

Karen R

Q: This is Michael [Howell?] at Appalachian State University. It's April the 23rd, 2010 and I'm interviewing Doctor Karen Robertson. So Karen, if you wouldn't mind sort of introducing yourself and either if you're from North Carolina let us know that or if you have moved here from somewhere if you could sort of help us know a little bit about what brought you here, where you came from, and also your age. And then you can sort of talk about what you'd like to talk about.

A: I'm Karen Lee Robertson and I was actually born in Kentucky but raised in Tennessee. And I came here after a job search at Appalachian State. I ended up here in 1995. So I've been here a little over 15 years. And I've lived in Nashville, Cincinnati, Kansas City, and ended up from Kansas City being here.

Q: And you're faculty where?

A: School of music.

Q: So what do you think about living here?

A: I can't imagine living anywhere else. I think I have the perfect setup. I love Boone. This winter was not so great. Most of the time I love Boone and I love the winters. I

love the summers. And where I work is a really good situation through the faculty and so I'm not leaving.

Q: Different from Kentucky? Different from other places?

A: I guess because the faculty works better here probably.

And I do like the area. I mean I'm used to living in large cities and I wasn't sure that I would like Boone but I like the smallness of it and I like the mountains and so I think it's a great place to live.

Q: Are the people in Boone pretty similar to the people you grew up with in Kentucky?

A: No.

Q: Different kind of culture or?

A: I grew up mostly in Nashville. I was born in Kentucky but I moved to Nashville by way of Jacksonville and up.

Nashville was a much larger population. I mean you think of Nashville, you think of country music but I didn't hear that much growing up. I was more classically trained.

Went to a very, very large high school and I lived in the suburbs and so it's very different really. The way of thinking is different, I think, too. It's much more a metropolitan mindset I guess you'd say.

Q: I was going to say I think I have heard that it's sort of more sophisticated than people sort of think about it.

A: Yeah, Nashville really is.

Q: The being in Tennessee and country music. All right, that's interesting. I found the same thing about Louisville when I lived in Louisville.

A: I was born in Louisville.

Q: OK, I was there in grad school. So let me ask you a little bit about yourself. How did you first come to know living where you grew up about issues of gender and sexuality? Where did stuff like that come from?

A: I was raised southern Baptist. My father was a southern Baptist minister of music and then he worked in the southern Baptist Sunday school board. When we moved to Nashville that was why he moved there was to be part of that. And he was a big mover and shaker in the Southern Baptist convention, in the music part of it. So I was not raised to think about those sorts of things and I guess, I can remember my first attraction for women probably when I was about seven or eight, maybe even nine. Just some things that happened. I remember being attracted to women then but I also didn't really think much about it. I got married out of college at the age of 21 to a man I had dated all the way through high school and wanted children and wanted to do the -- I was a very staunchly conservative Baptist then. Really wanted to please god, that was my concern. And so even though I knew attraction toward women

I really didn't think very much about it. I knew I wanted to get married, I wanted to have children, I loved my husband. We had children and we were married for 20 years. And I had some attractions during that time but, again, I was so concentrated on raising my children and trying to have a family and trying to get a job and trying to further my career that I really did not think a lot about it. When we moved to Kansas City we started going to a church that was very progressive. The issue of homosexuality in the churches, how to deal with it, was something that they were really looking at very strongly. And I had friends who were dealing with the issue, a pianist musician in particular who publishes a lot of music for Christian places who had gone through, he had gone through all sorts of therapy to try to -- all the stuff that you read about and hear about he had gone through to try to not be gay any more. And I supported him through that and started to realize through looking at that my own sexuality at that point. Probably thought I was somewhere in the middle. And said to my husband at that point that I thought I'd always been attracted to women and men. But more said in passing. It wasn't like now I want to go do that or anything like that. It was more like this is who I think I am.

And when we moved to Boone I started going to a pretty progressive church here and began to kind of explore that a little bit. And I learned about from a writer whose name right now is totally escaping me but a female priest in the Episcopal church who believes very strongly in the scale, I can't remember who --

Q: Kinsey scale?

A: Yeah. And that was the first time I'd ever thought about that and I was like oh, yeah, I can totally understand that. I'm somewhere in the middle, I'm not one way or the other. If there's a scale of one to five I'm a three or something that's probably straight in the middle. And then through a series of things that happened my husband and I separated, consequently divorced, and because of that I started thinking about what was the next step for me, where I wanted to live my life. And I kind of I guess thought about men and women pretty equally there for a little while. And then, as I said earlier, I got in a relationship with a woman and it was like a fog lifted off my eyes is about the only way I can put it.

Q: So that was a first relationship?

