

R Hayes

Q: This is Kathy Staley with Roger Hayes at his church on April 15th, 2010, tax day.

Q: [portion not transcribed] Once again, this is Kathy Staley with Roger Hayes at his church, the Church of the Holy Spirit Fellowship in Winston-Salem and it's April 15th, 2010. Let's start with where you were born and what your profession is.

A: I was born in Lenoir, North Carolina. Actually that is where I was born. I am from Boomer, North Carolina which is in Wilkes County. I grew up sort of like on the line of Boomer and Moravian Falls because we lived on the Falls Road, on the horseshoe so to speak. So because we lived on the Falls Road then our address was Moravian Falls but right behind us was Boomer. And I was born in, as I said, Lenoir, North Carolina because I was the product of my mother committing adultery. So my father had children and a wife and so my grandmother thought it was safer for me to be born the next county than right where I was from so to speak. Which set my life up for a myriad of secrets and all of those things that followed that.

Q: We know each other because you went to CC Wright Elementary School.

A: No, I went to Moravian Falls.

Q: You went there too? I thought you went to my school. OK, that changes the following question too. So you went to Moravian Falls [Elementary School] and then to Woodward [Junior High School].

A: Correct.

Q: And then Wilkes Central [High School]. I wanted to talk about the sex education course and how you learned about homosexuality within the community and then did you learn anything at school through the courses that actually had any relevance to you growing up as a man who would later love men?

A: Not at all. I mean not at all. I can't even, I don't remember anything that... honestly I don't remember anything that was ever said from a classroom type setting from teacher to student in any way that addressed it positively, negatively, at all. Even in my high school, going into high school, matriculating into high school, never anything. Therefore making it a very isolated and lonely path and journey of self discovery if you would.

Q: How did you come to learn about homosexuality? And I use that because I'm talking about the technical stuff rather than the identity of being gay.

A: Certainly. I guess really to say even in the technical aspects of it my first learning came in talking about HIV and AIDS. Because at this point we're talking about, I graduated from high school in 1990, so in the '80s I remember HIV and AIDS, this big deal. I remember whenever Reagan came on television in the State of the Union address and finally said something about it. I remember seeing the March on Washington with the LGBT and Q people coming to Washington [in 1987 and 1993]. I can remember that and I remember the rage and the anger in those people's voices about this disease that was wiping out, their, community out. But being from the rural places of North Carolina there was no one to tie that, there was nothing to say oh, OK, that's what that is. I remember the [Name's Project AIDS] Quilt. I remember when the Quilt was spread out on the mall in Washington. And I can remember knowing that there was a commonality with me and those people I was seeing on television. But now mind you, this was before Will and Grace. There was none of those types of portrayals on television in any kind of way, even in a slapstick way really, that had any regular appearance of someone that was same-gender loving or SGL, gay, LGBT, whatever the terminology or acronym for the day may be.

So technically that was the first time. I will say that I do remember being in high school and a discussion in health class about HIV. You know, if you got cut and it doesn't heal and some of the kind of information that was coming out then was just so wrong and just so off. So needless to say so then you become quite paranoid. Every time [whispering] and you had never even had sex, you know. Maybe I caught it in the wind. Did a mosquito bite me that had bitten, and you know. So this was the time when everything was so, the information and all was so up in the air --

Q: Did you feel like the teachers were giving what you would now consider incorrect information?

A: Oh, certainly. But everybody was giving incorrect information. They had been given incorrect information and the person who gave them information gave incorrect information. And it just goes on and on. Because that was during the time, in those mid and late '80s the information around HIV was so scattered. It was just so scattered. They wasn't quite totally sure how you got it. What was the ways it was really clearly transmitted? And remember that whenever HIV first came it was GRID [Gay Related Immune Deficiency]. So this was gay men's disease. And then as a black man, or a black young boy, black people

wasn't gay anyway. That word didn't exist in the black community. So here we are.

Q: Rock Hudson announced that he was infected [in 1985], I guess they didn't know HIV really too much at that point. Do you remember anyone talking about that and that seeming to connect with you personally?

A: I do remember that. But I also remember, again, a great disconnect. These things were a world away. And I think that that is one of the issues around homosexuality within Appalachia in the foothills area, not just of North Carolina but of anywhere that has these very rural places, is everything seems a world away. You know, our lives and the things that we dealt with on a day to day basis were so minuscule in comparison. I remember coming to Winston-Salem like going to New York. I mean it was a big deal to come to Winston-Salem, you know. So it would just seem so far away. So to really say that it was impactful, that it was something that I connected to, not at that point. Now, by the time I was in college I had this real sense that I was going to die of AIDS. That was the way I was going to leave here, I would die of AIDS because every gay person died of AIDS. That's what happened. They were going to get AIDS and I was going to contract AIDS and that would be that.

Q: At that point were you knowledgeable enough to know how it was transmitted or were you like, I've talked to one college student who believed that the act of having anal sex produced HIV --

A: Period.

Q: Period.

A: And again, that is still much a prevalent ideology, particularly in the African-American community. And I want to relate that or correlate that to rural, again. Because you're so far away and you feel so removed from certain studies, certain information. It wasn't so much that I thought that just having anal sex was going to cause me to be infected just because I did it, but just because gay people got it and I was gay. And it was a resolve. And I can't say that enough, that it was a resolve that I had made within myself that I would get AIDS and that's the way I would die. And so it became a part of the choice. My homosexuality is not a choice. I believe in all of my heart that I was created this way by my creator. I think that some of the biggest slaps I ever made in God's face was when I was praying, "Change me, change me, change me" as opposed to embracing the fearfully and wonderfully created self that I am. So I realized today that as the created then my job is to celebrate what has been created,

and that being myself. But I didn't realize that then. I did not know that then. And there was many miles to go before I would learn that.

Q: Let's talk about your coming out experience, the whole process. And if you were raised in a church how that interwove into the entire process.

A: I was raised in a church.

Q: What denomination?

