

## Interview with Melissa Truesdale

Q: And I think we're good to go. This is Michael Howe, at Appalachian State University. It's April 2, 2010, and I'm here interviewing Melissa. So Melissa, if you would introduce yourself and just tell us either if you're from here or where you're from, and a little bit about yourself, and then whatever you'd like to talk about, we'll just start there.

A: OK. My name is Melissa Truesdale. I am -- literally, I was born in Hickory, which is down the foothills of the mountains. I've traveled a bit and I've ended up here in the mountains, and I think I've been here about eight years. I decided to come up here for kind of a new career. I came up to be an acupuncturist, and there is a fantastic acupuncture store up here in the Sugar Grove area. So I started out in Zionville.

Q: Now, where is that?

A: A community that is like -- it straddles Tennessee and North Carolina. So people always thought, oh you live in Tennessee. No, I live in North Carolina, but it's that close to the western line, and so it was a good sample of what it was like to live in the hills a bit. I loved it.

Q: But you're from North Carolina originally?

A: Yes.

Q: OK.

A: And only Hickory, I mean that's 63 miles from the campus I think.

Q: Yes.

A: It was just a short little jaunt. And I've moved a couple of places in the area, because I've rented. I'm in Blowing Rock now and I really like it up here, especially the attitude of you know, kind of an open attitude, around some wonderful folks. And the air and the countryside, and I like the folks that are locals too.

Q: That's nice.

A: So, it's nice to come home. I didn't go through acupuncture successfully.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: I hit my head again, so that was another head injury, so that kind of canned that for a little bit. So now I'm just up here.

Q: Well, it sounds good, it does.

A: It kept me up here longer, because I fell in love up here.

Q: Oh, is that right?

A: I was going to go back down the mountain, but I feel in love with a wonderful girl, well a girl I thought was wonderful, but she's not a wonderful girl. I thought she

was wonderful, so it moved me into Blowing Rock and gave me a new sample of life you know? But now I'm single and you know, life goes on.

Q: Right.

A: That's my origins. Of course, I have lived in -- well, this would be appropriate. I've lived a little bit in San Francisco. I've lived in an area, a little town called North Truro, which is right outside of Provincetown. That was my dog. (laughs) Where else did I live that's kind of a little bit unusual as far as just open communities let's say. I lived in the middle of Wisconsin, which is not an open place however. And that's about it, as far as like longer terms. Oh, Massachusetts, Lenox, but as far as the gambit, I enjoyed San Francisco for what it was for a short-term, could live there.

Q: Wow.

A: Provincetown was really nice but you know, it's just different.

Q: I imagine. I've never been to any of those places.

A: Provincetown is typically -- my association with it, is that it's very comfortable for gay males, very, very comfortable, I mean for everyone, but as far as a home base that anybody can feel welcome in. Actually, I considered myself heterosexual when I was there.

Q: OK.

A: This is a new switch for me.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: Because I was raised in Hickory, I did the wedding, I was married for seven years. He got the seven year itch and we just decided that was it. I've been a professional woman all my life, and I just -- I've never had my mind closed or open to anything. It's just you fall in love, you fall in love. I will just tell you that I was dating for a while. I was actually dating a guy when I went to San Francisco, and traveled around a bit. I came back into the Hickory area and I was moving up here, and there was a girl that I knew that was helping me move. Something kind of traumatic happened in the move. Somebody had gotten it out for me or whatever and it was just a tough time. I fell into -- of all people, I fell into one of the worst people to deal with up here. Talk about luck. I mean, he's just really well-known for that and I didn't know any better because I was new, and I didn't see the warning signs that kind of Appalachian people put out to say, just don't mess with him.

Q: OK.

A: You know? So I was really taken. So I went home and I was a bit crushed. It was just a disaster. The next thing I

know, Christie's going, "You know M, I'd really like to kiss you." And I'm like OK. You know? And all of a sudden butterflies just wide open. I played in a symphony and I played symphony that night going what just happened? I really feel amazing. And it was kind of nothing had been closed before, but it just wasn't in my picture. It wasn't something I'd ever thought I was attracted to. I always appreciate people, I always appreciate this, that or the other. I've always been friends to anyone with any kind of situation, just no bias, I've enjoyed the communities. But here I was, suddenly there.

My bottom line is, I can call myself bisexual. If it pleases someone, I'll call myself a lesbian. I don't think I could ever go back to just heterosexual. It just doesn't make sense, because there's a sense of closure around that word. At this point in politics, it seems like you say that, it means you've denied all the other. I don't know, maybe that will change. I tend not to label, but at the same time, some people need that label, what are you? I'm actually finding the lesbian community needs it more than anything else at this point, you know?

Q: So then, does identifying as lesbian sort of help you integrate with that community?

A: Yes.

Q: Is that something that they look for?

A: Exactly. There are some people -- I've been to some events, and I think I've been pretty quiet about it. And of course -- well, let me back up. There was one event I went to, and there was a very non-trusting person somewhere out in the community, and she was like you know, why are you here, you don't act lesbian.

Q: Oh, who was in that community?

A: Yeah.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: Why are you here? Are you here to hurt us? I'm like no way, but I really don't know what I'm up to, because I'm new at this. Oh, that's the feeling I get, so you're a lesbian, and I'm like well, OK. You know? So I went through that process of oh, you must be somebody who is infiltrated, so that you could come in and hurt us, which would be a shame, but that has happened to them. There was a particular church group that I was a part of, and they're ever watchful, and I think there's more fear in there that needs to be, because of this one person who just has that, (gasps).

Q: So she's very anxious about it?

A: Yeah.

Q: This person.

