

Virginia

Q: Hello this is Michael Howell from Appalachian State University, it's May 1st, 2010 and I'm at the Hendersonville Public Library with Virginia. And Virginia, if you wouldn't mind sort of introducing yourself? And telling us a little bit about yourself, where you're from, if you're from North Carolina, from some other place but have ended up here, maybe your age, and then we'll go from there?

A: My name is Virginia, I grew up in the Army so I traveled around a lot. I ended up in North Carolina for college and never left the state. I'm 57. I ended up in western North Carolina because I used to do a lot of hiking in my younger days, and I needed to be closer to the trail heads than seven hours away, so that's how I ended up in the Appalachians in North Carolina.

Q: Wow, which college?

A: Wake Forest undergraduate, UNC Chapel Hill graduate.

Q: All right, so you're closer down to my end of North Carolina, from where I come from. I guess I'm sort of gonna start by asking you how did you sort of come to understand about your own gender sexuality?

A: Well, when I was 26, I met -- I was working in restaurants in graduate school, (laughs) and I met a woman at the

restaurant who owned it who I thought, "my goodness, she is really hot, and I am really attracted her, and isn't that interesting?" because I had not knowingly been attracted to women before that. But it was like a penny dropped, and I had had relationships with men and enjoyed them, but -- And I'd always have good female friends, but no gay female friends; I had a lot of guy friends since I was in college. But when I met Shirley, it was like - wow - (laughs) and I knew what I was feeling and it was for a woman, and so that was sort of OK, it didn't bother me. It just made some things a little more clearer to me.

Q: Wow. So, coming up in the army, did that particularly-- did you hear particular messages about sexuality coming up in that kind of environment, or?

A: No, and my parents were -- they were 35 when they had, when I was adopted, so they were of the -- you just didn't really talk about those things or anything. It was a rigid growing-up, I mean, things were right or wrong and you did it this way or that way. I was always more into sort of seeing both sides of an issue, but not necessarily voicing that around the house because there was no point. I mean, they believed what they believed. We're talking politically or whatever, or etiquettely. So, I was pretty much a really good, toe the line kid until I was about

eighteen when I left for college and my parents went overseas for two years. And, those first two years of college I just became -- I was a hippie I had the long skirt, denim skirt.

MH (laughs)

A: This was '71, you know, didn't shave legs, all that stuff, you know, and then when they came back I was this different person and that caused some stress for a good long time. But, I wasn't -- like, I never revealed my sexuality to them, although my mother finally came to understand. But, I would have two lives: I would have my life -- my life -- and then when I would go home, I would be as much to their standards as I could be and be true to myself. So, I shut up a lot, you know, and I just didn't want to make waves with them. They had, pretty soon after, in the mid '70's to late '70's, they pretty much disowned my brother, for reasons that are really too complicated to go into. But, I didn't want them to not have any children, and I did not want me to not have a parent. And I saw that they could do that, they could say - "you crossed the line and we cannot deal with this anymore." And, I just was unwilling for that to happen. So, it was a very dual life there, as far as family was concerned.

Q: And this is even pre-realizing this about yourself?

A: Pre-sexuality, yeah.

Q: How did it go after you realized?

A: I was already in the mode of hiding my personal life so it was just another aspect of the personal life that wouldn't come up. Now, Beth and I've been together 14 years. And... when she became a first person in my life, I would talk about her a lot and we traveled a lot. And mom, kind of after -- My parents died three years ago, so several years into the relationship with Beth, she was aware that there was this very important person in my life. And... I even -- I'm positive by the end there she knew the relationship and seemed fine with it, but we couldn't talk about it because my father couldn't know about it. But, she wanted to meet Beth and all this stuff. And she was always asking about her. I mean, you have a 47 year-old daughter who's never been married and all of a sudden has a really good friend who you talk about all the time because you're always doing things together 'cause you're living together -- You know, she was not a dumb one, so. But, it was just that Southern Magnolia etiquette, we don't talk about things that are going to make us uncomfortable.

