

K. Gentry

Q: This is Kathy Staley on February 23, 2010 with Kelly Gentry and we are here to talk about your various activities. Can you start with saying your name, age, birth county, and residency.

A: Current residency?

Q: Mm-hmm.

A: OK. I'm Kelly Gentry. I am 20, almost 21. And I was born in Surry County, but grew up in Wilkes County, and I now live in Watauga.

Q: All right. And, so you spent your entire K-12 experience in Wilkes County?

A: Yes.

Q: OK. Could you first talk about how you learned about homosexuality, and I use homosexuality.

A: Yeah. I don't like that word. Gosh, that's a tough question. I don't ever remember learning about it. Gosh. I guess the first memory I have of really considering it and thinking about it is ironically I was at Sunday School and our preacher let us open it up that day. Usually, they have a specific thing they want to talk about, but that day, they opened it up to questions, and my best friend in the church, Hannah, asked what should we think or say about

these girls that go out to these parties and make out with each other? And I was like, "what, girls do that?" I'm like, that's the silliest question ever. But then everyone else was like, "oh, yeah, yeah, is that bad?" You know, like asking about the ethics of it I guess. And I went home and asked my sister about it. I was like -- because she was in high school. I was younger.

Q: What age were you? Middle school?

A: Middle school sometime. Yeah. Let's see. I was in seventh grade when my sister was a senior, so that's probably around when it was. And so I was like, Julie, is it true that girls will go out to parties and get drunk and make out with each other? And she was like, "yeah. I've known girls who do that." And I'm like, "why. Like, really? Like who do you know?" Like I had all these questions, like I remember specifically just being like amazed that girls did that. And, you know, actually I'm ashamed to say that it was almost not curiosity but I guess I just thought that I needed to be angry toward people that were doing that, and I was like, "well I think it's wrong. Whoever is doing that, they shouldn't be doing that." You know? But that was just what was drilled in my head. So.

Q: What did the minister respond?

A: Yeah, the funny thing is I don't even remember what he said. I think I was just still processing the idea in my mind, that somebody my age knew of it happening even. I have no idea what he said. I can't remember.

Q: And then as you grew up, did you hear about it more and more? Because you were in middle school when Ellen DeGeneres had come out and there was a lot of increased media during that time period.

A: Yeah. Believe it or not, I didn't really watch a lot of TV. So, I don't remember Ellen coming out at all. Actually, I don't remember much of Ellen until *Finding Nemo*, (laughter) but I mean, I guess it came up from time to time. I know I can think of times when my dad would say derogatory things, not about lesbians but about gay men. He, you know, he would use the word flamer. I don't think I ever remember hearing him saying faggot, though. I really don't think he's ever said that. But he would say flamers or those queers. Those queers. Yeah, that was probably his choice term for gay guys. But he didn't mention much about lesbians. I do remember one time, my best friend, Ira, he was kind of like a punk kind of kid in middle school, and he had these really cool army pants that he bought from a surplus store and had like wrote things all over them and like drew peace signs and like put

patches on them and stuff. And I really wanted some. So I begged my dad to take me to the army surplus store to buy some army pants, and he called me a dyke, and I was like, "what? No, I'm not. I just want to be cool." I was kind of mad at him for saying that, but kind of for the wrong reasons. I thought he was just insulting me. I don't know. I'd never really thought about me being, you know, that person before. So.

Q: Could you describe your coming out process?

A: Oh, gosh. It is definitely a process. A very long process. I feel like everyday I come out a little more. Like, you know, I mean, for my parents just to know that I'm gay, there's a lot more to it than that. Like, they don't know that, you know, they don't know for example that me and my girlfriend won't be able to see each other in the hospital, you know. They don't know the rules, the law and stuff. So I feel like every chance I get to inform them about something related to being gay is another step in coming out. But, I guess it all started in high school. Where do I start? There was a girl on my soccer team who was openly a lesbian. She had moved to another high school and had come out there and then came back to our high school [East Wilkes High School], and it was a big deal when she was coming back. "Oh, [teenaged girl] is coming

back." I was like, "what's the big deal with that? She's a great soccer player. We're going to be awesome again." And I remember this one girl in my girls' chorus class who was on my soccer team. She was blonde and pretty and whatever, and she was -- she was like, "well, I don't want that lesbian on our team." And I was like, "oh, [teenaged girl] is a lesbian? Oh, OK. I mean, I think she's cool. Whatever." And she came back and we, I don't know, I guess I always kind of had a soft spot for people that were outcasts anyway. Like, all of my friends were like alternative people anyway, so I started hanging out with her because I kind of felt bad for her and I just realized that we had a lot more in common than I had first recognized and she started talking about like her feelings with the girls she had dated and how she had felt with guys before and she had like felt nothing with them. And I was like, "gosh, that sounds so familiar." So I guess that was when I started putting the word lesbian beside my name. And I remember in that time, I was 15, sitting in front of my mirror in the bathroom and trying to look myself in the eye and saying, "you're a lesbian, Kelly. You're a lesbian." And at first, especially that word lesbian for some reason, I couldn't say. At first I would be like, "I like girls," or -- and then I could say, "I'm gay." And