A: So I think that might bring it to her a little bit, more so. It is kind of what I've come to terms with, because I was thinking oh my gosh, is this what it's like? Because I have been a heterosexual woman, see this heterosexual woman, all around these wonderful communities; gay, lesbian, trans communities, everything, and never thought twice and never been asked that question. And suddenly, I've just had a wonderful relationship that you know, I broke up with Christie and I was in that process also, and I'm put in the situation of what are you. And it was just an odd thing to be in my forties and to be asked what are you. Very odd. So I kind of kept quiet after that. I went to something at ASU that was a wonderful, wonderful group, a show or something, and a young girl, obviously a freshman or something, stood up and said, "I'm bi." And there were people in that group that said, "Well then you just haven't decided what you are." And I went, "Oh my gosh!" OK, there is going to be prejudice whichever way you go. What I started out to say is, I fall in love with the person, no matter what, and that's how I see other people fall in love. I don't think beyond that, so these labels are just something that I kind of have to pick up and say well there it is. I was lucky to grow up as a heterosexual. I wasn't as confused. I fit in all the

molds, I didn't have to go through these different curves and things, because to do it at 40, I cannot imagine what it would be like as puberty kids. I've had great compassion and great insight before, but nothing like this.

Q: Well now, having been raised in Hickory, which really sort of falls into this area of the Appalachians in the first place, very close anyway.

A: Yeah, it's right at the foothills.

Q: Right on the border anyway, if it's not technically. So, you were raised or I guess, you developed heterosexually.

A: Right.

Q: That's how you felt up until your forties. So in Hickory, at the time that you were growing up.

A: Right.

Q: What were the messages that you were picking up about sexuality, or did you, were you sensitive to any messages about sexuality?

A: I was born in 1960, so I was sensitive to anybody being discriminated against. I was in the town of Hickory when the Black Panthers came through, and I remember it, and I remember curfews. I remember people being different were discriminated against, be it the color of your skin, be it the way you acted, be it the person you hung around with. And it was very -- I mean, Hickory is this southern town



and it's a lot of communication versus up here in the mountains. There's a lot of people that talk, so there's a lot more talking that goes on. The message that I was given as a child, no matter what, was just be careful who you hang around with; not the identity, but if they're good quality people. But then that also would slide into well, you can't go with a black person, brown, purple, pink or polka dotted. And I would assume it would have been tough on my family.

I do know, now that I'm this age, that I was hit upon by women. Like even in junior high school, there was a girl that I assumed was attracted to me, and I just was clueless. I mean, I was clueless with guys hitting on me too. It was just one of those things, it will happen when it happens, it's going to be fairy book. I just didn't worry about it. But thinking back it's like, I think I would have been labeled more of a problem child. I think it would have been more of a stigma. In my household, it would be more of a -- gosh, just we would need to support that person, because they've chosen a hard way of life. That would have been the verbiage, you know I'd hate for you to choose a hard way of life, because life could be a little bit easier. Even when I was working in a profession, I mean I was a teacher, I ran businesses, I

consulted a musician. I'm around all sorts of people, and when there was one gentleman who, in Hickory, was in the arts field, who openly kissed his boyfriend as they got out of the car or whatever, and people saw it and when, HUH! You know, and it was the talk of the town and I was like, so?

Q: How long ago was that?

A: I'd say 15, 20 years ago.

Q: OK, all right.

A: So I was in my twenties at the time, so that would be the 80s, and it would have been a first. It would have actually been a first. Of course, my family would have been, well whatever.

Q: So your family is pretty supportive.

A: Yeah. I mean, it didn't happen in their house yet.

Q: Pretty open to -- OK, ah-huh.

A: I did get the message that I really wouldn't be able to date somebody who was off color, because it would be too hard of a life, why would I choose that? And that doesn't mean that I didn't, but if it had turned into something serious, which I could regret that dearly, but I knew that if it was serious, my parents would have a problem with it. We would work through it, I know that, with my parents, but their overall concern was, you're choosing a hard way of

life. Do you want to socially going upstream? You're strong enough to, we know that. I mean, they put that in there; you're strong enough to do this, but do you want to choose that battle.

Q: Well now that you're sort of in this life, how do you feel about that? Is it a harder life that you're choosing?

A: Yeah.

Q: Is it going upstream?

A: I should be able to say no, it's not. I should be oh it's just fine but dag gonnit, it is.

Q: It is?

A: It is harder.

Q: Harder, OK.

A: It is harder, and I would guess that as open and as protective I was of other people, and as much as I stood up for other people and as much as I never shut my mouth, I just wouldn't be silent if somebody was hurting someone else or just going (sighs). You know, anything, I would go hey, what's up? I had that protection of being a female in the "normal world." I hate to say those words, but that would be what it is, even though people suspected around me long before I knew about it.

Q: How do you -- what makes you think that?

A: Went on a business trip. I'm part of a community college, teaching running, some things, and if these people were to see it, they could laugh or they could just disagree with me, it doesn't matter. But, I found a postage card that I just thought was adorable, and I had no knowledge that the rainbow flag meant what it meant.

Q: Oh.

A: This is now naïve I was. I was just like this is cool. A kid in the 60s, I mean who knows? And so it was the American flag in rainbow colors and I just thought it was amazing, so I brought it down to put on my bulletin board at the community college, and they were like, "Oh, that explains it." I was like, "Explains what?" (laughs) Well, that just explains it and I'd go, OK, so you don't like colors? And I did know that they were saying that I'm open minded, I did know that.

Q: OK.

A: I had never hit on a person that was female, and I hadn't even hit on guys that were female. That wasn't my mode of operation as far as anything. There was nothing that I can think of, even in the past, going OK, she's obviously a lesbian or she's bisexual or whatever you want to say, but all of a sudden, the people around me were like, oh that explains everything.

