

Beth Thompson

Q: I finished my masters last year and then some friends and I were talking about what else could we do and it's like there hasn't been documentation of LGBT people in western North Carolina so that's where this came from. Today is May 1st, 2010. My name is Kathy Staley and I'm with Beth Thompson. And could you --

A: My name is Beth Thompson and I am 64 years old next month. I was born and raised in eastern North Carolina in a small coastal town, Washington, North Carolina. I attended UNC Temple Hill from '64 to '68. I lived a lifetime there in Washington until 1996 and moved to western North Carolina and Clyde, which is everything that's not either Waynesville or Canton in Haywood County. That's my little history of who I am and if you need a question to discover other things...

Q: What occupation?

A: And by the way, I am transsexual and I started that in 1996. So therefore my occupation was I owned and operated a very large sawmill down in eastern North Carolina and I actually attended Chapel Hill on an athletic scholarship. Been very interesting, quite a polarity of existence, I guess.

But I came out when I separated and I had consumed alcohol alcoholically for 32 years, I guess in an attempt to try and hide from myself, or it at least was useful in that regard. And I began recovery in 1993 and came to a place of finally being honest with myself that I either needed to be or I needed to use alcohol to hide from being, so I decided that I didn't need to drink any more. In sharing that information with my spouse obviously that was not an acceptable thing which I totally understood. And after all it took me 47 years to get to the point of being able to accept it in myself so I can't expect anybody else to. So I left home and came to western North Carolina. I had one son and both my son and my ex have since passed away. My ex died in 2002 and my son in 2004.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: Yeah, tragically with a heart attack shoveling snow in Boston out in his driveway. And he hated cold weather and snow just like I do and I know that he was just going at it too quick. So anyway, that's me.

Q: So your ex-wife wasn't very accepting. How was the rest of your family?

A: You know, it's [transsexuality] such an odd thing and it would be one thing -- I think had I just come out as gay that that would have possibly been easier. At least they

would have a point of reference. But this was so off the wall. And so I have a sister and my mother, who's still living at 96, and they had a difficult time with it. You know, people that tended to live through the Depression and the Second World War and all that generation tended to come out of it with a sense of propriety that you did not change. You know, you did not buck the system so to speak and to do anything to do that was quite embarrassing. And at that point I'm sure, because if I think about it in my own head, had my father had this going -- you know, how in the world, and I can't get my mind around how I would feel about that.

So I don't blame, there's no blame or anything else but I had to get to a place that I was OK understanding that they were doing the best they could based on their own experiences up to that point. Now, over a period of time we have become closer again and so that's a good thing. But you know, a lot of what my recovery has taught me is that you can't change anybody else. So I've tried to change myself to be more accepting of what other people think and to be OK with that. I need to stand up for who I am and be honest and live in a loving space and that's the best I can do, you know?

Q: How did you first hear about transgenderism and it started connecting within yourself?

A: I can vividly remember, and this is so odd to me, I can vividly remember as a child, and let's see, I think that would have been when I would be about eight years old because I think it was '54, this Christine Jorgenson thing.

Q: Yeah, I was wondering if you'd heard about her.

A: And I actually saw that in the paper and I cut it out --

Q: Could you say who she is?

A: And even as small as I was at eight years old I cut it out and saved it. There was something about it that totally intrigued me and I was totally fascinated by and there was a sense of being family. There was this over here, this difference that also existed that had been, there was no way to put a name on the feelings at all because it wasn't something that was possible. But at that point it was now, that was a beginning story. However, that was impossible for me at that point and so I had to find a way to live my life that was going to be a decent way of living, you know, what you have to do.

And I think for whatever reason that my parents made me aware early on that if I would do all of the real "boy things" that -- so there must have been something there

because my mother has actually intimated that they did that -- that I would get their love that way and that that was the right way to do things. So I went at that and I was either cursed or blessed that athletics was something that I was good at and I could do and that my physical size and abilities were there to make that happen. So my sister was five years older and she studied all the time and was such a perfect daughter and doing things the way you should do it, I was never asked to study. As long as I did those things. And so then my starting to use alcohol and partied just as guys did when they were young, I was never admonished for that. You know, it was like you need to be more careful, you know, if I came home that way, but not you shouldn't do that. So that was kind of a way of living.

And I think that by the time I finished school, because I lost an eye when I was a senior in high school so in college I kind of had to give up playing ball, so at that point drinking was the main function of life for me. Not going to class, not really interested in doing that. How in the world I graduated I have no idea but I did, just barely. You know, with a 2.0000 out to infinity. But my life was about presenting this person, this persona, that

was to the very far extreme of masculinity in order that nobody would question anything.

Q: Did it feel like that was who you were or did it feel like you were acting?

A: As I look back on it now it feels like that it was acting. I'm sure as I lived through it -- for instance, my mother asked me. She said, "Well now, you didn't go through life not enjoying life, not having fun?" I said certainly not. I had great fun doing these things. But when you start drinking alcoholically at 15 most of it's a haze. So I can't go back and really get specific about feelings at all. I never approached the subject. I never had any feelings of being gay. That was not there. The gender thing was but I didn't have to think about it. Just pour another drink and that's how I dealt with it. And I got sober and it wouldn't go away. To stay sober you had to be honest. Boy, that's a hard thing to look at.