then finally I had worked all the way up to, you're a lesbian, Kelly. And saying that I'm a lesbian and once I got that down, I started saying it to people and I -- I kind of liked [teenaged girl] for a little while, but it didn't really work out because we were just too good of friends. And then I met another girl and in our relationship, I was outed a lot; more than I ever noticed. People were talking about me I didn't know. And if they had asked me, I probably would have told them. I guess at the time I considered myself bisexual because there were some guys that I still cared about a lot, but it took me a while to realize that just because I cared about them, didn't mean I wanted to sleep with them. So, I wasn't so sure of myself, but people knew somehow. People would talk about it and people who knew that they were gay and lesbian in my high school would come up to me and come out to me all the time. And I'm like, "well, how did they know to come out to me?" I don't know. I guess I was kind of oblivious.

Q: How large was your high school and how many people are you talking about coming out to you?

A: Yeah, I went to a very, very small high school. I think there were 110 in my graduating class, and I know -- we weren't the biggest class. I think the class below us was

a little bit bigger, but not a whole lot bigger. So, you know, like 500 people I guess in our whole high school. So it's like you know everybody. And, I mean, half of my Facebook now, it's like I'm Facebook friends with everybody from my whole high school time, so it's like, I mean, everybody knows. You can't escape it.

Q: Mm-hmm. And, how, first of all, you went to East Wilkes High School, which, that's Ronda -- right?

A: Yeah. East is -- East is in Ronda. It's very rural. It's like 10 minutes from Elkin and 30 minutes from Wilkesboro. It's kind of nothing else around East Wilkes.

Q: Right. How would you describe the overall attitudes of the teachers and the students? People were talking about you, but **how** were they talking about you?

A: Yeah, that's an interesting question, especially with the teachers. Because around that time -- I was so oblivious, you know. I didn't know really what was going on around me, but I did notice around that time that my relationship with my girlfriend was coming out to people. I noticed that teachers that were close to me before started kind of pushing me away a little bit. And then others that weren't nice to me before, started taking me under their wing, and I feel like there's this whole other story that I don't even know about happening with the teachers because

teachers that I could go to to talk to from freshman year on, like, they were kind of cold with me in my senior year, especially. And I can't think of any other reason why that would be than me being gay. And, there was one teacher -- I won't say who she is or anything, obviously -- but she was rumored to be a lesbian and I was very close with her. Even through my senior year we stayed close. But I remember feeling very frustrated with her that she didn't reach out to me. I was like, "why doesn't she ask me what I'm going through. I know she knows," you know, and I think I might have taken some anger out on her on accident, because I was just frustrated with not being able to talk to her because I felt like we had the same problems and she couldn't be out at our school. Neither could I, really. So. That's kind of how it was with the teachers. With the students, yeah, some of them, like, I guess some of them didn't believe it or something because still it would happen that girls would get jealous if I hung out with their boyfriends and I guess maybe it's kind of a sign of the times, you know, because it happens -- it's almost a trend for young girls to make out with other girls or to say that they're bisexual and stuff and so I think reactions were really mixed. Some people just didn't care and some people just thought it was me being a wild party

girl and there were a few people that I think responded negatively, but didn't really say anything to me about it. And those were people I wasn't friends with anyway because I knew how they were with other kids for anything. Like, at my school, we had one girl that dressed like gothic. You know, like black and chains and all that and she was the sweetest girl that I knew and we were really good friends and I could see from watching her who I wanted to be friends with and who I didn't because of how people reacted to that. And so if people were saying stuff about me bad, then I didn't hear it because I didn't hang around them.

Q: Did you have anyone in the school come out to you? How many were there? And did you all form like a friendship group?

A: Oh, definitely. Yeah. Yeah. My closest friends, like, and especially the ones that I still am in contact with, we all have some kind of like weird outcast thing going on anyway and so our numbers would grow as people came out, if you put it that way. I mean, not all of my core friends are gay from my high school, but all of them are very open -- they're straight but not narrow if you will. They're very open to it and, I mean, I don't know the exact number, but it would take me a minute to sit here and count, but at

least five. Somewhere probably between five and 10, which is a lot for a small high school. People have come out to me since my senior year until now from my high school.

Q: OK. Was there pretty much acceptance and lack of epithets being thrown at people? Or was there stuff like that going on in the halls and in the buses?