Q: So what is it then, that it was explaining?

A: I thought at the time, now my naïveté in that, I thought well, I'll counter them if they are prejudice or if they make a statement that's unfair to someone. I'll boom, boom, it's out in the open. They don't always like it, and I thought, well that's what that meant. I don't know yet. That's one of those things that probably will sort itself out, because maybe they meant someone around me and I clicked better than they thought we would. I don't know, there's no clues there for me. And then of course immediately, here's the other part, immediately, one person who I was close to, married, obviously heterosexual, had no interest, but obviously, completely rigid in her beliefs. Southern Baptist or something, very fundamental. Not another word out of her mouth came for me when that postcard went up on the bulletin board. Wouldn't eat lunch with me, would not walk with me, nothing.

Q: But you'd had a relationship.

A: Yes.

Q: A good, positive relationship with her before this?

A: And suddenly, she found ways for months after that, to not interact with me. Our desks were as close as you are from me.

Q: Wow.

A: It was three feet away and she just stayed busy. Now, it took me a while to realize that that postcard had done it, and when I realized it, I went, well it's not coming down and she needs to learn that I'm still a gay person, whatever she's thinking. She learned and she became a little bit more able to be in the same room, let's say, but it was that, that closed the door for her, and I was so sad for her for that, because I had done nothing except put up a rainbow flag. That's pretty closed minded. So if that had happened and I had been a teenager, that would have been hard.

Q: And now, do your colleagues know now that you're identifying as not heterosexual?

A: I have been completely open about it. I've actually had a hairdresser who lives in Hickory who said, why are you telling people that you're dating Christie? You know, the first girl I've dated and "Why do you do that?" You've got a politically active career, you're a musician, you've got to be hired by people daily. Why did you do that to yourself and I said, "Why wouldn't I?" And he said just, just don't, and I said, but they're going to see me with her and I'm not hiding my emotions or anything. I've been warned, just don't. So, I don't know, I don't have a career any more, and I'm wondering if part of it isn't

this. The symphony has failed to hire me any more and I do not know how much of a part of that is. I'm an artist, this should not be a problem. And it may not be the problem. It might be that my disability has gotten in the way; they don't like seeing a walker on the stage, or whatever, or maybe it's something else. These are all assumptions I haven't worked out yet. But it's very difficult. I would not have been able to have the career I have.

I said that my family was very supportive. My mother and father, who are now passed, I'm sure they would have dealt with it and been supportive in the long run. It may have been difficult. I have a feeling my mother was cognizant of it. She wasn't born in North Carolina. She was born in Nebraska and went to theater school or whatever, and came down here. But I'm still having a problem with my middle sister. She won't hug me any more. We had a very loving, hugging, touching family. The minute she discovered that I was dating a girl, she stopped touching me at all.

Q: Wow.

A: So, her children are not open to hugging me. Now, in my family, you walk in the door, you give a person a hug. So suddenly, I had to be careful about who I touch. I haven't changed and I'm definitely not dangerous, but I feel like I

have -- the one thing that has bothered me about this is the bubble of protection that I had as this heterosexual woman, you could touch guys and you might be considered flirty. You can touch them on the shoulder you know, pat them on the back, whatever, but it's OK, and it's -- guys are more on the physical as far as the attributes we give them, whether that's true or not. And then women, girlfriends, you know, you're dressing in the same room, you're doing all this stuff. This is all gone now for me. I feel the door has shut and I have to be careful.

Q: With women from your past?

A: With all women now.

Q: All women?

A: Because I do not want to be perceived as crossing a line, because I've gotten this kind of standoffish feedback not only from my sister but from other people, cohorts, whatever, and I'm like well, I guess I just need to be careful now, because they're taking it in a different venue. I'm meaning it the same way, but suddenly you know, I've had people who actually will say you know, I'm not making a pass at you. Why would you even think of that, just because you're a girl and I've dated a girl before. This is really absurd. I would get frustrated, angry, I've cried, I've been sad over it, and I've gone through the



whole turnaround where you go well, it would be easier if I just turn this off and went the easy way. That's not honest, that is not honest. I do not know who I'm going to fall next, in love with next. I don't know who I'm going to be with next, but it's going to have to be honest, or else I won't be able to live with myself. But that is the one thing that now has changed my entire life, because I was a very touchy, you know open, you could give Melissa a hug any time.

Over the years, let's see -- well, I've been up here eight years, so it's been at least eight years, because this was during my move up here. It was kind of transitional and my family hasn't worked it out yet. Of all the people, you would think the closest ones. And of the two girls that I've been with the most, it didn't work out there either, because they both informed me that they've been this way since puberty. They were like, you just don't get it; you grew up in a bubble and you just don't get it, you do have to be careful. I find that amazing, that our society is that penetrable, that we just, we hurt people that badly, on a subconscious level.

Q: But your behavior then, actually is somewhat directed by this.

A: Yeah.

Q: It has an influence on how you behave and how expressive you are.

A: Absolutely, which shames me, because that's not usually who I was in the past. Bringing up the fact earlier that said I spoke out for people, I protected people, I was outspoken and I would -- I would be polite and I'd bite my tongue if it was necessary, especially if there was any danger or I'd cause any problems. But now, it's very inward, so it feels very unusual.

Q: And do you feel like that's pretty typical of the women that you know?