Q: In the '90s when you were becoming sober, were there any role models of transsexuals that you could relate to?

A: No. Of course, the tennis player, whoever that was.

Q: Renee Richards?

A: Yeah. I had seen that on TV and when she was taking part in that. I didn't like the fact that she was always referred to as the transsexual. And so that was kind of a

downer but at the same time, you know, that was mainly in the '70s I think when she was doing that, late '70s maybe, so I just didn't pay much attention to it. In the '90s what I found when I got sober was a transgender support group in Asheville, North Carolina.

Q: What was its name?

A: Phoenix. And so I made a contact with people there and that was why when I left home -- I had no idea what I was going to do. I basically left penniless after living a life of being not that way, of being certainly upper middle class. But it gave me a little anchor up in Asheville. And like I said, when I left and I came up there I had no idea where it was going to lead me. I just needed to be available to whatever and begin to learn what it's all about and what is this thing and to what extent, you know, where do I fall on this continuum, which style?

And so then it was a learning process when I came up. And at the same time I had never in my life really been a seeker spiritually and so it gave me an opportunity at that point also to begin to do some study with that, and what a great place to do that, in Asheville. There are so many different philosophies available to study. And so I went through actually my dark night of the soul. I think at

that point as I was doing some of those things and coming to a crunch thing, place, point in which I came out the other side realizing who I was and what I needed to do. And then when I met my partner, she helped facilitate so much of everything.

Q: Did you meet her during the transition period?

A: Yes, I did. And you know, we are a lesbian couple but when we met, now she met me, I was beginning the transition and so that's who she saw. And she wondered when we met, I don't know how in the world she could be attracted to this person in very bad drag and yet we were, we both were. We both were not looking. There was no way I could visualize or feel that anyone could ever be interested in me ever because of the internalized phobias I had about folks like me. And so I couldn't see that anybody else could. And she was in a good place in her life not needing anybody else and her life was going along just the way she wanted, thank you very much. She liked to be up at the cabin and stay and have a lot of solitude. But it's been like we were soul mates and we were supposed to be there. And it does feel like I've known her forever so that's kind of cool.

Q: Could you backtrack a little and talk a little bit about Phoenix, how it's structured, how many people attend?

A: I have some difficulty with some of that now that I am where I am but Phoenix represents the huge umbrella of what transgender is and so it's from one end of the spectrum to the other including heterosexual cross dressers through drag queen people to transgender people who off and on present one gender or the other and then on along the line to there are some who present as female or male who are never going to do anything about it but that's how they live their life and then there are a few transsexuals who have taken part in that.

Early on I had found out that most transsexuals, once they have surgery, they're living their lives, that's what they are, don't take part in the transgender community. And I couldn't see that at first but now that's the way I am. And it's kind of like I am now able to be who I am and I don't necessarily relate to the other and don't want to be perceived as being -- I mean I know that sounds terrible but I've passed that. I don't need that. It was very useful and very good for me to have gone through that. It was a vehicle I was able to use to find direction.

But I don't know exactly how I feel about someone who is just dressing up or something like that and using the

ladies room. I certainly don't think that that's a political thing that needs to be fought for. So I don't get involved in it now because those things are not something that I really think about or feel like I need to be involved with.

Q: How long were you involved?

A: I still will try to go to one of their meetings a year. I feel like I need to for whatever reason. I need to say OK, I honor the fact that this is here and was useful to me. I don't look at my life and who I am. It's kind of, I will readily admit that I am a transsexual. I do not look at myself as transgender, if that makes any sense at all.

Could you explain a little more for people who aren't familiar with trans-politics?

However, if this had not been there then I would still have been going around in circles, I'm sure. Or probably. I mean I guess I would have found some place else somewhere. Especially with the computers now, it's everywhere, you know?

Q: Is that how you found Asheville?

A: No. Someone else that I had talked to, I had called up one of these, this is back in the early '90s, one of these 800 number things and I called and I talked to somebody. And of course the lines were these sex lines I think but I

wasn't interested in talking about that. I said have you got some information.

And one of these people put me in touch with another person who was also transsexual and they told me about a magazine that they got. I said, "I don't want to go buy that magazine, can you mail me one?" And so she did and then from that in the back it had a list of resources and Phoenix was listed there and it was in North Carolina and you know, I didn't want to go north and so that seemed like the choice for me. So that's how I found that. And I called the head of Phoenix there and we corresponded and I went to Asheville several times before I actually left in order to visit.

Q: How would you describe Asheville's attitude and environment regarding LGBT people?

A: Asheville is not where I live. I live in Haywood County, totally different situation. Asheville is very open. I can't imagine a place that's any more accepting of. It does seem to me that anywhere you go there, within Asheville in restaurants and so forth, to Grove Park Inn and to Biltmore, anywhere, and it's a homogenous place and there's no signs to me that I have ever seen in Asheville that anybody would even think about there being a

difference, you know, that there's anything wrong with LGBT people being part and parcel of what society is in Asheville. You know, just what it is.