A: The only time that I remember anything really happening like that was there was this one guy, you know, that one guy, and he, ironically, was my closest neighbor, but that's not saying much. He was still one mile away, so we weren't that close. But, we had grown up together. In classes together since kindergarten. Rode the same bus and everything. And I remember during my senior year walking down the hall with my girlfriend and he muttered something under his breath and looked at us and his little redneck boys with him were laughing. I don't know what he said, but it was obvious to me that it was about me and my girlfriend's relationship, but I just kind of blew it off. You know, I was just kind of like, whatever, he's a stupid redneck. I don't care. That was really the only really direct thing. I think it was harder for my girlfriend because she was not as accepting of herself as I was. I could just brush it off, but for her, it was hard that people were talking about us. And it was interesting --

her aunt was a hairdresser in a small town. There's not that many hairdressers. Everybody goes to the same one, and you know what happens: you sit down in the chair and they start messing with your hair and they ask you about, "you know, what's the new gossip." So her aunt was hearing all this stuff about us. You know, people would bring it up. "Isn't that girl your niece? And what is she hanging out with that Kelly girl for." So, that was hard. I guess we found out in such a roundabout way that people were talking about us because it was her -- people told her aunt and then her aunt told her mom and then her mom talked to us and we were like, "huh." You know, we -- that was kind of -- we didn't realize we were doing anything bad until that moment or "bad," you know. So, no really directly like mean, hateful things have happened, but just people just running their mouths was the biggest problem for us.

Q: Did you, or any of your gay classmates, experience depression, trying to deal with sexuality by "medicating" it with alcohol/drugs, or consider suicide?

A: Certainly, and I was one of them. I started drinking and smoking cigarettes and weed in high school. I also was cutting myself - not to kill myself, but it was a kind of symbolic release from all my pent-up emotions. When things

were too intense or too heavy I would get really drunk and high and it felt like there was too much pressure under my skin and so I would cut it to feel a relief from the pressure. I considered suicide a lot. It was always in the back of my mind. There was only one time though that I almost went through with it. My girlfriend had been cheating on me with all these guys, also verbally and physically abusing me and for crazy reason, even through all of that, I got really upset because she broke up with me. I think I felt like she was the only person who really knew me and she was all that I had. But I got really upset and drank over a half of a fifth of vodka by myself and smoked a whole pack of cigarettes (and I have asthma - I was hoping I would just stop breathing). My dad was at work and I went to his room and got his depression medicine and considered taking the whole bottle. I just stared at the bottle crying and I couldn't do it. I really didn't care if I lived for another day, but I couldn't do it. I think I had alcohol poisoning that night. But I got through it. I know that some of my friends went through similar experiences. Not just the gay ones. All of my friends were outcasts. We were brought together by a sense of not fitting in anywhere else. Many of my friends got into very heavy drugs. I know they were doing coke and snorting pills

(roxys and colonapins, especially) in addition to natural hallucinogens like mushrooms and weed and still drinking heavily. Some of them were cutting too. And we were all open with each other about it, but we just needed to get out of our situations before we could move on.

Q: How did you/other kids navigate romantic (or sexual or whatever) relationships within this environment?

A: Like you would expect. There was a rule against PDA's on campus, but it was one of those rules that everyone expects you to break and you don't get in any real trouble for breaking it. So the straight boys and girls would flirt and sometimes kiss and hang all over each other in the halls. But my girlfriend and I never ever touched while at school. Not a one armed hug, no high fives, nothing. Part of that was because of her insecurities about her identity. I would have been bold enough to hold her hand or rub her back or something like that. But I would still have been careful of who I did that around. I was still scared, but just not as scared as her.

Q: How did your families respond when you finally told them?

A: OK. That's a big question. And my family and her family were very, very, very different. Just first their backgrounds were very different. I mean, my parents, they went on to college. My mom got her master's degree. They're more educated and, I guess, open minded compared to her kind of family. Her family was terrible. They were just awful. And, at first, they just thought that I was the greatest thing in the world because she had -- she had gotten sick and she had to get her tonsils taken out and I was just head over heels. And I'm like, everything has to stop because the person I care about is sick. And I skipped school to go with her to the hospital and, you know, the next few days as soon as I got out of school I would be at her house and I would stay there all night, you know, getting her everything that she wanted. And her parents thought I was so great because I did that. And then I could tell all of a sudden there was this big shift with her parents and how they treated me because for a long time, I would be at their house more than I would be at my own house and they loved it and they, you know, I played with her little brother and sister and they loved me and it was really great and then all of a sudden, like they were really cold with me and they'd question me a lot, ask me all these really weird questions about my religion and my

upbringing and what my parents are like and I'm like, "ya'll have never done this before." I don't know. And I guess my girlfriend figured out what was going on and she warned me that they must have found out about what we were doing and she was scared. She had a right to be because, not too long after that, I was at their house and her dad called me out to his garage, just me and him, and I get out there and like he's just -- he's a good old boy in every sense of the word and, you know, he had his country music blasting and he had his gun, like, laying out. You know, he wasn't holding it or anything, but it was in plain sight between us and drinking his beer, you know, and he proceeds to tell me this story about his past and, you know, he'd been in a lot of trouble in his past and he told me one night he had got out and he was partying too hard and this guy said something to him and he didn't even know what it was that he said, but it really set him off and he got into a fight with this guy and he does not know to this day if that guy lived through that night. That's what he said to me. And I was like, "huh, that's interesting. Good story." And then he was like, "now I want to ask you something and this is really serious and you better tell me the truth: are you dating my daughter?" And I was like, "no. What?" I was like, "that's ridiculous. What." So