A: Yeah. I had kissed women before, I had gotten very close. When I was living in Kansas City I went on a trip with a woman and things got very close but I was very, very, very

much dedicated to my marriage and to my children and trying to provide the best marriage that I could. I was also kind of hung up a little bit with the whole religious, coming from a very conservative background and slowly becoming more progressive in my thinking. So I'd never acted upon any of the feelings that I'd had. Come very close but never had done anything. Primarily again because I felt very strongly about keeping my family unit together because I felt like I really wanted to make it work. And I personally, for me personally I think you can love someone whatever sexuality, you know, whether they're male or female. I was in love with my husband. I loved him. I'm positive he has better sex now than we did when we were together. I assume he does. I know I do. But nevertheless I loved him, you know what I'm saying? And that's always irked me when people think that you can't live with somebody and you can actually be gay but not love somebody. I just don't think that's true. That's not true to who we are.

Q: Was that an issue of tension?

A: No.

Q: If you don't mind me asking --

A: No, not at all. Because when we were first married we both wanted the same thing. He wanted to be a minister and I

was going to be a minister's wife and I was going to play the horn and I was going to do all this stuff and we had this very strict narrow way of looking at things. And when I was in college even I remember one time sort of passing around a petition against homosexual, I can't remember what the exact thing was but I was very staunchly against homosexuality for a very, very, very long time. So then when I started to really look at the issues and start thinking about my own feelings and my own thoughts about them and really coming to grips with them it was more, no, it was just more me saying I think I'm probably, like I said, I'm probably somewhere in the middle and if we weren't married I might see a woman. It was kind of that thing. I don't think there was ever really a tension. He was struggling himself with being in the relationship and really probably we were together for a good ten years after he probably should have been in a relationship. So it was kind of a mutual thing. But I don't know that my own sexuality had that much to do with it. I guess maybe the sex part of it.

Q: Maybe you both found that you didn't know what you were missing afterwards.

A: That's right, exactly. I'm hoping and assuming that his sex life is much better but I don't know that for a fact.

We don't talk too much but I'm assuming that it probably is. But when I was with this woman it really did feel like I had put on glasses for the first time or I had done something that just totally awakened who I was. It wasn't that the past had been a lie, it's just I couldn't see. And all of a sudden I could see and then I didn't really ever go back. I never really thought about men again. So I think at this point I would definitely call myself a lesbian. I don't think I'm anywhere in the middle any more. I think I'm definitely over on the other side. But I don't know, it probably sounds a little strange but --

Q: No, not at all.

A: That's the way I came around, so.

Q: How old were your kids?

A: When I came out?

Q: When you realized this.

A: My oldest one was 17 probably and my youngest one was 15 and they're now 24 and 22.

Q: How did that go?

A: It really wasn't an issue. I mean it was a little bit at first. I think the person that I saw, my first girlfriend was a lot younger than me so that was probably more of an issue than anything else but the last ten or so years that we were together as a family unit we had been pretty

liberal and progressive in our thinking. So they were not really raised with that whole idea that homosexuality is wrong. So that didn't really hit their consciousness. My youngest daughter was a little concerned that it meant that she was gay. And she's such a girly girl that I don't even see that as being a concern but for a while there she really fought it because of that reason. And it took her a while to figure out that that was what she was thinking. And I know when I broke up with my first girlfriend both of their first questions were OK, so what are you going to do now, are you going to date men, are you going to date women?

Q: Those were the kids' questions?

A: Yeah. And I'd always promised them that when we -- because of certain circumstances in our relationship when we broke up, there was some infidelity that they knew about but it was not discussed on the other side, and I promised them that I would be open about all my own personal dealings with other people. And if I was ever with somebody that was more than one or two dates that they would know about it, that I would be honest with them. So I was pretty much. Because they needed one parent that was kind of laying it out on the table and I kind of decided that was my responsibility. So that's why they were so free I guess to say OK, which one is it now, are you going to date men, are

you going to date women, do you know? And for a while there it was kind of like well, I don't know. I mean I knew in my heart but I also knew on paper it would be so much easier to go back with another man. It would make everything so much simpler. But I've never been the person to go the simple route.

Q: Do I understand that you have a partner now?

A: Yeah. And she's actually my second girlfriend. We've been together for almost seven years. So I did a lot of searching on my own for I guess almost a year and was really thinking about what I wanted and where I wanted to be and she had been a friend of mine for a long time so it was kind of a natural progression.

Q: So you're here in Boone and in a relationship with another woman. What is that like here in Appalachia, in this area?