A: Baptist. Grew up, as I said, there in the area. My grandmother was a member of Thankful Baptist Church. But other members of the family, immediate family, were members of Piney Grove Baptist church. So Thankful was in Boomer and Piney Grove was in Moravian Falls. My mother was a member of Thankful as well and I was saved at the age of ten in 1982, in April actually. And I joined Thankful. That's where I became a member. There was a song that they used to sing, "Since Jesus Came Into My Heart." "Since Jesus came into my heart floods of joy over my soul like a sea billow robe since Jesus came into my heart." I remember being a person that knew, and I was very much aware, that this heart that Jesus had habitated was different. I knew that I was not like other boys. At the age of ten I was very much aware that I was different.

Q: In what ways?

A: I was very effeminate, that's one thing. I was very effeminate. Other kids that I played with, other kids that I interacted with, which was mostly my cousins, being first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, whatever. They were all cousins right there in the area, so whenever I did go and play with the boys I really just did not fit. And ironically there was not a lot of girls our age. And that's so true. At my age in our community there was not a lot of girls. My next door neighbor, it was a brother and sister, she was like a year and a half or so older than me and her brother was like a couple of years younger than me. So he and my sister was right about the same age and then she and I were right at the same age. But beyond that the other girls, there was just a very few other girls around. There were several guys, there were several of us, but I didn't fit. I just did not fit. And I don't know how to explain that and explain that away and make that make sense. I just didn't fit. But I also remember, I remember those boys messing around with each other. I remember them performing oral sex on one another. I just never got into that. I never got into it but I knew that it was happening.

Q: Did their parents know?

A: Oh no.

Q: So this was a secret?

A: Right.

Q: Unspoken?

A: Right. This would be connected to playing house. We just didn't have many girls to play house with and that is just the truth. The majority of them had older sisters but I guess there was like this three or four year splat here that just produced all these boys. Maybe it was in the well water. [Laughter] But all of these boys. And I remember, they were messing around with each other and stuff. But none of them, can I say this? I won't say none. They were not as effeminate as I was. They just weren't.

Q: Would they grow up to self identify as gay or was this --

A: A couple did. But even the two that I can think of just right off the top of my head right now, they're older than I am. They're two, three, four years older than I am. Four or five years older than I am that did grow up to identify.

Q: What happened to them? Did they remain in Wilkes County or did they also move to larger cities? Are they out to your extended family? Were there any future lesbians in your neighborhood?

A: Others just sort of I think matriculated on into society, into societal norms if you would. I think that it is very possible as an adolescent to have same sex experiences and

they were just that, experiences, for a myriad of reasons. Again, here we were in a situation where there really wasn't a lot of girls and if you were going to experience sex there just wasn't a lot of options except for -- and so I just think some of them sort of choose that route. But I think it was much more situational than what it would be as a way of life for them. What I very clearly understand today is by the time that I hit my teens I knew that I was gay. I knew that the difference that there was in me was an attraction to the same sex.

Now, my very first sexual experience I was in the first grade and there was a guy, a white guy, because certainly growing up in that area there was almost a predominant concept or idea that "white was right." So if you were going to experiment, if you were going to, I guess to say want to be somebody or be like somebody or aspire to some level beyond where you were, then it was white. So I remember crying because I had kinky hair and I wanted hair that you could run your fingers through and throw it back. And it wasn't that I wanted women's hair, I wanted the boys' hair. Their hair was just so wonderful when they did that and they could just run their fingers through it and throw it to the side and that was just so right. And I had this stuff that you had to pull and try to get a comb

through and then it would roll back up and make its own parts. And I didn't understand that. So this boy when I was in the first grade, during that time in Ms. Mitchell's room I would perform oral sex on him. And this was like an everyday thing almost.

Now, we're in the first grade. I can remember he didn't have an erection. I don't even know where this came from. This was not sex. As I know today it wasn't about the sex act. It was something else. I think it was more around acceptance, it was more around serving, more around oppression if you would and hangovers of oppressive ideologies. So it was a whole something else. Now, this didn't happen with several people. This was just him. And I remember my teacher at that time, Ms. Mitchell, one day during recreation we were out on the field and she pulled me to the side and she said, "I know what you've been doing and you're going to stop that." The funny thing to me is that at this point, at 38 years old, I don't remember how long that happened. I don't know if it was just two days, if it was a week, if it was three months. I really don't know. But I know that it did happen and I remember her addressing it. So because I don't know how long I can't say why did she allow it to go on as long as she did or

whatever. I just know that it happened and I know that it happened more than once.

I remember being on the school bus in my kindergarten, first, second grade, right in there, us having a bus driver who was a high school student. Because at that time high school students could drive the bus. And he was extremely vulgar. Very, very, very vulgar. And it's interesting how one kid could have never been exposed to things sexual, be it elementary school, junior high and even high school, had never really been exposed to sexual things where another kid could be so open to it, just so open and so exposed. And I would have been of the first category where in my family there was no exposure to that.

Q: The secrets.

A: Not just secrets, it was just there was no exposure. I never saw a *Playboy* magazine or a *Penthouse* magazine or anything like that in my home. And though I was raised with six uncles who were closer to my age so to speak. My grandmother had 12 children. She had all girls except her oldest one was a boy and then she had five girls and then she had five boys and then she had a set of twins at the end, a boy and a girl. So that girl at the end had all brothers that was closer to her age. So I grew up with guys but still and yet, never exposed to that. Never heard

words like 'dick' and 'giving head' or 'sucking,' never heard stuff like that. That type of language was not in our house. But on the school bus by that guy I remember the things that he would say. And me being curious and me being willing to be open to something else. You know, he would get me to do things like touch girls inappropriately and stuff such as that, and climb up onto the bus seat and reach up and touch a girl inappropriately, those kind of things. So it was an exposure. So there we are.

Q: Was any of the lingo, homosexuality, gay, even some of the slurs, attached to the behaviors that were going on, either with the first grade classmate or with all the neighbors? Or was it just behavior that you were doing and there wasn't a word for it?