A: It used to be. I've met some women up there that are much more comfortable with themselves. Now, I'm believing it's either environment or age or whatever. You know, every single person is different, that's always been my premise, so to categorize this by OK, if you date someone young, you're going to -- you know? I don't know, you know. But I'll tell you, one person up here made a comment, you know one of these social comments, and you can take this all as hearsay, because I don't want to quote this person. But as far as social etiquette and stuff, she made a comment and said you know, I've never met such a lesbian. I'm not talking about me, this is somebody else, which is why I feel very strange saying this out loud.

Q: Mm hmm.

A: I've never met a lesbian that's not friendly, that doesn't want to hug or touch. And I'm thinking what? This has been my experience, this whole oh my gosh in my head, and I go, well maybe she's been hurt and maybe that's just not how she's comfortable. And the person went no, if you're lesbian, you can just hug anybody, and I went, well I could learn something from you.

Q: So there's some stereotypes about behavior and how people act.

A: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: OK. So, you're living in Blowing Rock, you're living here or you're in this area of the mountains. Do you think that life is different for you here, around your identity, around your life, than it would be if you were in Hickory again?

A: Yeah.

Q: What do you think the difference is, being up here?

A: In Hickory, people would have known me beforehand, and I get -- when I do go down there, I get a mix of confusion or, it doesn't matter. The confusion is what's really bothersome. Oh, oh hi, you know. But up here, it's kind of like starting over. I don't know, I've just been careful. (laughter) My dog is taking over.

Q: Your dog really likes me.

A: He does.

Q: He's very sweet.

A: He's a happy boy. I'll tell you what, he's been a blessing. If you can lay down please sir. I'm probably more associated with having him around here than I am with anything else.

Q: Well, I think he's a sweetie.

A: He's my companion at the moment, as far as a medical assist dog and hanging around with me. I love all animals. I mean, I would have -- I withheld from volunteering at schools once my identity changed, because it was also at the same time when people would be going well you know, people who are gay can't work in the schools. And I thought well, I certainly don't mean to cause problems. I had been a teacher of two years to you know, 80 three-year-olds, without second thinking, and now I hesitate volunteering in the school system.

Q: So you do feel that that's a perception that people have up here?

A: I think it's just that's how they've known me, and they haven't known me any other way. So the difference between Hickory and here is they've known me one way and oh, she's

just gone off course, there are those people, or oh, she came into herself, or well, there she goes. You know?

Q: Right.

A: How ever you as a person think out there, it's the way you think, but they know me. Here it's a solid identity; I was open when I came up here.

Q: But do you think that people here in the Blowing Rock, Boone, Watauga County area, also have that same idea, that gays and lesbians are predatory?

A: I'm afraid they do.

Q: Do you think -- OK. Because that's what I think I was getting from what you were saying about the schools.

A: I'm afraid I do, because my landlords right now, I thought were plenty open. I was there for a few months and suddenly, one of the couple said well, you know, that person, bla bla bla, talking about somebody else, and I went oh, you don't know that I'm one of that person category. And I thought well, I'd better not tell them, because it was such a strong comment. It's just, I'm much more cautious about it. I'm more feeble as far as a social standing, and maybe that's part of it. I'm not in a constant job, where it just becomes part of my identity, you know? It's really interesting.

Q: Wow.

A: It's very different. That's been the hardest thing for me, and I've never been one to step on people's toes. I joked, before this interview started, that I had accidentally outed some people in the past.

Q: Right.

A: I had no concept you know, of some of these people that were obviously gay to me, that were hiding it from other people successfully. You know, I had apologies to make and it was OK, but I don't need to fall into that problem now, because I know what it causes now. Life experience. When I lived in Wisconsin, I had been divorced and I was up there as a single woman. I had a dear friend, that if she sees this video in any way, I offer her humble apologies for any end result, because I had no idea what was going on. And I don't think she did either at the time. We were just friends and it was dark, and we were walking home with the dog that I had at that time, and we're in the middle of Wisconsin, at a university city, Stevens Point, and we were simply holding hands, because I didn't know where I was going, I was new. And we were girls holding hands. We had no attraction that we knew of at the time, we were both clueless, and we were just hanging out. I was keeping the leash and she was keeping me on the path because it was dark. A red truck, I do know it was red after the fact,

but a truck came up and tried to run us down. Now that is my first experience and that is at a glance. This was maybe the second time I had been around this person, so they hadn't seen us before. I was new in Wisconsin, they knew nothing about me, and just because we were holding hands, walking together, they decided they would actually kill us. That was an alert for me.

Q: Have you run into anything even remotely similar to that here?

A: Not that I'm aware of. Now, maybe my partners kept me from it, maybe they protected me, but personally, no. Maybe I closed myself down so that I wouldn't have that situation. I don't hold hands with folks any more or just walk around with my arm around somebody. So those obvious clues that somebody would take wrong or right or whatever, maybe aren't there. I'm too much of a scientist to think that you know, it's all because of the area, but maybe it is also. I don't know, maybe it's because of the time. There are kids that come into my house. I get a CNA, a nurse, to help me out at home, and I've had experiences with people going OK, I'm leaving. Now, I have not done nothing to them, but they --

Q: Service provider people.

A: Service provider people. And I've had people who -- I've had a lot of people that come in my house, it's their experience and I can't share that, but that I've been there to hear about. Say I was getting ready for a date and they heard the she word, they were like, well I'm not coming back. Well, I haven't changed as a person, you know in the same earlier part of the day, you liked me, you wanted to work with me, and then suddenly you've decided not to. Now that's pretty obvious.

Q: And these are healthcare providers.

A: Healthcare providers. On the other part, which is what I meant to start to say, is I have to tread that lightly. First of all, I'm not going to hide it. I'm also not going to make a pass at you, a girl or a guy. You're a healthcare provider you know? You're helping me brush my hair or get dressed or whatever, so you know, we're not in this romantically. There is a line here that's just professional.