it was a little scary because he was obviously threatening me and her mom just really didn't want to talk about it with me. She didn't ever really directly talk about it to me, but it was just in the way that she treated -- the difference in the way that she treated me that it was obvious that she was not happy about it and I can honestly say that her parents were the demise of our relationship because they were just over the top. I was afraid of them and so was my girlfriend. She was scared to death of her parents and their reaction.

Q: If you remain in touch with your ex-girlfriend, is she still struggling with her sexuality? Has she come out to her family or is she trying to live a heterosexual life?

A: My ex is still a little crazy, I think. There are some emotional and mental scars from being raised by her insane conservative, religious parents. She'll never be able to leave behind some of the things she has gone through with them, which there are things far deeper and worse than just her being in a relationship with me. She told me that her father physically and sexually abused her as a child and he physically abuses her sister and mother. She also told me of some other crazy things that he has put her through involving drug deals and stolen cars and hand guns - all from when she was way too young for that. Those things have

really screwed up her self-esteem and her image of the world. Because of all that, her sexuality is more than she can really handle. I can tell that things have gotten some better for her, though. She was afraid to leave her sister and mother at the mercy of her father. She felt she had to stay home to protect them, but she finally left home and got her own place. She is living with her new girlfriend, and she claims to not have cheated on her and abused her like she did me. And she is apologetic for the things she did to me. But she is still not really out. She just says that her girlfriend is her roommate. Even people who graduated with us still ask me if she is "really gay" - whatever that means.

My parents on the other hand, I guess they started hearing stuff around the same time. Not my dad, though. He's kind of like me. He's just oblivious to stuff. And my mom is a high school teacher at Wilkes Central, so it hopped the teacher train over to another school, you know. Teachers like to talk, I guess. And my mom took me out to dinner one time and it just so happened that another teacher walked into this restaurant whose daughter is best friends with the only openly gay kid at that time at Wilkes Central. So she used that I guess to start talking about

it. She was like, "oh, [2nd teenaged girl] is out at Wilkes Central and everybody knows about it, and I heard that you were hanging out with her girlfriend, [1st teenaged girl]." And I was like, "that's true. [1st teenaged girl] plays on my soccer team. She's a great soccer player. We have a lot in common, you know. She's just fun to hang around with." And I was like, "she's a cool girl." And mom was like, "well, aren't you worried that people will start thinking that you're one of them." And I'm like, "well, you know what, I guess some people might think that. It hadn't really crossed my mind." And I was like, "well, oh well if they do." I didn't care. And mom, I guess she didn't know what else to say after that. She just got really serious and was very unhappy for the rest of the evening and that marked a long process with my mother that is still going on to this day of this back and forth about my sexuality and I've gone to great lengths with both of my parents and it's tough with my mom, especially. I guess it's an image thing with her, especially being a teacher. She just retired so maybe it will get better with her.

But my dad has done a lot better with it. At first, he was really upset and he told me that he wouldn't stand for it and he couldn't support me if I were gay. And I said,

"well, I'm not gay, because I need your money." So, I just kind of lied and went with it. And then I came to college and it got to the point where I just couldn't keep going without my parents knowing. And so what I did, let's see, this was two Christmases ago I think, I bought this book called *Straight Parents, Gay Children*. And I bought a copy for each of them and I went through the book and I marked and highlighted and wrote specific things, specific for each parent, because my parents are divorced and it's totally different situations for them. So -- and I wrote specific things that happened to me between me and them and issues I was having and then I wrote a separate letter on top of that specific to the parent saying how hard it is for me to be closeted and I just want to be who I am and I wish they'd accept it and how the bottom line is that I love them and I know that this secret is alienating us and I didn't want that. I wanted them to be an active part in my life basically. And then I made them this really cheesy CD of songs about families and relationships, you know, between parents and children and wrapped it all up and hid them in the back of their Christmas trees so that when they were cleaning up Christmas they would find it. Because I didn't want it to be a big deal at Christmas, you know.

So that worked out really well with my dad. It really impacted him and to this day if you ask him about it, he'll cry. And I think it was just a big wake-up call for him. And now he's great. He came to SAGA, the Sexuality and Gender Alliance. He came to Parents' Day. Made everybody cry that night. And he talks about it. He knows that my plans are to go off with my girlfriend and to make a life together and he's probably the most supportive person in my family.

Q: How has your sister responded? What impact has your advocacy efforts in school having on your family?

A: My sister is great! I actually told her long before I told my parents.