A: Right, there wasn't a word for it. I remember being in the second grade and in the second grade I knew that I had an affection for another guy. Now, he and I never did anything, never fooled around or nothing like that, but I knew that I was in love with him. I mean the crying because he went off with some other guys and left me. Crying. Sitting on the stoop after school just crying my eyes out because he left me, you know. That is my first, because the other was something else, as I said, but that in the second grade was the first time that I really

connected there was something in me different. Then I remember having my first crush, real crush, was in the sixth grade that I could identify. See, because in the --

Q: Did you identify at that point?

A: No, not identify as gay, but I identified that I had a physical attraction and reaction to this guy. Very much so. I knew that in the sixth grade but I didn't know what that was. See, I did not know a word went to that, that there was a verb that would mean an act or a noun or even an adjective. I didn't know there was a word that had anything to do with what I was feeling toward him. And then as I said, the one when I was in the second grade, honey, my heart beat his name and that was just -- again, there was no name to that. It would not be until the seventh grade going to junior high school that all that I felt got a name and it was a faggot. Very clearly faggot. You're gay, you're a faggot. I didn't even know what that word meant.

Q: What did you think it meant?

A: I did not know. Only thing I knew is it was nasty. It was degrading. It was humiliating. It was dehumanizing. Whatever that word was and whatever that meant it was all of those derogatory things. So in the seventh grade my life's ambition was not to be whatever that was. And

literally that's where I was with that. I was not going to be *that*. I don't know what that is but whatever that is I'm not going to be that. And by the time that I began to really understand what that was I guess I became aware that that may be me. There was certainly a fear that came in then, that that may be me. I remember this gentleman in High Point, my mother was living in High Point at that time and I had come and stayed with her for a few days during spring break and riding my bike to a store in High Point and Prince was coming to Greensboro at that time and I wanted to go see Prince. I knew I wasn't going to get to go but I wanted to go and I was in the store, long story short the guy who worked in the store pulled his penis out to do something with me. And I ran out of the store I was so scared. So scared.

That would per se be the first time -- I can't even say that though. It wasn't the first time because there was another experience that happened when I was in ninth grade of a gentleman pushing himself up on me or doing something so to speak. But that one, when that happened to me in the store in High Point there was such an identification to what that was. That is that. That's what the boy pushed me down the stairs going from the seventh grade building to the eighth grade building over

and over and over calling me a faggot and a punk and all these other kids are around and teachers are in the halls and he's pushing me and it's just lucky I didn't fall down the stairs. And he kept pushing me through the door, up the wall, by the band and chorus room into the other set of doors calling me a faggot over and over and over. Again, that, that that guy was trying to do or say in that store was that. And I certainly was not going to be that.

So coming out at that point was not even -- out to what? You know? Actually I take my hat off a million times over to these kids today who are even 11 and 12 who are self identifying and are being able, they're empowered with the verbiage of knowing who they are. That is wonderful. They can put a title on who they are which enabled them and empowers them to begin to shape their life the way they want it to go as opposed to how someone else would want it to go. You know, because of molestation or being put into situations. I didn't know any better. I really didn't. So, yeah.

Q: So you've talked about how some of the school climate was. Could you talk about the school climate overall?

A: That was a one-time occurrence that that happened. The pushing part. But I was a fag. I was a faggot, period, and that was school wide. All of my friends were girls,

mostly. Coming from Moravian Falls elementary school where everybody black was cousins and kin, but we all had grew up together. We were in kindergarten together up to the sixth grade and so we were our own little family so to speak. And then whenever we all just got dumped into junior high school, now you have the kids from North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro and C.C. Wright and these other elementary schools that have all converged. Well, these kids lived downtown, these kids lived where they knew more than what we knew so to speak. So they were the ones that were calling me these names and the kids that I had grew up with that were my friends in elementary school began to pull away.

Q: How did the teachers respond to the students' treatment of you?

Q: Were there any particular places, such as the locker room, that you preferred to avoid and were there particular places or classes that felt safer?

And I remember one boy, we called him Scooby, he and I were best friends in elementary school. I think I stayed the night at his house once or twice. That's not something we did a whole lot of anyway but we were best friends. And I remember one day going to the seventh grade building down to the cafeteria for breakfast. We rode two separate buses,

we didn't ride the same bus to school, but he was in front of me down just a little bit going down the hill and I called him, 'Scooby, Scooby, wait up.' And I'm running down to get with him to go into breakfast. This was definitely in the early fall, so the early part of the school year. And when I got to where I was he said, "Get away from me." What? What are you talking about? He's like, "get away from me." I'm like, "huh?" He said, "Roger, I can't hang with you no more because I don't want to be labeled like you." I remember that moment and standing there left in the parking lot trying to wrap my mind around what just happened. What was that, you know?

I know with all my heart that gay is a gift because everybody is not equipped to withstand up under and in the middle of the things that LGBT and Q people have to stand up under. We have a tenacity and a God-given strength to be the other that impacts this world in ways that are so positive and so strong because of that otherness and how we are equipped, the things that we have to go through.

Later on I would have a repeat, so to speak, of that situation in the eighth grade. One of my first cousins, we became best friends, and somehow or another he was able to not care what other people thought about his friendship with me. He was my first cousin on my father's side so we

didn't grow up together but I had exposed to him or came out to him in that I was his first cousin because my father denied me. My father denied me up until I was 15, almost 16, that I was even his child. So my siblings through my father did not even know I existed, though I knew who they were. They did not know who I was. Again, secrets.

So much of that ended up being sort of like the "don't ask, don't tell" kind of thing. But Michael and I became best friends. And I remember one time, his father is my uncle, I remember one time we were probably in the ninth grade and we walked to meet each other. Because at this point my mother and my sister and I had moved from Moravian Falls downtown into North Wilkesboro up Second Street hill, we lived over there. Actually we were living in the projects on Walker Place and Michael lived over the way. And us walking to meet one another and him telling me he couldn't play with me any more, we couldn't hang out any more because his dad didn't want him to hang out with me. His sisters, he had all sisters, seven sisters, and he was the only boy and he was like right at the bottom, so I think it was maybe like he has two sisters that are younger than he is but all the other ones are older, so here comes, they finally got this boy. Michael is not gay. A wonderful, wonderful guy and we're still friends to this

day but in that moment said his dad didn't want him to play with me any more and he didn't want to hang out with me any more. And he and I both stood there and just cried. Because we felt so powerless.