A: I feel in some ways that I'm in kind of a fishbowl. I mean I go to a very progressive church where I'm the choir director and my partner goes there. We're very open and out so it's not an issue. Here at Appalachian through a series of events I was pretty much outed so I don't worry about that very much. In my job I think the only way that it affects me is because I do recruit, because I am responsible for bringing in my own students to study the horn. When I'm recruiting I just don't say anything. You

know, I don't make much reference to my own particular family. I may say something about my children but that's about as far as I go. I may even say that I'm divorced but I won't say anything about being gay. Especially if I sense that they're a pretty conservative family. I won't say anything about it, I don't really allude to it at all. I don't think it's important. I'm they're here to study the horn with me, they're not here to know anything about my personal life anyway.

And I know my students well enough to know that they -- I guess I kind of trained them this way several years ago and it's just kind of continued on. I remember when I first came out saying to my older students, "please help me out here. We want to have a good studio. Try to not talk about things that you know about my personal life. For a few months after they've gotten here, they've studied with me for a little while, they know they don't have to be threatened by me, and then if they figure out another way that's fine. But initially I don't want them to be uncomfortable." I don't want them thinking, you know, however it is they've been raised, and there is a lot of conservative thinking around here, we all know that, I don't want them worrying when they come in the door, especially female. The door's shut, there's no window

there, I don't want them being concerned that they're going to have to -- I don't know what they're thinking in their head but I don't want them to think about that for a few months. So I know in my own studio that that's kind of not talked about as much at first and then it kind of just goes from there. I have the students over at the end of the year to my house and my partner's there and they like her better than they like me. I mean she's the good cop, I'm the bad cop.

Q: She's not grading them.

A: Exactly. And she can have a good time with them and I'm worried about whether anybody's drinking. And they just love her to death and I'm really happy about that but I think that's the only way that it really affects things. I have a very close one on one relationship with my students and I always want to make sure that they're comfortable. But in Watauga County I think is more of an issue than actually Boone. It seems to me. I know we've been looking around at houses and I know there are some pockets of Watauga County where you really have to be kind of concerned. And I know that we looked at one house and we're thinking if we live in this particular area we probably would have to be a little bit more quiet about who we are. It's not like we go around and announce it or

anything. Where we live right now there's not that many people around and I've got a big gay flag hanging off the back of my house. So wouldn't be any gay flags, wouldn't be any of this, you'd be concerned about what people think. So to me the deal is more outside of Boone than it actually is Boone. I know it's there but I just really don't hang around with people that much within Boone that feel much different than I do about things.

Q: So then living in the area even though Boone itself, Boone proper, seems to be a little more open or liberal, that's your perception, living in this area does have some kind of influence on your relationship or how you live your life?

A: Most definitely.

Q: Can you talk about that a little, explore that just a little bit more. How does that sort of shape how you act or the things you do or?

A: I think the first thing is, like I said before, I think it's really quite sad that we can't as gay people just be who we are, that we have to watch any kind of PDA, that we have to kind of watch anything that would allude to having a relationship. I think first of all that's probably more of a nation thing than it just is this area but I do think that it's far more conservative in this area, the way people feel about same sex relationships at all, let alone

any kind of cohabitation or marriage or anything else you want to think about. There are so many preachers in these little Baptist churches all over the area and there's tons of them, you can go in any Sunday probably, you could pick a church, and you'd hear them say something about homosexuality being wrong and that you're going to hell. I just don't choose to be in those particular situations. I have not personally met up with any kind of troubles for being gay. Had a few problems here at Appalachian when I came out but other than that I haven't really run across that much of a problem with it. Probably because I think we learn as gay people just not to say much unless we have to. You know what I mean? We're not doing anything to really show that we're gay all the time. I guess like people don't show that they're heterosexual all the time too. But I hear things are said, comments are made, you know, at the grocery store or whatever, hearing people talk and you can tell that their thinking is a lot different than yours is. But personally I don't think I've really felt, I guess I've tread such light ground in places where I know it's probably not an open thing, so I just don't say anything about it. Does that make sense?

Q: I think it does. So I mean there are just messages around about it?

A: Yeah.

Q: So you can pick up on how people will sort of think about it around?

A: Yeah.

Q: Even within sort of a liberal area there are still some conservative or --

A: Yeah. And again, we don't get all liberal students.

Q: -- different kinds of thoughts. That's very true.

A: We get a lot of conservative students. Quite a few, I think. And whether they are still conservative when they leave is a whole 'nother story but when they get here a lot of them are. I think people who have grown up in the mountains who work at Appalachian have a different kind of thinking about those sorts of things. I guess for me if I know somebody was raised here in Watauga County or in this area I just immediately assume that, I don't say anything to let them know anything else unless I'm totally sure that it would be OK to do so. Because I'm just assuming that they don't agree with it. Maybe that's being a little bit prejudiced on the other side, I don't know. But there's an assumption from where I'm at that they're not going to agree with it, that they're probably going to be very conservative, that there's probably not much that I can

talk to them about as far as politics or anything else that we would agree on.