Q: Is he OK? Does he need to go out?

A: He needs to go and tinkle.

Q: Do you want me to take him out?

A: Yeah.

Q: We can stop.



A: I'll finish this statement, just so that I don't have to hold onto it. What has completely pleased me and amazed me, are the girls that have come in who -- because I'm a girl, so I get girls you know, it's part of the code of healthcare providing, it's kind of strange. But the girls that come in and go, "So?" Yes! Or the girls that go, "Well, great." You know, or well, I've tried this or whatever, if they want to share that. But it seems like the younger you are, the less it matters these days, so I have a positive feeling that society is changing. I myself am in my late forties, so I have that experience. That's pretty much what I wanted to say before I lost that thought.

Q: OK.

A: Shall we go tinkle?

Q: Let me stop this then, or try to anyway.

**[END OF AUDIO FILE STE-000]**

Q: Yes, this is Mike Howe, it's still April 2, 2010. I'm talking with Melissa. I couldn't figure out how to pause the machine, so I think this simply opened up another file.

A: Oh, interesting.

Q: So, we'll work it out in the transcription part. I had two questions that came to mind.

A: Sure.

Q: And then we can talk about anything else. One, I know that you have shared that you've had some medical issues and health issues.

A: Yes. It's a massive part of my life.

Q: OK. So I'm wondering, how do the women in your social circle, how do the women that you interact with or identify with -- and I guess it's not just necessarily women, but this community, whether it's men, women, are you finding support from them? Are you getting...

A: Generally, it's tough.

Q: Yeah?

A: This is an area that -- I do find that this is different in Hickory in that way. If we're doing a comparison study between Hickory and say the Blowing Rock area. What are you doing in the mountains if you can't be by yourself and take care of yourself?

Q: Hmm.

A: That was pretty apparent in the first place I lived in. I felt like I lived in a fishbowl, which was interesting, because it was in the Zionville area and it's a very nice community, many people lived down there for years. I was

going to school on weekends and such, which is what the school was like. I also had a lot of study partners and lots of people coming and going for lunches or dinners or something, and I just was -- I'm very social and friendly, so I had people coming and going all the time, but they'd stay long enough that it wasn't drugs. You know?

Q: OK, ah-huh.

A: And I was there for a while and I was driving down the road, and I saw one of my neighbors sitting on the porch. So, I went up and said hi, I'd like to introduce yourself. She's like, "I know who you are." Really? She says oh, you live in that white house down there and you bla bla bla. And I went yes? And she said, "So what are you doing with all those people coming and going, men and women?" And I went well, I'm going to school. Well, you're not an Appalachian student, because you don't have those kinds of hours. I said no, I'm going to the school just down the road, that you may not be aware of. Well, sometimes they stay over. I go yes, they do, because if you're coming up from Charlotte or Georgia or something, you need a place to stay, sleep on the sofa. She goes, "But they stay long enough to be friends." And I go yeah? Now, I've got curtains, I'm a decent human being, I'm not really a voyeur, and they know everything that's happened since I've

been up there and I'm going whoa, this is a community that pays attention.

Q: Mm hmm.

A: There's a reason for that, you've got to take care of yourself. But her comment to me as far as what we were saying before is, you are alone up here. I said well, I've got school and I've got friends. She said, now you live in that house by yourself, why do you do that? I said because that's where I live. I don't have an answer for this. Now, at the same time, the minute I said hello, out of nowhere came her husband, with a large tool in hand, to protect her. I am not threatening folks. I am just probably one of the least threatening persons you could just see right off the bat, but I didn't have a guy there with a hoe or a shovel or a rifle or whatever, and it was obvious to her that that was not OK. I'm fine, I've been on my own for a while. Losing my train of thought here. That was kind of an obvious thing of you're alone and you're in the mountains; how do you expect to survive, were the questions I was getting. How do you plan on surviving the winter? Just like I do every other winter. But you're alone. Well yeah. I've got a telephone. I've got a cell phone and a landline, but it's you're all alone. I understand that now.

Eight years later, I'm in Blowing Rock, a city with pavement, with tight neighbors, and I'm driving down the road and there's this wonderful gentleman I've never met before. I'm very good at saying hello to folks, so I said hi and I stopped and talked to him, and he's shoveling somebody else's driveway. Now he might be 80 years old, and he's having trouble doing this, but he's still going out and shoveling somebody else's driveway, because this is what people do for each other. It's been a harsh winter this year granted, and I said -- I didn't know if this person was related to this person, I don't know the neighborhood that well yet. He introduced himself and he told me right off the bat, he's helping this one armed lady here, she can't shovel the yard. OK. I didn't have to know that but thank you for telling me. And then as the conversation went on, he said yeah, my wife died so many years ago, because we got the flu and nobody checked on us. Now it wasn't a blaming comment, and I wish I could say it the same way he did, because it was very much, very vernacular around here. He said you know, we didn't go out because we were sick, and of course, we didn't just go to the doctor for the flu, but nobody checked on us and she died. And there was no blame there. But I understand how this very first woman said, but you live alone, because

just the flu can knock you down on your tuchus and then you're gone. With this winter, I feel that for the first time ever, and so I understand that.

As far as socially and whatever, when I'm looking for apartments, it's very hard because a handicap apartment, now I use an electric wheelchair, I use a ramp. Sometimes my knees work, sometimes my back works. I need easy access, I mean I really need the handicap spot, even though some days I can do everything, which is quite wonderful. I've been shown many handicap apartments with four steps up to them. A handicap apartment, which is a split level, with six steps in between, to get to main living areas, the kitchen, the dining room, the kitchen, the bathroom, step up, step down. I mean that's handicap, because if you can't go up and down stairs, why do you live up here, because we're on the mountains and flat is -- go to Florida.