And again, whatever this thing was, I knew that it was terrible. So very early I began to pray, "God, take this away." So my prayers for my teen years was not consumed with "God, give me a girlfriend" or "let me pass this test" or "I want a car," my prayers weren't consumed with that. My prayers were consumed with "take it away, take it away, fix me, I am broken."

Q: How long did these ambivalent feelings towards your same gender affections continue?

So coming out for me, I had my first boyfriend my senior year in high school. Michael and I were best friends, I mean we were best friends. I had a lot of really good friends. My high school experience was much better than my junior high experience, even with those same people. It just sort of evolved and again, I hung out with girls anyway and so it was just all girls is what I basically dealt with. But the guys came around more. And so after we moved from up in Moravian Falls down to North Wilkesboro and I'm living in the community where they were then I began to sort of build some relationships, they got to know

me some and stuff like that. I wasn't just this kid from somewhere else and so that helped. So some of those friendships began to sort of build with me and some of the boys.

But my senior year in high school I started dating a guy that I worked with on my job. I started working at Holly Farms literally pulling guts out of chickens, worked on the main line. My mother had moved to Winston-Salem. I did not want to move. I wanted to stay in Wilkesboro, wanted to graduate from Wilkes Central. And so myself and my aunt who is about eight years older than me, she and I got our own apartment. And so I was on the honor roll in high school and as long as I kept my grades up and stuff my mom let me stay there, stay up. So I worked, as I said, at Holly Farms on second shift and I was in the work co-op program so I had classes in the day and no classes in the afternoon. So I would utilize the time before it was time for me to go to work to sleep, even there at the school. So I would go in the auditorium and stretch out on the stage and go to sleep or go get on the bus and go to sleep until it was time because I rode the bus to work. The bus dropped me off there at Holly Farm, I ran down the hill, went in and clocked in, and went straight on the line. And

met this guy. He was a Mexican. He showed an interest toward me.

Now, there was a guy that worked there that was a friend of my aunt's. He was openly out gay. He is the first openly out gay person I knew and his name was Ricky. And Ricky and I became friends. Never sexual friends but always to say mentors, mentoring thing. You know, because he began to sort of show me some ropes. He was the first person that I could ask a question to and get an answer. You know, what is this? Though his answers were not the best answers [Laughter] and his introduction for me was not the best. So --

Q: What was his introduction?

A: His introduction was book stores and cruising and glory holes and those types of things. Because I have a theory and my theory revolves around affectional orientation versus sexual orientation. Because that many same gender loving youth are not raised in areas and in environments where they are affirmed in their affectional orientation then they miss out on those healthy, if you would, social cues and exchanges as it relates to "do you like me, yes or no." You know, sitting in class playing googly eyes or playing footsies while we're watching a movie in third grade, holding one another's hand walking to the cafeteria, having

the teacher say, "You sit over there and you're going to sit over there." All of those social cues that revolve around behaviors and behavioral cues and the do's and the don't's. The boundaries and very healthy boundary lines that you get or that heterosexual kids get growing up whose affectional orientation is toward that of the opposite gender. Then they get those. So then though they can be sexually active in their teens as well or whatever, there is still just a line that is healthier because they got the necessary cues and some helps in that area that we as same-gender loving and LGBT and Q kids miss out on.

So for most of us our first introduction to our orientation is through sex. So somewhere we have to learn to love our affection towards someone else. We have to learn to do that from the waist up and not the waist down. And so because of that, and for many of that we teach that to one another, loving from the waist down as opposed to the waist up. So Ricky showed me how to do it down, how to be pleased by another man in that manner, that this is the way you cruise and this is the way you pick up and these are the cues and these are those things and this is where you go and stuff. He really gave me the best he had. The best he had is what he gave me.

So when me and Freddy starting going together, Freddy was liking me and was wanting to hook up with me but I played the feminine role so to speak of hard to get. You know, he wanted to take me home from work and I wouldn't let him. And I would tell, I said, "You can take me home next week."

So finally the day came that I allowed Freddy to take me home after work. And we would get off from work anywhere between 11 and 2:30 in the morning. We were on the line at three, 3:15, I think it was 3:15 we had to be on the line and then, as I said, we'd get off like 11 and sometimes as late as 12, 12:30. Not 2:30 but 12, 12:30. And so again, I'm high school. So this particular day he's taking me home, this evening, and we went up to the store and he got something to drink and stuff and he bought a magazine. We got back to my apartment and we were sitting on the couch talking and everything and I was quite prepared for this. If he touched me I would tell him no, if he said something to me out of the way I would say no, if he asked me something I'd say no, if he tried to touch me I would tell him don't do that. So I'm OK. We're on a date, just like girls know this is the things you do and you tell the boy this, this, this and this. So this is what I'm going to tell him. So I was quite prepared and so

we were sitting on the couch and I remember that I had crossed my legs and had turned sitting Indian style toward him.

So he was sitting regular on the couch and I was turned facing him on the couch and we were sitting there talking and stuff. And I'm like, "What's in that bag?" And so I reach over to the bag and I pull out, he had brought a *Penthouse* magazine. So I said, "What is this?" And I flipped through it. And side note, I still have that *Penthouse* magazine today. I have it in my chest at home. So here I'm flipping through the magazine and I'm looking down at the magazine and I'm like "what is this," you know. And I looked up to say something to him and he leaned in and kissed me. Now, at that point I had had a girlfriend for almost three years. She and I had been dating and we had fooled around. When he kissed me, literally my world stopped. To this day I cannot piece together what happened to probably about a good 20 minute period of my life. It is gone. I swear. It is totally gone. Because it was almost like... perfection kissing. You know, an emergence of everything that was coming together. It was the most euphoric moment I have ever experienced in my life. I don't know what other people's story about their first kiss -- and it wasn't my first kiss. But it was my first

kiss. Because all that other was something else. This was it.