Q: I take it your partner is also not from here?

A: Right, she also was raised around Nashville.

Q: So do you think that your relationship would be different if you were living in a different area? Would it be easier or different in a more metropolitan area --

A: Probably.

Q: -- than in this kind of area?

A: Probably.

Q: Yeah?

A: Because I do think that, like I said, if we're thinking about moving from where we are now to another area you have to think about particular areas and what you've heard about the way people think about things. You know, there's pockets of, like if you go toward Tennessee we just kind of know that you have to live a little bit more closeted lifestyle. If you're in a large city I think things like that don't quite matter as much. Or maybe even a northern city. I don't know. I studied in Cincinnati, I lived there for six years, my first child was born there. But I was also very conservative then so I don't know that I would have had an idea of how that would have been. But I would imagine that it would be a little bit easier, all

those things would be easier in a larger city, maybe further north. Though I get kind of frustrated being raised in the south like I am and being a proud southerner and all this supposed prejudice that's here that's supposedly not in the north. I just don't, I think everybody's got their own biases and prejudices and it's ridiculous to say that we're any different than anybody else. But that's my own feeling.

Q: Oh, I thought of something I want to ask you in a minute. But now I get the sense that you're fairly out on campus, that people around campus know you and you're sort of connected into the campus gay culture. Are you and your partner connected to the sort of larger community off campus?

A: We are slowly becoming so. Jackie, my partner, was in student services in Knoxville for the last four years and before that she was in Statesville, and so she was in the public school system and definitely was not out. I think people who knew her knew me and you know, there was some knowledge but she never talked about it in particular. So now she's retired, she retired last July, she taught public schools in North Carolina for over 25 years, so she's done with that part of her life and now she's a big out lesbian.

Q: What does that mean? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

A: I don't know. She got her hair cut real short and she's not worried any more about what people say. She's getting into the gay and lesbian culture here in Boone. I just don't have time. I mean there's a group of women that get together and have dinner once a month and I went one time and just never was able to work it into my schedule to do it. And we have friends that we hang around with and of course I go to the Boone pride thing and all that sort of thing. But because of where she is in her life she's able to get more into that and discover that more than I've been able to do at this point.

Q: What's your perception of it here?

A: There's a lot more women than men. I think that's the first thing I'd say. And I'm not sure it's representative. I know from just being in this building that there are men who are gay who are not comfortable in being gay in Boone. And whether it's their own feeling and their own fear or whether it's real I don't know. But it is interesting to me that there's a lot more women who seem to be doing things in this area than there are men. Maybe that's my perception, I don't know. You're male so you would know more than me.

Q: No, that's a reasonable perception for this area.

A: I mean in the school of music we have at least four that I know of who are not out. One has been here forever. The other ones think about tenure and they still think about tenure and I almost wish -- I had tenure before I came out so if it was going to affect anything it would be the rest of the ladder. But now I'm a full professor so I got through with all of that and it didn't affect any of that. And so, boy, I would really like to see us have one person in the school of music here who was actually out when they went through the whole thing.

Q: So that's interesting --

A: But there's a fear.

Q: People perceive that that could have an effect on their tenure.

A: Yes, most definitely.

Q: Is that because of something around the issue socially or is that because of concerns that they would have about the people who would be making their tenure decisions?

A: I think both.

Q: Is it an issue of bias or --

A: One person told me --

Q: Because it's odd, there's such a natural affinity between music and other arts that that really surprises me to hear that. I'm sorry, I cut you off.

A: One person here who said to me, "I know this area, I was raised in this area, I know how people think." I don't think it's just tenure. I think that's part of it but he doesn't want his students knowing or that being an issue for them either. Because again, he knows he thinks. And his personal feeling is that women are much more accepted than men, and I think there's probably something to that. I mean unfortunately, you know, men think about lesbian, they think of two women doing it and that's fine and they go on with their life, you know what I mean? They think about two guys doing it and unfortunately it seems to me that that's what men think about. It's all sex for them. There's nothing about relationships. I'm being very general, I know I'm being extremely general, but if they're going to be biased it's more, I think personally that they start thinking about the sexual act between two men and they go ughh and they get this natural aversion to this that makes them be totally against the whole idea of two men being gay. Where two women is like, eh, doesn't mean much to them. It doesn't mean they take it seriously but it doesn't seem to bother them.

Q: But it's enough to make the other people concerned?

A: Right.

Q: The people who would have to face the issue potentially concerned.