Q: So there's an idea about ruggedness and self -- you know, being able to... OK, all right. Well, I think my other question is now that you've lived here, how do you think this area in general, the Appalachian area, Blowing Rock, Boone, Watauga County. How do you think that influences people in the way that they're gay, lesbian, bisexual? What's the influence of being here?

A: What a great question, because I've seen that in my travels, that exact question I see. You know, what it was like to be in San Francisco, what it was like to be in Provincetown, what it was like to be a little bit in Canada, in Wisconsin, in Hickory, in George, these places. I get a sensation, and I could be really wrong, but I get a sense that it's actually easier here, because even though your window is a fishbowl to everybody, it's your business and as long as you've got enough social network around you to support your life, the people who do not care about this life are out of your business. It's pretty much a nose out you know? I'll keep my nose out of your business if I don't agree with you, and if you're not harming me.

Q: So people were interested in knowing that you're alive.

A: Absolutely.

Q: But they're not really going to get into your business.

A: Isn't that interesting?

Q: OK, hmm.

A: Where, I don't think that would happen more so in the flatlands. I've had very little -- I've had people very curious about me, because I do things. I've been an oddball all my life. I don't mind doing things differently. I don't mind doing things the right way if it's a little harder, and I don't mind speaking up in the

past, and I can't honestly say that about myself, which hurts my integrity. I can still speak up for animals and children and whatever, but I do -- I watch my tongue a little bit more than I used to. So I've been a little bit on the outskirts of just mainstream, what everybody else says. I'm not one of those follower persons, which would be easier, I have seen that, it's easier. But I'm not, so when people see that I react with a smile instead of oh, tsk, tsk, tsk, or I pick up a piece of trash instead of walking by it, or any little tiny thing, they go oh, she's an oddball and heck, just leave her be. This is the general community you know? I find that very nice around here, because there have been very eccentric people in this area and literally, I understand, as a musician and as a music therapist, I go to different churches and I listen to the sound, and the sound of music that I'd love for somebody to do as music therapy students area, on the same tangent that you're doing, before it's lost. The choirs, you can tell which choirs were based in the hillside, where you had to be a hollering distance away from a neighbor. Your voice had to be tenacious enough to cross the hillside, so you could holler for help.

Q: Mm hmm, right.



A: Where, so that sound comes out in the choir, it's very strong and very nasally. That can come out as negative, but it's very poignant let's say. And so I think, if they see that you -- a person who was brought up here sees that you can holler for help, that you can be your own person, they're not going to worry about you. And I think that is the immediate relaxation. You can be whatever, whoever you are, but if you can't holler for help, be it your voice, be it the way you live, be it you have no social structure, be it that you're handicapped, that somebody's taking advantage of you or hurting you, that's when I see the community popping up. If somebody is uncomfortable with themselves enough that they're in danger of something, that's when I see the community actually attacking that person and going, you need to stand up for yourself or you need to change your ways, whichever way this person or -- you know, whichever the community reacts to. So I feel it's actually easier up here in that way.

Q: That's cool, that's fantastic.

A: I feel positive in that. Now, if you are brand new and you are into all your thought patterns, and let's say you are not a person that can stand up for yourself or you have zero social structure, it can work against you. I think that we can see around here, in some obvious situations of

history or whatever, but it's not just people gossiping. They're gossiping for a reason. So I find that relaxing and kind of nice in that way.

Now, I found a group of women up here that are very, very positive and very charged and open, and it was the handicap situation that kept me away from them actually. It wasn't anything else we've spoken about. It wasn't even the fact that I am not rich or I am not in a profession. None of that really matters, but the fact that I'm OK to get up sometimes and not OK to get up at others, and that I'm inconsistent, because sometimes my knees work, sometimes my back works, sometimes this, sometimes I'm having a bad day, the nature of if you wanted to relate to it at this and age you could say fibromyalgia. I mean, it's a brain injury based injury with other injuries based on top of that. I've got to get my knee replaced or whatever, so sometimes it doesn't work, and the brain changes things. So I'll be verbal and outspoken one day and another day I'll be quiet. Generally, that would be OK, but up here it's a little bit odd and it's pulled me away from folks and I'm a little bit -- because of what I've just shared with you, that I don't share with everyone else, in whatever you want to call, chapter one of the tape recording, I'm not as outward going. I'm not exactly sure

where I can go and feel safe any more, although inside me, I know it's OK, but because my handicap has taken me away from people who were very safe to be around, it gives me hesitancy. I've been very much socially -- what a word, deprived, this winter. I think everybody's been homebound you know? But to find a support structure is hard with all these characteristics. So if you -- let's label my disabilities as they are, so that they're clear on paper. I am not from here, so to speak.

Q: OK.

A: You know, locals do not see me as from here. I have never talked like a local. My vocal patterns can mutate no matter what, wherever I live, with the musical ear and such, but it's obvious that I'm not Boone born. So there's one disability for being up here and blending with you know. And mostly it's you know, where's your family? Well, I don't have a string of family, so I'm not from here. That's OK, I'm still accepted. OK, what church do you go to? Well, I'm kind of eclectic and whatever. OK, that's strange. So have you been dating, if they find out that I'm single or interested in dating. Well I'm not, and they go why? That's strange. You should be interested at all times. No. Why are you up here and in no profession? Then you mix that with sometimes I'm wearing knee braces,

back braces, arm braces, I'm in a wheelchair sometimes, I'm in a walker sometimes. Other times, I look like the average person. Then you combine that with sometimes I have a great vocabulary and then other times, I can barely swallow or talk. It's an oddity and it's hard for people to know what to deal with, because I don't fit the mold. Isn't that interesting?