Q: Did you live in Asheville when you first came?

A: For a very short period of time, yeah. In fact, when I began doing my spiritual work I was living in Asheville. I was subleasing an apartment from the person who headed up the Phoenix group. I didn't have any money or anything so I slept on the floor and I just sat in there and really did deep meditation and reading. That was all I did for four or five months.

But I was in Asheville where it was OK to be. And it was also OK for me to begin because my first job was there. I traveled from Haywood County back over to Asheville to my job as I began to follow the Harry Benjamin Status of Care. You know, where you live for a year before you can have surgery and that sort of thing. And that was a nervy thing to begin but I didn't -- I got looks and so forth. I think though that as I've gone along and after surgery and everything else and with the hormonal changes I don't get that so much now. But early on, it was there.

Q: Could you talk about your job in Asheville when you were beginning the transition?

A: I got a job with a book company. I had been working part time in a gay book store and a person came in there who worked for this book company and said they were looking for someone to help so I told them that I was interested in beginning transition. So they said we think that would be OK. So anyway I went there and interviewed and in the interview as male told them that this was what I needed to do and it was OK. So I was very fortunate, very lucky, because it's really hard for me to say that Asheville is a certain way as far as work is concerned because I was lucky that it just hit that this worked out perfectly.

I can picture in my mind how that might have gone and been very different, going from place to place to place trying to -- because it's one thing to go to a place and if you're gay you don't have to answer that question. But if you're going to do a transition, you have to. And at that point my identification and everything I've got is male and so I couldn't go in there and try to hide something that I'm not up front with. And I think it's part of the status of care to confront you. You know, this is who I am and for the individual to have enough guts and courage to see if they can step over that threshold.

But I was very fortunate. In so many things I have been just so fortunate to be in the right place at the right time for things to unfold and to unfold in a way that's not been troublesome at all. I haven't experienced discrimination. I have a few times with looks and things like that but you know, some of that is because I'm six foot two. If someone were to ask me about discrimination, I haven't been discriminated against.

Then I left there and worked for a book store for about a year and decided I didn't like what I was doing there and started work with a large company that is a retail concern. I'm not going to say the name just because they might not need me representing them but got into management and I managed one of their stores. So that was kind of cool that here I was able to as myself get to a certain place with a career, if you will, if you want to call it that because at my age I wasn't interested in doing but so much for so long anyway. And I'm pretty well retired now. But that was good and I had expected a certain amount of problems as I started and they really have not, it's kind of like one of our little sayings in recovery, worrying about the wreckage of the future and it doesn't happen. Because it should. In my mind with my own phobia I should have been

discriminated against. I should have experienced some abuse probably. You know, this is where my mind went with it. Not that I would have ever as a person abused someone else and I might have stepped in if I had seen something like that happen or at least said, "Just leave the person alone, they're crazy." But certainly I would have judged that person. And I haven't even felt that I have experienced a lot of judgment. I'm sure there's some but I don't see it. And if I don't see then it's not hurting me.

And I don't know how long it'll be before that kind of thing won't be thought of. But I think it's one thing for gay people to assimilate as we go through history to a point that it's not a thought. It's just who you date, I date so and so, it makes the thought of that being a gender thing not even being of use. I don't know that someone changing their gender will always be kind of a dramatic thing, I think, unless there was a way that they could find out early enough to have had that done early on. What a great thing that would have been. However, had that happened to me early on, I don't know what the impetus would have been for me to get to where I am now spiritually. And so I wouldn't be willing to give that up for the other. So I guess for this lifetime it is what it is.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your spiritual journey?

A: Yeah. I had in my life always been a good Methodist and my community at, and I still call that home, Washington, North Carolina, even though I don't go back there and I'm not welcome back there, I was on the board of trustees and that sort of thing with the church. My father always was. When I began recovery and I began to read and we've got a little book called *24 Hour Book* and each day has a little different thought for you to (inaudible) and this was as my ex and I were sitting down and we were reading these things together. And she was willing to get involved in that too as I began my whole recovery. We kind of hit on things that she was very, very conservative in her ideas about what Christianity represents. So we began actually to, for me anyway, I began to move away from her.

I need to backtrack just a little bit from that. We in college had to get married. She got pregnant. We'd only dated about five times and at that point there wasn't any question, OK, this is what you've got to do and so I had to do it. So love is kind of something that I'm not sure of throughout that 28 years we were together. But she was willing to sit down and for us to do these readings. And it got to be where she felt that if you were not Christian,

if you did not believe and Jesus was not your savior, if you will, then you go straight to hell. That homosexuals go straight to hell, that Buddhists go straight to hell, that all of these people are going straight to hell. And all my mind could think was, that doesn't make sense to me, I can't go there. If you're living in a state of love then you can't go to hell because that's (inaudible). So I began to move away from her at that point. And as I got up here I did some study in Native American thought, in Buddhist thought, in theosophy which is Blavatsky. I don't know if you're familiar with that but this was a 19th century woman who went all around the world studying all these different religions and everything else and came up with this philosophy that she had that I felt was pretty much right on.

END OF AUDIO