A: Right.

Q: So if I'm hearing you right it sounds like the idea is that if you're going to be gay then it's going to be easier if you're a woman than if you're a man. So there's an even stronger negative bias towards gay men here.

A: Yes. That's my perception. Although I would really have to say in the tenure process here in the school of music I really think that's a perceived thing and not the truth. I really think that if they were out that that would not be used against them. I really don't think it would be. I mean our new dean is very, he's been extremely supportive of my partner, of my own -- I work with the GLBT task force here. He helped evidently at Ithaca College with getting the GLBT center open there. So I think it's more perceived than anything else.

Q: And given that the chancellor seems to be so supportive with students and things it's really interesting that there's that perception. Although I'm aware that there are a number of faculty here across the university, at least that's the stories I hear, who everyone knows but they don't officially recognize that out. So that's really an interesting dynamic that is here somewhere for some reason.

A: Again, I don't understand it. Let me back up. We have a teacher here who's female who also feels the same way so I'm not totally sure that it's all gay but it seems to me that it's more men than women. I think sometimes it's the feeling that they don't want that to become their little. You know, I don't want to be known as being a gay person because that may affect my relationship with my students or it may affect my tenure. And I think I'm the type of person that it's very difficult for me to be, I don't know, what you see is what you get. I just am that way. Sometimes it doesn't serve me very well but for the most part if I'm going to be who I am I'm just going to be who I am and you're going to have to deal with it.

Q: It does sound from what you said that you actually got outed as opposed to making the choice to come out.

A: Yeah.

Q: So in retrospect --

A: But I probably would have anyway.

Q: -- do you think it has actually helped? Maybe not the way but, you know.

A: I think so. I mean it's helped what would probably eventually happen. I wish it had been on my own terms. Like I said I'm not really one to hide a whole bunch of stuff. It's hard for me to keep secrets. I'm not the

person that -- that's not really true but you know, like when I'm giving a present to somebody it's so hard for me to hold back and not tell them I got this really great present. I want to give it to them immediately, I get so excited about it. And I'm just that way. And so I really doubt that I would have gone too much farther without totally being out. But I really wish I'd been able to do it my own way, if that makes sense. And it was, as I said to you, it was over a student that I saw and some students who wanted to see me lose my job. I was being a good teacher, quite honestly, and calling them on stuff and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). Yeah, sometimes it doesn't serve you to get on students who don't want to be gotten on. And then they turned on me and tried to get me fired and tried to use it as a reason but it didn't work.

Q: Do you think now that you're sort of out on campus, out in the school of music, do you get the sense that people relate to you in a certain way because they know or think you're lesbian? Or is it sort of really not an issue?

A: The only way that I see that it's an issue is actually with the other homosexual kids around this area, the students know and I know they know. I mean we never talk about it but I know that they know. And the gaydar or whatever comes up. I can pretty much tell which students are

struggling with their sexuality and in the school of music we have quite a few. I don't know whether I've suddenly awakened and seen that we have more or if it's just been in the last ten years or whatever but I have had students come to me to talk to me about issues that they're having. Whether it's their parents who kick them out or they're afraid of telling their parents and they want to know or just that they know that I'm an ally and if they need to talk to me they know I'm here. So in that way I think it's been a very positive thing. I've not gotten any negative feedback but I don't know that they would tell me. You know what I mean? And my students, if they hear it, they definitely won't say anything to me about it. But I would guess in my own studio, I have 12 horn players now who take privately from me, I would say I'm guessing five of them are struggling with their sexuality. That's my own guess. So in that way it's been good for me to be somebody who people can look at and know that they can talk to if they need to. And that's something I've said to my partner Jackie is that I want to be a couple, I want to be somebody that they know, you can make this work, you can have a relationship with someone if you want to and make it work even in any situation.

Q: Does she do the faculty stuff with you?

A: She does.

Q: Whatever gatherings and --

A: We started that about three or four years ago. It took a while. And everybody was very welcoming to her. Again, I know we have conservative people in this building but I haven't heard anything from them. If they feel anything they aren't telling me.

Q: You said you'd been here 15 years?

A: Yeah.

Q: So I hate to stick too close to campus with the question but maybe the community as well, do you think that things have changed? I mean does it seem now in reflection that it was any different over the past 15 years? Have things gotten more open, less open, stayed the same?

A: I think they've gotten more open. At Appalachian I think that's primarily because of our chancellor. Personally. I think Boone has gotten more open too and probably Watauga County in general.

Q: You also mentioned that you have friends in Wilkes. Do you think that they have a similar experience or is it sort of different off the mountain?