Now honey, whoo! And what would pursue after that was gentle, it was loving as it could be. Again, it was gentle. So it was not a negative experience at all. He and I dated for almost a year. Matter of fact, we did date a year. Because we dated right up, it was right into the summer, and he literally walked out of my life. Literally walked away. I think the fact that I was getting ready to go to school, go to college, and other reasons, he just walked away.

Q: How did this romance affect the other parts of your life? Did you continue dating your girlfriend? What was your rationale? Did you hide this relationship from your aunt and how? How did your boyfriend approach his sexuality?

A: When I went to college I started my freshman year in college I was not very sexually active, just did not have a lot of sex at all, and I'm so grateful for that today.

In the spring of my freshman year, I met a guy who was from Maggie Valley. Now, Maggie Valley is Tennessee or North Carolina?

Q: I think it's North Carolina.

A: Yeah, he was from Maggie Valley. So, very rural, very Appalachian. I mean that's in the mountains for real-for

real. He went to Appalachian [State University], I'm at Lees McRae [College]. He was a part of the gay and straight student alliance [Sexual Awareness Group at Appalachian] on the campus there and we started going together. And that was my real coming out. Now, I was very out in school, in college, even in my freshman year. I was very out, but I wasn't out outside of that environment. But when I started dating him I really came out.

And I remember my mom calling one day and he and I was laying in the bed because this was during the summer and so that summer I stayed in Boone for the summer. We were laying in the bed and my mom called and got on the phone with her and she asked, she said, "Are you and Kevin lovers?" And I said yes. And she said, "OK, we're going to talk about this later." I said all right and we hung up the phone. So that was my coming out. And at that point I was in my second relationship, quote unquote. Because Kevin I only dated maybe about four months, something like that.

Q: How did your mother and the rest of your family handle it?

A: I am grateful that I came out when I did the way I did and how I did. I really am. Because I was in school and that summer I was in Boone and I didn't leave Boone until it was

time to go back to school, and so I went right back to school. So I didn't have to be around them and they didn't have to be around me. So what I was able to do in that was really to fortify myself and really find myself.

I remember these guys that I had met in Boone, maybe they were co-workers, something like that, hanging out with a little bit, and we watched a movie. Harvey Fierstein wrote a play called *Torch Song Trilogy* and then it was made into a movie and that movie, I think it should be part of Gay 101. Anne Bancroft played his mother. They were a Jewish family. Their movie spanned, I think it did the best of any movie that I have ever seen to cover gay life so to speak from the parent situation to long term relationships to one night stands to, as he calls it, Arnold is the lead character in it, as he calls it hopeless relationships where you're dating a married man or someone that is on the down low or is bisexual or whatever, to the trans community to the drag community. Covers the *whole* thing.

And in one of his exchanges with his mother he says to her, "I need to tell you this one thing. I have learned how to cook, sew, clean, feed, take care of myself. Hell, I can even pat my own self on the back if I need to. All so that I don't have to expect anything from anyone else. The only thing that I ask for is love and respect and anyone

who cannot give me that has no place in my life." And she says, "Oh, so you're putting me out, are you?" That line was so perfect. So I gave that to my mom when it came time to really have the conversation. Because at that point in my life, I was there. So that would become its own journey.

With the rest of my family I didn't care what they thought. I could have cared less. When I came out, I came out. I just came out. I never bothered with people. I didn't care what they thought about it. I did not care. The only being that I cared about was God and that became a spiritual odyssey of being in and out, delivered, fixed, not, the ups and downs of all of that. Now that was a whole 'nother story. Because my love for God and my understanding and my ideology at that time was I could not have God and have a man. So that was its own journey.

But as far as my family, community, whatever, honey, when I was out I was out. My godfather told me one time, he said, "Roger, you need to stop making so many declarations." Stop making so many declarations because one day I'm gay, another day I'm straight, next day I'm gay and this is my man and the next day I'm straight and I'm marrying this woman. Stop making so many declarations. You know, if you stop declaring so much then you could find

yourself. Well spoken from a man who is 62 years old and lived in the closet 58 of those years.

Q: So how did Thankful Baptist church take to you coming out?

A: They didn't have to.

Q: Or at that point were you out of that?

A: Yeah. Because when I went away to college, while I took another turn, as I said, my mother had moved to Winston so then Winston became the place that I came to on breaks. So fall break, spring break, winter break, whatever, Winston was where I came. After Kevin and I had broken up, I went into my sophomore year in college and during Christmas break of my sophomore year I met the first black guy that I ever dated, I met him. He was from Winston, I met him here in Winston. He was 12 years my senior. Extremely abusive. Emotionally, physically, mentally abusive. But I loved him. And remember, the rejection or the denial of my father coupled with the things that I dealt with in junior high school somehow or another interwoven performing oral sex on a boy in the first grade, being pushed down the stairs, being the faggot faggot faggot, to I can't be your friend any more because I don't want people saying about me, I can't hang out with you any more because my dad, your uncle, doesn't want me to any more, tie all of that in together and you get this boy, this young man at this point, who

believes that he's not worthy of love, that love alone is not enough, and has a history of being in hard relationships. Really struggling with being worthy to be loved and being able to say no whenever it's not healthy. When I'm not getting my need met I still, *still*, don't know how to say no or that's enough, you're either going to do this or we're done, you know? Going to the extreme, going up and over the call of duty to have something and somebody.

All of that is in there, all of that is in my story, all of that. And I wish that I could say, "And that's my history" but that is my story. It is my yesterday and my today. The difference between my today and my yesterday is a real sense of awareness. I am coming to a place of awareness about this but all of that other stuff is interwoven in that. So it is the quilt of our lives. I said I'm going to write a book one called *The Not So Gay Life*. Because as gay as I am, it is not being gay. It is not being hahaha. Though my smile is genuine, though the joy that I feel in my heart is real joy, the peace that I have is real peace, my *happiness* sometimes is very skewed.