I never have fit a mold before as far as if I did. I mean you know, I was the kid in high school, with the open lunchroom setting, I probably never sat with the same table twice in a week, or twice in a month. I wanted to go get to know people, so I sat here and then I sat here, and I sat here and I sat here. I was not a clique. I'm finding being called a label, a sexually -- I don't even believe it's out of the norm, but a politically -- a political label of having a sexual label. I mean, that's all it has to be, it's a politic thing, that I'm not just a human being standing in front of you, but I'm actually bisexual or lesbian, whichever way you want to see it. It has to be bisexual in my book, to be honest.

Q: OK.

A: You know? But if I'm standing there in front of you with that label, I'm in a clique. That is hard for me to handle, because I've never been in a clique. I've been in

a profession which outreaches. I've been in the arts field, which outreaches. I have this knowledge or I do this, which also has tentacles. I'm not in a closed clique, it's closed, even bisexual, it's closed, because the mate that I have will have to be open to the idea that I am not just a single individual in one direction, and that I've had these experiences. Not that my entire history has to be known, but whoever I am with...

There was one lesbian I was with that said well, I'm not comfortable you've been with men. OK, that's all right with me, but if I'm with a man, they're going to have to be comfortable that I've been with women. If I'm with a woman, they're going to have to be comfortable, because that is who I am. I find that might be a challenge in the long run. The other challenge of falling into the lesbian world, let's say, is -- this was a complete shock to my system and I still haven't gotten through it yet. Because of the wonderful women that I've met in this group, that have lifelong partners, that is how I believe life to be, and that is for the lucky ones that find people who they love. That's how I look at forever, is a lifelong partner. It was a shock to my system when I was divorced, and it was a necessary situation, and I appreciate my husband. I mean, it was a horrible situation to do, and I was the

first one in the family that I knew of. Lord, my father had been divorced, but did anybody talk about it? Talk about a complete change. So I was the first one in the family to be divorced, that's an interesting thought. My father had had a previous marriage but I'm the first one.

Q: Hmm.

A: That's OK, as far as -- I mean that's just a social twist. I dated two women and loved them dearly, absolutely, and when these women said they wanted to be with me forever, I believed them. One actually asked my hand in marriage. I mean, we know marriage isn't legal or whatever, but the rings were exchanged. For both of these women, forever was two years, in their mind. When I discovered this, when things started changing they were like well, it's been two years. What? These two women have said well, that's as far as forever goes for women. To me, that speaks more of how hard it is socially, to be together with someone for a long time.

When I lived in Wisconsin, I had darling, darling friends, and I can speak of this couple, one person has deceased. I will not mention names, but one person, they've been a couple as long as they've known each other, and they were a lifelong couple. The profession, the area, never caught on that they were a couple, which I find

amazing, just amazing, but they were careful. They didn't live in side-by-side duplexes until the very end. They lived across town from each other, one was a nun.

Q: Wow.

A: It kept her cover, as a nun. Now whether they did anything except be very close friends, that's for them to know and not for me.

Q: Mm hmm.

A: OK? So maybe she really was a nun in all sense of the word. I will never ask that question because it's not my business, but they loved each other and they were a couple, no matter how you see it. Even they said it was unusual, that they've been with each other for that long. They welcomed my friendship, because they were just people, there was no judgment. I find myself in this spot and all of a sudden I'm self-judging more than anybody would ever judge me. As a matter of fact, when I became a part of this official women's group, that is a group of open... I don't even know if everybody's open about it, but a wonderful group of loving lesbians in this area, which I think it's wonderful that it's happened. Joy, laughter, discussions, whatever, abound. People have met the love of their life in this group, they've met passing partners. I have been very hesitant to date or even to make myself

available. This is how uncomfortable I am at this point in time. Somewhere in the beginning of the winter it hit me; OK, I'm OK now, I could date, and the oddness that was so strange is I actually announced to somebody, well I'm OK to date now. Would I ever have done that before? I don't know you know. And it came out, and it actually made the other person uncomfortable. She's like OK you know, but it was just that big of a ta-da!

Q: Ah-huh.

A: I'm relaxed enough now, I've healed long enough from the last time and I'm settled down enough, that I don't need to just turn the page or turn away from this, for myself. I'm interested again and I could open that chapter and say all right, if there is a woman out there for me, I'd love to meet her. It took years to get back there, so it is harder to live this lifestyle, which is a shame. I have no profession to account for, I have no politics to stand up for. I mean, I have no standing in the community that's at loss if I spoke up, and I still am that careful. That's the amazing part to me. My parents are deceased. There's no reason I should hesitate as far as -- people say you have many deaths in the world, you can be killed off socially and you can be killed off politically, you can be killed off professionally. This is a normal -- this is



written in psychological books, it does exist, you know we have a fear of death. It doesn't have to be mortal, physical death. It's when you go into a cocktail party -- let's say the absolutely worst scenario possible. You walk in and everybody turns their back and nobody talks to you, that's a social death. You have been ignored, you do not exist in that single moment socially. That's kind of how I take it, you know the extreme of that. That still exists for me even though it really is no difference, absolutely should make no difference with me. It does, in my inner core, make no difference, but somewhere between the inner core and the outside world, I'm careful. It seems like two different ways of living. For two years to be forever versus, I can get married and put a ring on my finger and it's a legal bond. That does have more standing than forever in a world... How do I say this?

I fight for marriage rights because, I don't care if it's political or state or religious. The stability of being able to say, I'm with you and I'm with you for good, bad and ugly, I'm with you, will eventually change; two years is forever, because maybe two years is all you can put up with as far as just having a girlfriend that you cause no problems in the community. There's no spats, there's no drama, there's no nothing. It's the best of both worlds.