A: I think Wilkes is different. I think from all indications that I can tell they're much more closeted down there than I can be here. But I don't know. I mean that's just from

talking to them really briefly. I do think that Boone is kind of a, we're a fairly liberal area surrounded by a bunch of conservatism. And you know, I was on the chancellor's diversity committee task force and we did a bunch of questionnaires and it seems to me, I mean it's not just gay people, it's if you're from India or you're from Pakistan, it doesn't seem to matter, there are some biases that are out there that are going to affect you if you go kind of outside of the Appalachian area in a lot of ways.

Q: So anything that makes you the other sort of?

A: Right. And they're that way, I mean the mountain people are that way about people who teach at Appalachian too. You know what I mean? You're almost, my kids when they went to Watauga High School it was a real struggle for my oldest one because she was different. She was a very high IQ musician that didn't ever quite fit in. And some of it was this whole idea that you're not from here. You're not a native. Doesn't matter how long you've lived here, you're not a native. So I think there are some pervading things that kind of influence everything else, I guess.

Q: That makes sense. What else would you like to talk about?

A: I can't really think of --

Q: Actually the question I had for you, and I put it out there, knowing your background from what you said how has your family responded?

A: My father died, kind of ironically the same day that my husband moved out my father died. He fell down a flight of stairs and never recovered. He was in a coma. So I kind of had, my father was probably the largest influence on me of any one person in the world. So when he died I think there was a freedom that I probably wouldn't have had if he was still alive. I'm not sure my path would have been quite as easy as it was, to tell you the truth, because he would not have approved of anything. My mother on the other hand is a lot more open. I've lived with Jackie for four years. When I moved in with her I still wasn't out to my mother. My children, like I said, knew almost from -- well, they knew very much from the very beginning of my discovery that I was a lesbian but my mother was a whole 'nother story because of the way she was raised. And my sisters were as well.

My younger sister, I came out to her first, and it was funny, I guess I was about two years into my relationship with Jackie, maybe a year, I really don't remember, but her response was, "You know, I understand people who are born gay but it sounds to me like you decided to become gay."

And she had a real issue with the fact that I wasn't willing to say that my whole marriage was a farce and that there wasn't anything to it. She wanted me to just like totally, I mean it seemed like she would have been much more comfortable with me saying I've been gay from the very beginning, our whole marriage was nothing. I haven't been willing to say that yet. I mean I have two children from it and it was a good relationship in most ways. So that was a little bit of a struggle with her and I think she still has a few issues with that. But mostly she's supportive of me and of Jackie.

My mother, I told her, I guess it was three years ago now, and basically the way I told her was just starting with my journey. The realization that when I started out I grew up all my life wanting to be a spiritual person, a religious person, a pious person, whatever you want to think of, I wanted to be a Christian. And when I started going through my life and Joe and I both going through our lives began to realize that you don't have to do anything. You know what I mean? You just have to be who you are. And that realization just kind of blew everything wide open. So to me when I look back over my life it was like a progression of things. OK, you're free to no longer believe that you have to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior in

order to go to heaven. That's the first step and then you go from there down the road. You're free to believe this, you're free to believe this, whatever it is. That whole progression was now you're free to be who you are. And it's kind of brought me to this point. Spiritually, emotionally, whatever.

And so that's the way I explained it to her was you know, my relationship with god now is so much better than it was when I was married and definitely so much better than it was when I got married because I know who I am and I know that being who I am is far more important. Having the integrity to be who I am is far more important than all the list of things I could do, of the millions of people that I could win to Christ or any other number of things. And she cried and I cried and she said, "I'm a lot more liberal than your father was and I love you." And she's tried very hard. She has tried extremely hard. She's never said this to me, my mom's not one to really talk a whole lot about feelings, but I kind of sense that she may or may not agree with all of it but it doesn't matter. She loves me and she's invited Jackie to come when we come home. She wants to see her, she asks me how she's doing, she's invited her to Christmas dinner. She's tried as hard as she can to make her feel welcome. So that to me is incredibly

important whether she agrees with it or disagrees and I really have no idea. I don't know. I'm not sure it's important. I mean she can struggle with that and she'll come to a point to where it'll all be fine but she tries really hard with Jackie and like I said, that's very important to me. It makes Jackie feel good because her mother is totally not accepting and hasn't been for years. So we've got the two extremes.

Now, my older sister, her husband is a minister of music in the largest church in Nashville, First Baptist Church. They've been there for a couple of years and before that it was a really large church in Arkansas. She doesn't drink because of what people will say. So I've not said anything to her. I mean she's not an idiot. She knows I'm living with Jackie. I've been living with Jackie. She knows we've talked about buying another house together. My children talk about Jackie all the time. So if she hasn't figured it out --

Q: So it's sort of a family don't ask, don't tell kind of policy?

