part of the problem, too, you know? Drinking to cover

up what I was feeling. But after I came out and started telling people, "Look, hey, I'm gay. This is who I am." Or, just, you know, introducing them to Robert, "This is my boyfriend." Going out to eat and sitting at the same side of the table as him.

I've seen that the discrimination started to decline for me. I don't know, it seems really weird, but if I think about it -- and I told people that, that when I came out of the closet, I felt like the discrimination kind of went away. And we still encounter looks, you know? I used to have a rainbow flag on the front of my car, and I remember a guy who didn't even know who I was came to the intersection, saw me, and shot me the bird, just because of that thing. (Laughter) Just because I had the rainbow flag. I took it off, haven't had a problem since.

But it's just important that we do educate people, to things like this. And it's all right to be who you are. I like who I am now. It took many, many years for me to get to that point, you know? Through having boyfriends and girlfriends and drinking and moving out and running away from home and not speaking to my parents for a year and educating myself. And I learned to like myself, and there's nobody out there -- I don't care who they are, a religious group or a psychology professor or -- who's going

to tell me that this was a choice for me. It's not a choice. It's something I knew, and as I went through puberty, I started to understand who I am, you know? I didn't wake up one day and think, "OK, I'm going to wear white socks and I'm going to be gay for the rest of my life." Why would I choose to be gay when it's one of the most, you know, discriminated areas of America right now? That's what I ask everybody. And they're like -- I have people asking me, "How do you know you're gay?" And I'm like, "How do you know you're not gay? How do you know you're straight?" You know, you know what you like and you know what you don't like. That's the way I see it. It's who I am.

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