Q: I've heard things like that from a lot of people who are gay. There's all this past that affects your presents but you're still happy and you want other people to feel

comfortable so you project happiness too. And it sounds like that's part of it too.

A: Very, very, very joyful. That happiness area [Laughter], you know? Real happiness. Very co-dependant. Deal with a lot of that co-dependency. It comes out of that. It's a byproduct of all that other stuff.

Q: So how did you come from where you were there to becoming the minister of a black, very spiritual, very inclusive church?

A: Wow. I don't know. I swear I don't know. Outside of God I don't know. When I think back over my life a lot of times I think about how I didn't have a plan. I remember being in high school and because Michael didn't take the SAT, neither did I. You know, Mike wasn't applying to any colleges and neither was I, Michael wasn't talking about going to college, neither was I, Michael wasn't talking about what he was going to do with his life, neither was I.

And working on the line at Holly Farms I remember one day almost like having an epiphany. I looked around and at this point I'm a high school student and I'm a floor boy. What a floor boy just simply meant is that I knew how to do all the jobs on the line and it was my job to give other people their breaks and fill in if somebody didn't come to

work or something. So it wasn't a supervisory role but it was more of a leadership role.

That day I looked around and here are people who are all older than I am who have kids my age, who have grandkids my age, working on that line. They had built homes and bought trailers [Laughter], had kids in college, new cars working on that line. And there was days whenever my prayer was "God please, either I'm going to die here and this shift will be over or it will just be time to leave, either way I'm getting out of here." And I found solace in that. Isn't that crazy? I hated that job so bad. My legs would be so tired. I would be so tired of standing, so tired. And my solace was either I will die on this line tonight or it'll be time to get off, either way I'm going to get out of here. And I found peace in that.

To get to this point the journey, I don't know. I didn't have a plan. But when that epiphany happened to me, let me go back to that, when the epiphany happened I knew I had to do something. And that next day I went to school. Craig Little was my music teacher and Mr. Little had been my music teacher since kindergarten so he was my music teacher my whole -- you don't call it undergrad, what do you call that? Primary school experience?

Q: Public school.

A: And I remember saying to him, "I gotta do something. I need to take the SAT and apply to schools." "Roger, now I just think you need to just go on over there to the community college and learn you a trade and then you go out here and get a job so you can help your family." He knew my family, he knew all my family. He had taught many of the members of my family. I sang so he was definitely my music teacher and all that. But that was the best advice he had to give me. Took the SAT, applied to three schools. Applied to Lees McRae, Mars Hill [College] and Carolina Central [NC Central University]. I did not get accepted into Carolina Central though I was an honor roll student my whole time I was in high school. I did very, very poorly on the SAT. Mars Hill accepted me on a provisional, it was a provisional acceptance. I had to take some courses in the first quarter or first semester or something like that or whatever. Lees McRae accepted me mainly because Lees McRae wanted me in their drama department, wanted me in their performing arts department.

So I had a contingency plan now. So I got accepted, now I've got a contingency plan. And my contingency plan, I was going to go to Atlanta. God, I thank you so much for that not happening. I was going to move to Atlanta and I was going to go to Gupton and Jones Funeral Services and I

was going to become a funeral director. Now, my thanks is not that I didn't become a funeral director, my thanks is that I did not move to Atlanta. I would probably be dead. I would have probably truly became [HIV] positive. I mean I was a size 28. I was a cute little boy. A lot of the things in the big city and being naïve as I was where I grew up, a lot of things that the city would have done to me. Wow. So I ended up going to college and that's how. Pastoring for me, preaching for me, it was so not on my agenda. I am so sorry that I can't do better right now with this piece. I don't know how I got here. I swear I don't.

Q: When did you start preaching?

A: I started preaching after the bad relationship which lasted three years. One day I was driving back from High Point. I was working at a job and I was coming back from High Point and I heard this preacher on the radio and I declare he was preaching to me. I began to cry and my life was so unhappy and everything in my life that looked happy was a farce. It was a made-up thing. And I wanted to go to that church and so he and I went to the church one time and it was a very large African-American Pentecostal Holiness church in Macedonia. True Vine Pentecostal Holiness Church of God Incorporated. I say that name because I refuse to

allow them to etch me out of the history of that church. Because there's a lot of gay people there. On every level there, there's a lot of gay people and some of them are my acquaintances. I don't say friends but acquaintances.

This next Sunday or so I wanted to go to church, my partner didn't, I went anyway, and that Sunday I joined the church. When I came home he was livid with me that I joined that church. He was mad because he should have been there with me. Joining the church is not a frivolous thing, it's a very important thing, and it's not something I should have done alone. He should have been there with me, I guess to, what? To celebrate it with me? I don't know what. So it was a big old issue with him.

And right after that, because I asked God to do two things for me that day. The first one was I needed a car because I was walking to work and the second thing was I needed him to get this man out of my life, out of my house. And God did just that for me within a week's time. I went that week trying to get me a car. That didn't work, which was great because that's not what needed to happen first. I needed to get that man out of my life first, out of my house. And that week basically I caught him cheating and was able to really close that door. And though I had loved him so passionately for what had been so long to me, God

closed my heart up to him almost instantly and I was able to move away from that.

I fell completely in love with Jesus. I began to study the word, I began to pray without ceasing. I mean I fell head over heels in love with Jesus. It was not a form of godliness that denied the power thereof. The power was working in me, through me, with me, I was in love with me some Jesus. And that was like in February and then in December God released me into the ministry. It was not a man call, it was a God call. And by that next February or so I preached my initial message and then began that journey. It would be the rooms of NA, Narcotics Anonymous, that really began to sort of solidify even more of my calling so to speak as far as what it was I wanted to see in the church, what it was I felt church was missing, what I felt church needed. Honesty, truth, safety, a place to have non-punitive conversations. Church needed all of that and church was so missing that. And I began to ask god some very poignant questions around all of that. So then that began to set that path.