A: Yeah, that part really is. That part really is because it's not so much that I'm concerned about her judgment. I just don't want to hear it. I just really do not. I'm not interested in hearing it.

Q: You know what the reaction, what you'll hear?

A: Yeah. And I'm not interested in it. I mean she had her judgment against me when I got divorced. And the judgment was basically it was his fault but you should have done more to keep the marriage together, you should have done, you know. And again, when you're sitting up there in your little throne there then it's very easy to say those sorts of things and then you get down in the nitty gritty and it's not so easy to say that. But she's never been there. I'm not sure that her marriage is that fantastic but you know, she's not going to go there. They'll stay married until one of them dies. It's just the way that it is. But I just don't want to have the conversation with her. Again, if she doesn't know then she really is living in a fantasy land. I'm assuming that my sister and my mother haven't said anything to her about that. I don't know. I know when I came out to my mother that I said to her, "I've had this conversation with Lisa, I've not had it with my older sister because I know what she's going to say and I'm really not interested in it." And my mother was like, "Yeah, I totally get that and you're totally right and I can understand why you wouldn't tell her." So I guess there is kind of a don't ask, don't tell. But I certainly don't trip around and don't say things. This ring I have

on Jackie gave me many, many years ago and my sister asked me last year, you've got on that ring, I notice you always wear it.

Q: Your older or younger sister?

A: My older sister. And she said it's a pretty ring. Oh, Jackie gave it to me. What does it say? It's Gaelic for soul friend. That's all that was said.

Q: That's enough.

A: Yeah. Oh, I like that necklace that you've got on. Jackie gave it to me. Again, I'm not sure that she doesn't know but...

Q: Something that you said prompted me to think, and I want to be mindful of your time because I know you have things coming up.

A: What time is it?

Q: It's five after 12. But you mentioned how your spiritual relationship is important to you and that you're part of a progressive church and this is an area where religion is really sort of a dominant theme of life, I guess.

A: Most definitely.

Q: So how do you think that works out for people here? Particularly I guess LGBT people who are spiritual or religious. Is it that there are natural places for people

to fit here or do you think people struggle with that more here or less here?

A: I'm so happy that the UCC is here now. I don't remember which one it is, whether they call themselves the Boone one or, do you know which one I'm talking about?

Q: Is that High Country out on 421?

A: I think it is called High Country.

Q: The big one out on the hill?

A: Yeah. And as far as I can tell they probably have the most number of gay people in one congregation in this whole area. And as I've watched that happen over the last four or five years, however many years it's been, I've thought that's fantastic that there's a place where people are feeling like they can go and they can discuss these things. Saint Luke's Episcopal where I go, Episcopal churches, if you're aware of the news at all, we're kind of struggling with that within our denomination. And the Episcopal Church here, again we're like a fish bowl. We wouldn't know any of that stuff out there if our priest didn't occasionally tell us. OK, we may split from the Anglican Church because we just ordained a bishop in Los Angeles or whatever. It's not an issue here. I mean I think we have people within our church who may have some problems with it and from what the priest tells me, we do. But they don't ever voice that

opinion. It's not ever, I've never had anybody come up to me and personally say that they had a problem with me.

Q: Is that the Southern if you can't say something nice?

A: That, maybe.

Q: Or do you think it's different, some other reason?

A: No, you're probably right. That's probably a large part of it. But although I'm sure that if I was sitting here in First Baptist church in Boone playing the piano and directing the choir and I went and hugged my girlfriend after I got through or made it really widely known that she was my girlfriend I wouldn't be choir director there any more.

Q: So every religion, or denomination I guess, is probably not as liberal in this area as others?

A: Most definitely.

Q: So sort of the traditional are still pretty traditional, is that right?

A: I think so. See, I mean for me personally I have been raised making music in churches. I sang long before I played the French horn which is what I do now. Long before I did anything else I sang. Grew up that way. So for me not to be part of a group on Sundays would feel very odd. I mean I did it for awhile but there's something about a group of people getting together even when they're not all

like minded, and Saint Luke's it's definitely you put ten people in a row and ask them what they believed and it would be ten different things. One of the things I like about it. It's just that idea of getting together for some sort of corporate worship of something that's higher than you that to me has a lot of value. And providing the music for that is part of the way that I personally worship or come to a higher state of being. So I just can't imagine not doing that. But again, if I hadn't found a church here that was, I mean I was already going to that church when I was married to my husband so they kind of went with me through this whole thing.

Q: Did he stick around, by the way?