It's the best of the world, you know ta-da, and then I move on to the next step. So where's the depth of life?

Marriage is not successful, it's a current tradition, but the ritual of promising, in front of your friends and family, that you've made a bond for someone, and that someone has made a bond for you, and that you own this life together as individuals. And it brings tears that we can't have that for everyone, just tears, because I think it changes how we act as couples. I don't necessarily trust that forever is ever going to -- you know, forever doesn't exist, but the bond of promise for, I'm with you, is not legally binding, it is not socially binding, and therefore I think it's for folks with a very strong, strong bond, that end up being able to do this. So the support that that particular act gives to the ones that are not so strong, is unfair, and the joy that you can feel about having -- there are down times and there are up times.

I definitely believe that Khalil Gibran's got it, I think is who said it, you know the depth of the joy is equal to the depth of your sadness. Well, if you are on show, and you can only be a good couple because that couple has to win, that couple has to succeed... And even people who are married are having -- same sex marriages are in that position right now, which is, as I say, because a

percentage, they succeed more so than the heterosexuals do. But you're afraid to risk the depth of sadness for the depth of joy, because it could break apart at that moment, so the depth of bond isn't there, to share all of those life things. What I've found are there are some women that actually have that depth and have shared that life. It's given me hope and it shows me well, this isn't just this part of life. You know, the study that I'm seeing. I watch nature and humans are part of nature, and what I'm seeing is it does exist out there. There can be a peaceful life, and I do believe that it's possible up here, I really do.

Q: Well, we've ended up talking about quite a lot of things.

A: Yes.

Q: Excuse me. I think just sort of to end, is there anything else that you'd like to say about your story or about how you feel the connection between the community and this place we're in? Any other insights that you'd like to share?

A: Let me think just a second. I think my next chapter is going to be amazing, and I think I'm a novice, I'm a newbie. Eight years is not very long. If you compare that to a teenager, you know I'm pretty young in this field of

life, and I'll be amazed at what I can say in ten years, so I hope you guys follow up.

Q: Maybe we'll be able to come back again, that would be great.

A: I hope you follow up, because it will be a different way of living. I hope it won't be under so much commotion, and I kind of hope that life will change for everybody.

Q: Well I guess actually, I do have one last question for you. Now that you've done this, what made you think that you wanted to do this? Why did you agree to do this?

A: This interview?

Q: Yeah.

A: I hesitated completely, because I was like, well I don't have anything to say, I know nothing. I'm kind of in this newness, I'm asking more questions than I've answered actually. And then I thought well, guess what? This is a different situation. We're very aware of the children that can't go to prom at this second in time, that's very politically out there. We should have been aware for a long time. We're aware of gay marriage. I've been around many, many flaming gay males, dear friends. I have not been around a person like me. I don't have a role model for this. Maybe I should say something, and especially for that one girl that stood up at ASU, at an event, for gay

and lesbians, transgender. This gentleman was a great speaker, and for the openness and the entire, wonderful speaker that that -- and the open environment, and then in that very question, well I'm bi, and the door slammed shut, as if you could hear an iron door shut on a safe, when she said I'm bisexual. The entire community in that room went, (bangs something) and it was for that reason.

Q: Well, maybe this will get to that person that needs that.

A: That person may not seem to need it. It hit me hard and it may have hit somebody else who was questioning. Not to get into tantric, this or that or the other, but a long time ago, I did agree that a human being falls in love, period. You can follow it with anything else you want in the world if it's true, and there is love, is a very strong statement. I mean we have love to offer, and how you want to share that and how it feels good to be shared back, is your own personal business. The fact that we have to label it right now is a shame, because I do believe that... I believe that -- well, I've always seen people as souls, as persons inside. My father would laugh at me and say, you'd be horrible at a lineup, because you'd have to see their souls, you'd have to hear them talk, you wouldn't know who they are. You can't say this person is male, female, got glasses, got long hair, got short hair, is black, white,

white clothes they're wearing, tall, short, you just can't describe them, but you tell me what kind of person this is and you're right. And that's kind of how I go about this, I mean that's all kind of love, and everyone should have the right to, if they fall in love and it's right for them and it's right for another person, do it.

Q: Words to live by.

A: So that's kind of it, and if this helps anybody and it just lets somebody know that you can be 49 and be in question. For a person who has been out there in the community, I've been on who's who lists, I've done so many wonderful things. I almost got into politics, I was invited, turned it down. I've done a lot of things, a lot of, you've got to be an upstanding person to do it. For me to doubt myself at this point is crazy, it is crazy making, and so if it helps someone else to hear that someone who had a very solid life -- and it's not my brain injury and it's not my health that has made me this crazy. It's the fact that I fell in love with a woman, that made me this crazy, as far as crazy making and going, what do I do next as far as partnering, as far as social environment. Point blank, if I go into a church, can I be a part of a women's group that's just for women, that's all it is, or will I be seen as a lesbian in that group? Will I be threatening to

somebody just because of that title? That's out and out scary, and if that helps someone ever understand, that that is what our society has done by labeling and by pointing out that this is different and this is not acceptable, and if helps somebody close their Bible and touch their own heart, and pray to God instead of reading the words the way somebody else has written them, and open their heart to somebody, so that people don't get hurt, I would hope that it would be worth something. Also, I just thought it would be fun. (laughs)

Q: Well I hope it was. It was certainly fun for me Melissa, thank you for sharing your story and talking with us.

A: You bet.

Q: Thanks.

A: Thanks.

**END OF INTERVIEW**