I told her my freshman year in college. We were both home for Thanksgiving Break and wanted to go visit our friends from high school and so she drove and dropped me off at a friend's house. Well, my friend took us out to get dinner and at the restaurant I saw my ex having a dinner date with a new girl. We hadn't been broken up very long at all and I got real upset. We went back to my friend's house and had a few drinks and when my sister picked me up I was drunk and had been holding back the tears. I started bawling in her

car and told her everything. She was great. She didn't even hesitate to tell me that my ex isn't worth it and that being a lesbian doesn't make me a bad person and that she loves me no matter what. She just married a guy that she had been dating since back then and so he has known since before my parents too and he is just great. I call him my brother, not just brother-in-law. He likes to buy me rainbow home décor. Unlike them, it definitely took some time with my dad. But now that he is on my side, it's great. With his family, we have discussed that his side of the family is never going to be down with it and honestly, he's never gotten along with them all that well and so now he makes me feel better about them because he kind of rejects them. He makes up excuses for us to skip holidays when he can so I don't have to deal with their homophobia. My education has never been impacted by my sexuality. At least not negatively. I've always been an honor student. If anything, I think I tried extra hard in school so that I knew that I at least had that for my family to be proud of me, even if they weren't proud of my sexuality.

Q: Wow.

A: It's a good story, right.

Q: Yeah, it is. What has been the larger community's response to your coming out in -- I'm talking about in Ronda.

A: That's a place I avoid. I don't really -- I don't go back home. My dad lives there. My mom lives in another county. She lives in Alexander County now. And I know it hurts my dad's feelings that I don't go back, but it's hard for me to go back, specifically because of the memories of coming out and especially related to how I was treated by my ex-girlfriend and her family. It's like if I go home, it's just like this rush of memories about it and it's painful for me. So I don't go home a lot, but I try to keep in touch with other people in other ways and I know that my being gay is more widely known than it was. And, also, I really believe more accepted than it was in high school, especially among my peers. Because there has been a few people that I've talked about it, kind of just because I was tired of making up whatever lie and was shocked at how supportive they were, especially compared to how they treated me in high school. Just this week, I was on Facebook and there was this girl specifically who had gotten upset with me because I was hanging around her boyfriend and at the same time I started hanging around him, he broke up with her, and honestly, he might have had a little crush on me. I don't really know. Like I said, I'm oblivious to stuff like that. So she was really upset at me in high school and stopped talking to me and she was

a cheerleader and had her whole little cheerleader posse mad at me and it was like a nightmare. All these people were so mad and I was like, "what did I do?" I didn't know what I did. It was bad, and it was one of those things that I subconsciously held onto, you know. And I saw her on Facebook and I said "I feel like this is something I'm ready to let go." So I messaged her and I'm like, "you know, I'm sorry. I don't think I really handled things so well back then and I just wanted to tell you that I'm a lesbian and I never had anything for your boyfriend." I mean, they're married, now. They're still together, so I didn't know what she would say. I had no idea, but she wrote me back and she was like, "you know, I think about that all the time and how stupid we were in high school and how jealous everybody gets over the smallest things" and she said, "people would tell me obvious lies about stuff they saw you all doing and I would know it was not true but I would still get upset" and she was so apologetic and she was like, "I know it must have been hard for you to be a lesbian in high school and I don't blame you for not coming out as much, you know." And she was so supportive, you know. And as the perfect blonde cheerleader girl, I did not expect that, but I am proud of my community for supporting me as well as they have.

Q: Cool. One of the questions that I like to ask is how has living in a rural Appalachian area affected your sexuality development and how you behave as well?

A: Yeah. I think as far as identity goes, and, you know, that's all it really boils down to is your identity and I identify as a mountaineer - as a person from the Appalachian Mountains before I identify as a lesbian and, you know, like growing up in the rural North Carolina area, it's just more important to me, I guess, and like really, I did -- I play Bluegrass music. I love it. I love the culture. I love the mountains. I love everything there is about being from this area and it has been something interesting for me to watch out in my life, about how my sexuality has interacted with that, and in some cases, it's been kind of hard and in a lot of cases, not really. I think the most difficult thing about it is that around here, we don't talk about it I guess as much. And when I was a kid, like I said, I didn't know what a lesbian was. I, you know, it seemed like everybody knew but me. In my household and in just my smaller community where I grew up, you know, I did not know about this stuff. So, I think if I had grown up in a more urban place, then I would have known and it wouldn't have been so hard for me to come to terms with.

Q: What about how you behave with your girlfriends in the past and now that you're at a not necessarily urban university but you're at Appalachian State University, which has well-established gay organizations -- LGBT organizations -- that have been in existence for quite some time.