I started dating a guy in September of '96, because I was celibate for 18 months with the exception of one [in]discretion. Now, I'm 24, 25, very healthy, virile, young man, celibate. But nothing was too hard for God to

ask of me because I loved him. And so again, it cost. Love for me has always meant a great cost at my expense. Always. Love for me means a great cost at my expense. Even my love for God meant that. So I was ordained, met Duane. Duane who would become the love of my life. We started going together but it was not intended to be. When I first met Duane, Duane was on drugs. He was really on drugs and we were the same age, are the same age, and this was all about I was going to help Duane. I was going to help Duane to get off of drugs and I was going to help Duane get delivered. Like me, because I was delivered. And get him away from men and help him get fixed. Long story, I ended up falling in love with Duane and Duane fell in love with me and I got honest with myself about my attraction to him. So within about a month and a half we started dating.

Somewhere in that process, about a year, year and a half, two years later, whatever, there was a church that had opened up right up the street from my house, Holy Trinity Church. I knew that was a gay church, Caucasian church. Knew what it was but I prayed to rebuke them people. I wasn't going up in there, them spirits and they're all going to hell anyhow and that is just so wrong and they need to get themselves right. The same thing that

many people, even gay people, feel about our church because of all the tapes that play in their head. So Duane and I are going together. Matter of fact, Duane and I was not going together at that very point right there but shortly thereafter I started going with Duane. Then Duane and I broke up for a little while, for a period of time we were broken up and then we got back together again. Duane and I did a whole lot of breaking up, getting back together, breaking up, getting back together, for 11 years.

But I found out about this man. Matter of fact it was the same man who was the pastor of that church, Holy Trinity, who had moved from up the street of my house over to Robin Hood Road. I found out that he was a substance abuse counselor step one. So I called and asked if Duane and I could come in for counseling. So we went in for counseling and I am so grateful that he did not, A) make it a point that we hadn't been to his church so we couldn't come to counseling or that I was going to have to pay him or that if I came, we had to go to church. I'm so grateful that he did not do any of those things. But we went there for counseling. Later on, a couple of years later, before I would actually go there for a service or something, I started attending Union Baptist Church. Was on the ministerial staff there. I would go to Union Baptist for

my black church experience and then I would go to Holy Trinity on Sunday evenings for my affirming church experience. If I had had to choose between the two, I would have chosen my black church experience because that was more what I knew. It was more of all those things.

The day came whenever the pastor called me in and asked if me and Duane was in a relationship. And in that moment, I oftentimes speak of that moment being the moment that my truth filled the room, when truth came rushing in. And I said yes. I was going to be set down in the church. I didn't understand that. I didn't understand what set down meant. Why did I have to sit on the front row? How long am I going to sit on the front row? And what is my sitting on the front row supposed to accomplish? So none of that made sense to me so God released me from there. He really did, God released me from Union Baptist. I started going full time over to Holy Trinity. I really didn't fit there for a time because it was a white congregation that was really more quiet and more laid back and more sort of like a Country Club kind of feel that they had going on and here I was, this loud black boy.

So the pastor there had started a church in Greensboro, Church of the Holy Spirit, and talked me about taking over the pastorate of that church. So I prayed about it, talked

about it over with my partner, and decided that this may be God's will and so I did. And so in 2001 I became the pastor, in November of 2001 I became the pastor of Church of the Holy Spirit. And then we would later on, we met for a year after then and then decided to close down because the church wasn't growing or anything. It really was not growing and we shut down and was going to revisit it in the spring and did do just that. So in the spring of '03 opened the church back up in that March with all new people, most of which was driving from Winston to Greensboro. The church's racial degree changed because I had been the only black member of the church. I was pasturing all white people. So we just started going on from there.

What I got out of the NA meetings was such a truth and honesty that I heard in those rooms that that became again to be a catalyst for what this church was going to be. Inward discovery, personal recovery, and affectionate outreach, that was what we had to have. We had to be honest, we had to be transparent, and we had to allow God to heal us and then grow us in Christ Jesus. That is the best that I can do at saying how I got here. To say it was my plan or I was on the fast track to pastor and I wanted to have my own church one day, um-mmm, no, not at all. So today I know that my purpose as an out gay African-American

male Christian pastor is to create safe places and honest dialogue around marginalized people's lives. That's it. And if they meet, Jesus, because I think that he is just so fabulous. But what I want more than anything is for them to meet themselves.

Some of the things that I have shared in this time I have never said. I had never glued them together like this to understand. So life is full of opportunities to learn and to grow, to express, to understand, create, and recreate who we are. And I'm really grateful for this journey. I'm very, very grateful for it. So much so I want my other brothers and sisters to know this piece and this joy and somewhere in there I hope we find happiness.

Q: Your church has been growing quite a bit.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: How has the dialogue with the other black churches in Winston-Salem and the Triad been part of the growth? I'm also wondering, it's a two part question, if like the other church that you had been going on Sunday nights, is this a church that some people have their full black church experience over in their family church and then they come to this church --

A: For that other piece?

Q: For that other piece.

A: Yes and no. We're really not geared for that. Not as much as I think I would like for us to be. We have service on Sunday mornings at 12 noon. Traditional church is at 11:00. On second and fourth Sundays we have an evening service at 6:30. Definitely there are some people that have feet in both pools, so to speak, but the majority of our membership are in a way very close to say out. We just recently did a survey of the demographics of our congregation and in that survey 82% of our members are out to family, friends, on their job selectively but live pretty much of their life out.

Q: Are the other 18% all LGBTQ or are some allies? Like your mother --

A: Right. Some are allies and then some choose not to be out.

Q: How has the dialogue between the other churches been?

A: Nonexistent. Basically nonexistent. You know, knock on wood, I'm not trying to create drama for my own self but this has been fairly drama free. I have just not had to deal with a whole lot of stuff if you would from area pastors and things. Now, do they know me? Do they know about me? And a lot of them know me. They knew whenever I was either at Macedonia or I was at Union Baptist and they know I'm not play-play, I'm not a fly by night, I'm not kooky. They may think I'm wrong but they know that I'm

fully standing in my role. They know that I demand respect. Not because *I* demand respect but because all that they know about me demands respect. You may not like me but you will not deny that I stand flat footed in what I believe. And I am articulate, well spoken, and I know what I'm talking about.