A: He's now in Nashville. But we started going to the church together and then we split up and I came out and I still had the same friends I had before and they still support me. I think sometimes, I'm not sure they totally understand the progression and being straight I'm not sure I would ever expect them to totally understand how all that works but at the same time they love me and now Jackie and I go to events that Joe and I would have gone to ten years ago. But back to the spiritual thing I think that I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found a church here that felt like that. But I probably wouldn't have gone to

church before I got separated from Joe if there wasn't a church like that. Does make sense? Because I was already at that place where I knew I wanted to be in a community of people who were open minded and if they couldn't be that way I didn't want to be there.

But we have a few communities I think that really are. The Unitarian church and the two UCC churches we have here, Saint Luke's Episcopal, the Lutheran church seems to be fairly open. There are some places I think where gay people can go. Now, I guess Unitarian would be the place that you would go if you're not necessarily Christian, if you're more thinking bigger. I guess that would be the Unitarian church. But I guess one of the things that I have thought a lot about more lately is this idea of how to be gay and how to be spiritual at the same time and why we have allowed the world to tell us that those are two totally separate things. You know, you have to be heterosexual in order to have a relationship with god. That's just totally BS. It really, really is. But nevertheless I think we as gay people allowed ourselves to think that. Whether it's really, really way down in our psyche or whatever it's still there. And I think some people think, it's partially because of what the church says and preaches. You can't be a member of something that

tells you that you're going to hell. I guess you could but it would be kind of a hard thing to do (inaudible).

Q: So do you think that your church sort of takes some heat for standing where it stands on things?

A: I don't get that impression. I don't know, my priest would probably be able to answer that a little -- I know she kind of stands in between both sides, at least in our church. Those very few, maybe two or three or four people I would think, in our church who have some problems with it and the rest of us that are kind of on the other side. But the church as a whole is probably much more progressive in their thinking spiritually than the priest is. Not necessarily issues of gay people but just in general I think the church is far more progressive than the priest is and she kind of deals with all that anyway with all the different beliefs that are going. I know being raised Baptist that we just knew that Episcopalians were not Christians. I mean they just weren't. So I don't know that that's changed any. Whether they'll tell you that's true, again that southern thing of somebody, whether they'll tell you the truth or not, Episcopalians are not Christians. They don't fully immerse in the water.

Q: Having been raised Southern Baptist I know what you're saying. I understand.

A: You know, so they're just not Christians. We don't even go into the whole gay thing about it. And I would imagine if there was a Baptist church here who decided to really be open and affirming that, yeah, that would really raise some major red flags.

Q: They'd have a harder time --

A: Oh yeah.

Q: -- as a church than other churches. So it makes sense.

A: You know, Kansas City, which is more Midwest and not Southern, the church I went to there was Baptist but they were kicked out of the Missouri Baptist convention because of their beliefs about homosexuals and them to be members of their church. That was like unheard of. So if we had a Baptist church here that was open and affirming I just, I can't even really see that happening, to tell you the truth.

Q: Maybe you know people or just have a sense, do you get the sense that there are people who sort of put themselves in the closet or keep themselves in the closet because they don't want to lose that connection to that religious or spiritual or community that they have?

A: I think that's true. Or maybe they're partly in the closet. I mean I know a good friend of mine who, he works in the community, he doesn't work at Appalachian, but he goes to a very, very conservative little bitty church, backwoods

church, and he's in a relationship with a man he's been living with for, I don't know, three or four years I guess, but he never says anything about it. I think he told me that the pastor knows because the pastor has a son who's gay. But the pastor never tells anybody and the pastor has made it very plain that he disagrees with it to this friend of mine. The friend of mine says to me that it's not important to him whether they know or not and that he goes to that church because he loves the old people that go there and that's why he goes and he doesn't care that they don't know. And again, I think it goes back to what you're comfortable with. I just couldn't be comfortable with that personally. I just couldn't worship that way. I don't want to worship with people who think I'm going to hell. I don't know, I'm just a little odd that way I guess. That just seems so strange. I just couldn't do it. But nevertheless that's the decision that he's made and I'm sure there's people who make those decisions all the time, nationally and in Boone.

Q: Makes sense.

A: It is a real shame to me. It's one of those things I wish I could figure out how to impact, how to do something about that. Because I think there's a lot of gay people that want to be spiritual, that want to explore that side, but

don't have any idea how to do that because of all the crap that they've been told by the churches. I guess my own pain is partially from the realization that I was one of those people that was saying that stuff for such a long time. It's painful for me to hear people say that because I know that I was part of that whole ilk for a while.

Q: We've talked for quite a while now. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

A: I don't think so.

Q: All right, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me and share your story. I appreciate it and I think it's going to make a great addition to the collection.

A: Good.

Q: Thank you.

A: Wonderful.

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