A: Yeah. So, when I had my girlfriend in high school, we -- there was no PDAs [public display of affection] at all. You know. And often we would go somewhere and she would end up flirting with random guys, just to make it look like we weren't together and it would really hurt my feelings and I hated it. And I was like, I can't live this life anymore. It's painful. It's hurtful. And so when I applied to college, I applied to college for the specific purpose of finding an environment where I could be myself. I didn't even care what I majored in. I just wanted to be myself and to be happy. And so I applied to Appalachian and I applied to Wilmington [University of North Carolina at Wilmington]. And my reasoning with Wilmington was it was very far away from where I was from. It was the furthest I could get in North Carolina. And so I thought that that would be helpful. And with Appalachian, I think it was actually the girl from my soccer team who told me that they really have a great gay population up here and that it's a great environment for gay people. So I was

like, well, OK. And I got into both and I think really I was just impressed, you know, that I knew I was going to be in a safe place. So that's why I came here was so I could stop that nonsense of pretending to be something I'm not. So, from day one when I came to college, I was Kelly Lesbian. You know, that was my new last name and I pretty much just -- I made it my life. You know? I remember the first weekend we had Club Expo and I grabbed my roommate who is gay, or she's bisexual actually, and my best friend who is gay -- gay boy and bisexual girl -- in each hand and I both knew them from my hometown and I drug them into the Club Expo and straight to the SAGA table and I'm like, "this is it. This is our new home. Here we are. We're finally in our place." And I signed up and I've only missed like two days of SAGA since. Just, I love it. Not only am I out and proud now, and I'm not afraid to show PDAs, but I want everyone else to be like that, too. And I want to dedicate my life to, you know, helping people get through it and claim it, to own it.

Q: Since you brought that up, we'll just segue way that way. You have been active in SAGA as well as you attend TRANSACTION, the student organization for transgender issues. Could you talk about what each one is and how did

you get involved with TRANSACTION and we'll move into other aspects of your leadership roles?

A: OK. So, SAGA is the Sexuality and Gender Alliance. Let's see. It used to be BGLAAD [Bisexuals, Gays, Lesbians, and Allies Advocating for Diversity], but this was before me, and back then there wasn't a TRANSACTION. And I think the deal was with BGLAAD, was it wasn't inclusive of trans people. So, they changed it to SAGA, but I guess the damage had already been done, so now there is a TRANSACTION and a SAGA. And in the last three semesters, I've been an officer in SAGA. And it's interesting to me that all the TRANSACTION people still come to SAGA. It's like, they have their separate thing, but they're still with us. So, I think that's nice and I wish that more people from SAGA could reciprocate and show up at TRANSACTION, but I guess that does make for a very long Thursday. But, I can't claim that I'm really that active in TRANSACTION. SAGA is my priority. I'm an officer there. I support TRANSACTION and I support trans issues, but I can't claim so much from TRANSACTION. And SAGA, we've -- we do so much in SAGA. I guess especially since I've been an officer, our big goal is education, because I really feel that that's the only way to move forward is to educate people.

Q: How often does SAGA meet? Could you also talk about going out to Macadoo's after meetings?

A: SAGA meets every Thursday at 8PM in IG Greer. In addition, we have several special events outside of meetings during each semester. Usually everyone goes out to dinner at Macado's after the meetings. The meetings can be a bit formal, so going to Macado's gives everyone a chance to socialize and form that tight social network that we are known for having. I don't really go to Macado's that much anymore because I am so busy. I am usually too tired or have too much work to do or both.

And so, all of our meetings have some educational point to them and some, almost academic, really, area of discussion. And, we bring performers and speakers. We just had these two guys that are trans rappers. Yeah, they're rappers. That's weird to say. I don't like rap music. But these two trans guys. They do like spoken word and poetry and rap and stuff and they did workshops about being transgender and we do our drag shows. We have an amateur drag show coming up on Saturday and then we have the professional one later. There's just always some kind of project to raise awareness and visibility really.

Q: What are some examples of a different educational -- like, the scope of what type of programs the weekly meeting has?

A: OK. The first meeting, which actually got snowed out, but I was running it -- I was going to talk about what to do if you get cut off from your parents, which is the number one excuse I hear when people say they don't want to come out, is that they're afraid that they won't get any more money from their parents and that they'd have to quit school. So I came up with my five-step plan on like what to do if, you know, if that happens. So that was one thing. We had -- actually did a transgender meeting. We had like a few people from transACTION come in and talk and talk about how to be a good transgender ally because not everyone in the gay community is. Oh goodness, what else? We talk about so many things. We've done history meetings, talking about just queer history in general, from Stonewall and whatever, or before, even. We've -- oh, I did a meeting last semester which I really had fun with on not just about gay marriage laws, but how to put on a gay marriage, and how to have one. And we kind of had like a mock wedding. And that was a lot of fun. And just like, God, anything you can think of, we talk about it, really. Just, religion. We had a meeting on religion, which is, you know, a constant thing that comes up in SAGA. We're going to have

a meeting just about activism and just about how to get out there and help change the world. I'm looking forward to that one.