So to debate with me or to whatever with me, uh-uh. Someone else, they would probably beat him to death in ridicule and everything but that just hasn't been -- and I thank God for that, I really do. Because I will not debate scripture with anyone because scripture is up for your own interpretation based out of your own experiences and etc., etc. And so my experience has been this. This has been *my* experience, this has been *my* journey, and because it has been my journey someone else cannot tell me about my journey. You can't tell *me* about *my* experience and how I got here and how I got to this theological belief. *You* can't tell me about that because this is my journey and this moreover is my personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. So the buck stops there. You can't get over into this no more than I can get over into yours. I've had a couple of little hiccups within the community along the way but we have next month, May 15th, we are having the black round table is going to be having their

conversation here entitled "The Politics of Silence: Homophobia in the Black Church." They're out of Berkeley, California, the Pacific School of Religion and they're going to be here. This is going to be advertised in the *Chronicle* newspaper,¹ all African-American pastors are going to receive a letter concerning it and an invitation to come for that Saturday to have dialogue and discourse. The very thing that I have wished that could happen for a long time, to have dialogue. I just wish, I would love to be invited their way. People feel more comfortable on their own ground so since they're not inviting me I'm going to invite them. I've at times thought about sending invites to pastors to come preach but I guess just the rejection, why show up for the rejection? Why show up for that rejection because I know what that's going to be?

Q: This reminds me of something that's going on in Hendersonville. It's a city in the southwestern part of North Carolina. There's been a group formed of LGBT positive churches there in *Hendersonville*, North Carolina and they aren't getting any feedback from any of the other churches. It's like "live and let live" type of attitude. Could it be part of that or?

¹ *The Chronicle of Winston-Salem* is an African-American newspaper published in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

A: I think one thing, it is coming to an end, this foolishness is coming to an end. Now does that mean that everybody is going to come to the place of agreement that homosexuality is? Not any time soon and I don't know if that'll happen before Jesus' return. But what I do know is that the degree of prejudice is coming to an end. Having the dialogue, I mean I just got back from Duke Divinity School, a very conservative school, and they struggled greatly having this conversation. So there is a change, there is a wind of change and all. So I think that it's in the time it will.

Q: To shift gears back to Wilkes County again, do you plan on going to your 20th high school reunion?

A: Yes, with my partner. And I cannot wait. I am so excited about it.

Q: Did you go to your tenth?

A: I did not. And it was very, very small. Nobody knew about it. I don't know what all happened with that but because of social networking, Facebook and others, they've been able to get in contact with a whole lot more of us and everything and so I am so looking forward to whenever it comes out to say this is when we're going to do it, this is when it's going to be, this is what it's going to cost, this is where it's going to be, whatever. I would not miss

it save death. So looking forward to it. In all that I am, so looking forward it.

Q: Would you ever move back to Wilkesboro?

A: No, not Wilkesboro. But I would love to have a home in the mountains. I think Wilkesboro sucks life out of people.

Q: **How so?**

Q: But a mountain home?

A: Yeah. The region, yes. I mean I love the mountains. My god, I love the mountains but to Wilkesboro, no. Oh, I am so looking forward to it. Yes. And I'm taking my man. You better believe it. In a very public, very real way I'm taking my man.

Q: How do you think they'll react?

A: I could care less. I don't care. Many of them are my friends on Facebook. I am very open about who I am. And ironically I get some of the greatest support from some of my high school -- maybe one or two said I don't agree but I respect you for who and what you are. It really doesn't matter if you do or not.

Q: Has anyone apologized for their behavior back in the day?

A: Oh wow. No but some of my greatest antagonizers are friends of mine. I would call them friends today. Some of the bigger antagonizers.

Q: So they've moved past wherever they were back in
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

A: Honey, you won't pull that on me today. Now that's one thing. Because I am very much grown. But yeah. Even in my gayness growing up, I was not weak. I always have had a strong presence. And when I say weak I'm not meaning that gay people are weak and I'm not meaning weak as not strong physical or frame-wise but I'm just talking about God really gave me a tenacity to just stand up and I just always just stood up. I didn't hide. I didn't shirk.

Even though I wasn't out so to speak because I didn't know what out was, and I can't say that enough times. I had nothing to come out to because I didn't know what out was. There was not an out for me, you know? Like for kids today there is an out. Like for me today there is an out. But then and being in the rural area there wasn't an out. Out to what? What were you going to say, that I'm gay? What does that mean? What is that? How is that? Why is that? What does that do?

Q: When you were in high school there were some people who were in the band with us who were out to some degree. Do you remember, I'm thinking of a person who played clarinet who ended up dropping out of school and he was very open

that he was dating another man. Do you remember those conversations in the hall or were there different paths --

A: Not really. I remember the guy who played the drums and wanted to do the flag is what he really wanted to do. He still lives in Wilkesboro today and we're friends on Facebook and hit each other up from time to time. I remember him being very gay. I wasn't that gay. And again, it was just the name calling. There was no camaraderie. There was no gay-straight student alliance. See, those are things to come out to. Come out to something. You don't just come out but you come out to something. So there was nothing to come out to. And again, I didn't know what out was. I didn't have a clue what that meant, not then. But when I went to college that made sense. I understood that so much more. I went to the gay-straight student alliance down at Appalachian a couple of times and so, "oh OK." And then I had gay friends on campus at school. OK, I got you, that's what it is, all right.

Q: Is your understanding of what being gay is from college different than now and what Ricky had taught you?

A: Very, very much so. I see the error of that now and I understand that now. Where I am today is that we as same gender loving people need major, major

Q: What did you learn about gay culture in college? How did it differ from your experiences in Winston-Salem and within a predominantly gay black community?

END OF FILE