Q: Since you brought that up, some of the comments that I've heard about SAGA is that it's more of a social group than an activist group. Could you talk about some of that balance act that you have to have with SAGA?

A: Yeah. It's definitely a balancing act and I was Vice President of Activism, for a year, two semesters, and it was very, very difficult. I think it is the hardest job that SAGA has. Yeah. Or hardest office. And the problem with it is we're all just a bunch of young kids here and I'm guilty of it. When I signed up my freshman year, I'm like, "oh, I'm going to find a new girlfriend, you know." And I guess it's hard to avoid the social aspect of it because we are on the college campus because we are still young people and it -- a lot of us aren't really thinking far enough ahead, yet. Definitely the seniors are now. We're like, "oh, we're leaving. We're leaving this great gay world that we're in. What are we going to do? We're so scared." Especially with the freshman and sophomores, you know, it is a social thing. And that, you know, that's OK. It's OK. Because we need it. We really -- I needed that support when I came here. That was what really struck

me about SAGA was that it was a place where I could go where I could be totally safe and I could say anything that was on my heart and I think it's important that it's a social group. But we try to keep that activism at least in their minds, just pushing it and saying, "hey, you know, this stuff is really happening" and I think that once -- I think once they leave SAGA, once they're done with college, they'll think more about it. They'll think, "oh man, I remember what Kelly said that one meeting. Now I'm really worried about this issue. We've got to get out there and vote and donate money into the HRC [Human Rights Campaign] and do stuff." So, it's a big balance.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the size of SAGA, because there is a rumor going through the university that it's the largest student organization on campus. And I was wondering, one, if you knew whether that was true or not, but also what is the size of SAGA.

A: Yeah. I had not heard that it was the largest organization, but here's the problem with that. It's that, with SAGA, we don't take roll. You know. There's no members, really. And it's not just for people from ASU. We let anybody who is open-minded and supportive to come. Like, I have a lot of friends from my high school who don't go to school here that come every Thursday. And, the other

side of it is that we have a lot of people on this campus who associate themselves with SAGA who don't come every Thursday and I don't count them out. I think they are part of SAGA even though they don't show up because I know their heart is in it, you know, even if their schedules don't go. On Facebook, that's kind of what we're going with because we don't have like a roster with school, but we have a Facebook group that we use for logistical purposes and the last time I checked we had 178 people in that Facebook group, but, you know, that, like I said, that's people that have graduated, who never went to ASU and just come because they like it. And there's people who wouldn't sign up for that group because they don't want to be outed. So, there's really no way to get the exact number, but I will say that I have been surprised at times by the amount of people that we've packed in that room. Let's see. I know --

Q: Which room are you talking about?

A: The Strickland Conference Room in I. G. Greer [Hall]. The second floor. That's where we always have our meetings, Thursdays at 8. And, last semester, see, our fall semesters, we usually get more people in. I guess because it's a new school year and people are excited to get out.

Q: And no snow.

A: No snow, yeah. But, our SAGA Social, which is the first meeting that we have, last semester was packed. There were -- you know, we all counted different numbers -- oh, am I rambling too much? [Audiocassette noise]

Q: So you, at the social for 2009, were counting numbers?

A: Yeah. And all the officers got different numbers, but I think the highest number that somebody counted was in the 130s and the lowest was like 110. So it was, you know, 110-plus people in this like - I mean, it's a conference room, so it's pretty big, but we were packed in there. I was shocked at the support, and it felt good to see that many people there.

Q: What do you see as the greatest successes of SAGA since you have been involved with it?

A: Oh, goodness. I think -- really, I think our greatest success is our drag show. I mean, if you go down there and ask Legends, we make a killing off of it. Everybody comes. It's not just SAGA. Everybody wants to go to the drag show. If you're gay or straight, it doesn't matter. We get straight guys, almost every drag show, they incorporate that into the routine, and they'll ask how many straight guys are there and I'm always just shocked. It's just -- it seems kind of silly to say that that's our biggest accomplishment, but we put a lot of time and effort into it

and I think it's important for our visibility because so many people on campus go and they see, you know, these gay people, they're great, they're having a great time. This is so fun. So, I think our drag show is our best contribution there.

Q: What would you say are your challenges to have the organization working as you want it to be? What are the challenges to the organization?

A: Oh, there's a lot of challenges. It's tough. I didn't realize how hard it was going to be when I ran for office. I don't think anyone ever does. Well, we're talking about the numbers -- it's tough. There are so many people and you don't know who is going to show up or what size of a group will show up. So, you have to do a considerable amount of planning ahead, especially if it's like your meeting and you're running the meeting that night. You'll never know who is going to show up and what's going to happen and as an officer, this seems kind of silly and I think this happens in any organization, but I've had to deal a lot with personal problems within the group, people's exes and what not and people's just past experiences with each other kind of clash and we've had to -- you know, we've had to talk to some people at the meetings and settle that issue. That was kind of the

scariest thing that I've had to deal with, was people being mad at each other and I think it got to the point where somebody put a restraining order on somebody. That was our biggest challenge I think.

But other than that, just keeping everything organized because we really do a lot. I mean, we have an amateur and a professional drag show -- two drag shows every semester and we have a big trip. In the fall, we all go to Pride. The North Carolina Pride Parade for all weekend. That's kind of hard to get a group of people, like, you don't even know who is going to show up. So it's hard to get people committed and involved in that. And in the Spring, we go to Unity [Southeastern Regional Unity Conference], which is in Chapel Hill. And, you know, they have workshops and stuff. And so it's just every week we do something else and there's a holiday, you know -- there's a [National] Coming Out Day that we do. Transgender Day of Remembrance. Day of Silence. It's just every week we have to plan some big event and just the organization of doing all that. It feels like a full-time job.

Q: Yeah. I wanted to talk to you about your academic work because you are going to be graduating with the LGBT Studies minor, which is brand new this semester. Could you

talk about the classes that you've had, not necessarily the dirt, but what types of classes and how those have been for you?

A: Yeah. I'm proud to say that I'm the first person getting that minor. I care a lot about it and I've loved my classes. I've loved them. Those were the only classes that I really cared about. They were just -- you know, those were the one classes that I wanted to read. You know, like, oh, yes, we've got seven books in this class, you know. But the first one I took was Introduction to LGBT Studies with Professor Jill Ehnenn. And that was early on. I guess I was a sophomore, so it was kind of early on and I was just blown away that we could have a class where we were talking about this stuff and it's just like we feel like we're talking about our everyday lives, but it was neat to me to be able to relate so much to what I'm studying. And in that class we talked about everything. We kind of went over like LGBT history, you know. Learned about as far back as like the Greeks. Wasn't that it? The Greeks that slept together. All the way up to today and we talked about media. We talked about that a lot. How we're portrayed in the media. And we read -- we read a couple of novels about being gay and being trans and then I took out Sex, Health, and AIDS with Dr.

[David] Orvis. And that was kind of a nice switch-up because it wasn't as broad and obviously it wasn't just about being gay. It was about AIDS, you know, so it was a lot about being gay but it was more, I guess, the class was all about the stigma of AIDS. So, that was interesting. And, it was fun to be in that class because it counts as a Women's Studies class. So there were a lot of people in there who weren't in there for the same reasons as me, and I was one of the few gay people in there, so I guess I had an interesting contribution. I always had students after class telling me that they were really glad that I was in there to get a gay perspective, I guess, on the situation. And then right now I'm in Queer Theory, which is under the Philosophy Department, with Dr. Kim Hall. And this one is different because I'm not a philosophy person at all. I'm a psych major and we are very concise and to the point and philosophy is talking about all these crazy theories and stuff that is way over my head. It's interesting and it's made me re-think things. Like, for example, we're talking about essentialism and like are you born gay. Or do you come into it. And from the queer perspective, you are not born gay. It's a choice. And that was, I guess, kind of an eye-opener for me. Even now I feel like I have all this stuff down pat but that class has been interesting. So

far, it's challenged some of my thinking of my own self, even. Those are the main LGBT classes.

Q: And, you're going to be graduating and possibly moving away from Appalachia completely. How do you expect your life to be different in living in potentially a more metropolitan type of a setting?

A: Yeah. I can't wait to move to the city. I really can't. I need that experience. I don't know if I'll stay there because, I mean, my heart is here in the mountains and back on the farm. That's kind of where I feel like I belong, but I'm excited to move to a city, just to have the experience, and as a gay person especially, just to like see it in a different way. Maybe, I don't know. I'm thinking probably wherever I go, it's going to be more open and just have more options and like, I don't know, like gay knitting groups. I don't know what they have in the city, but I'm looking forward to seeing what they have to offer me, as a lesbian especially.

Q: Was there anything else that you would like to talk about?
A special anecdote that you would like recorded?

A: I don't think so.

Q: OK.

A: Unless you want to talk about my thesis at all.

Q: Go ahead.

A: I mean, it's kind of similar to yours, I guess.¹ I'm doing kind of a climate of North Carolina for LGBT people and I'm interviewing like specific stories that related to big issues. So I'm having somebody that's talking about being discriminated against in the workplace. Somebody that got beat up for being gay. And somebody who wants to get married. And somebody else who had trouble with bullying in high school. So, I think that it will -- if I could get people to watch it -- I mean, I can't make people watch it, but if I could get people to watch it, it could make a big impression on people and, I mean, I just feel like I'm really lucky to have gone to Appalachian in this time where I can study LGBT stuff and I can do my thesis on this. And it's a privilege, I think, and an honor to be doing what I'm doing.

Q: All right. Thank you.

A: Yeah.

END OF K. GENTRY

¹ Kathy Staley wrote "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Life at Appalachian State University" for her history master's thesis at Appalachian State University.