Q: What was the impact of that on your life and on your life with a partner? Did that makes things difficult?

A: Beth is probably one of the most loving and understanding people you will ever meet in your entire life. And she, of course, she had her secret that she hid for years from herself. So, she understood, she understood my need to respect my parents. And in my personal life there was -- with our friends and stuff, they're open with friends, you know, everybody knows everything. Then, when you get to my work life I had -- there are some people who know and have met Beth and like her and all this stuff, and there's other people whom I've never told but I assume at work when one person knows, other people know after a period of time. So, I'm sort of closeted at work -- semi-closeted, I've not officially come out to anybody, it's none of their business. I mean, I don't around saying "Oh, I'm a gay person, and my partner's trans-gendered." If it were to come up and I'd be asked, I would be honest, but, I kind of hope that doesn't happen, I only have another year or two at work, and I'd just as soon that not become an issue. The only time I came out on that was when Beth -- we went to Brussels for her surgery in 2000, and so I went to my director and, you know, and shut the door and said, "I've got to be gone for two weeks, you don't know this, but I have a partner and she's a post-operative -- pre-operative at that point -- male-to-female transgender person, and

we're going to have her surgery and I need to go, and I want to take medical leave. I want to take my medical leave that married people can take when their people are sick. And, she was pretty well flabbergasted and somewhat sympathetic, but basically she said, "there's no way in hell the County's going to let you do that so you'll need to take your vacation time and not sick leave time." And I said, "well, that's what I figured," but, I needed to ask because at that point we'd been together maybe only four or five years. But, I mean we were a couple and, you know, if anybody else had medical problems with their spouses you would let me have sick leave. But that's Haywood County and, I mean, I knew it, but I felt strongly enough to ask. So, I think I rambled, I'm not sure. (laughter)

Q: No, no, you haven't rambled at all, but you sort of move me to another question now: how did you meet your partner? This is a different dynamic for... ?

A: Beth and I met -- I was a buddy with [Wincap?], they don't do buddies much anymore, but for a long time I was -- that was my thing. Time out on that, I got involved with [Wincap?] and the buddies because when I moved here in '81 there were tremendous amounts of fag jokes and AIDS jokes, and stuff at work, and I just would make them stop. And, that drove me insane, and I was very angry 'cause I had

moved from Durham where I had already started losing friends, so I got involved in [Wincap?] out of anger, and I was a buddy for -- until they [inaudible] on my feet. My last buddy was about six years ago.

Q: Explain what a buddy was?

A: A buddy is -- you get involved with a person who has AIDS and is near the end of that process. And, once a week, once a week you would get with him -- and it was always a gay guy, for me and well, once I had near the end some black female drug addict people and that was a whole different dynamic. It was just still sympathy but, I mean, it was a different dynamic all together. But anyway, so you would get with the guys and you'd spend one day a week with them, or one evening a week, helping them out and being friends, being buddies, and being there for them. And sometimes you'd get to be there when they died, and sometimes that didn't work out. But it's very intense, some of those relationships only lasted a couple of months because at the early days, guys were dying really fast. My last buddy, I had him for six years, every Wednesday for six years, unless I was out of town or something. I remember one of the buddy meetings I was saying, "my God, I didn't know I'd signed up for this for the rest of my life." Which was a joke, you know, that was long, that was

real long. But it's a very -- it was a very needful thing for me to do and for my buddies to have. So, I was doing -- I was -- that was still in the active buddy stuff, and it was Christmas, and there was a Christmas party at Grove Street, which was the gay restaurant in Asheville at the time. And, so I was presenting with a friend of mine at the workshop for buddy training, and then afterwards we went to the Christmas party. And, so there's lots of people and not a lot of places to sit. So, [Adele?] and I were sitting 'cause I can't have cocktail in one hand and food in the other and stand ...

Q: (laughs)

A: ... and do anything with it, so we grabbed a table, and I guess it was three... transgendered people came up and wanted to ask if we could -- if they could share the table, and I said that was fine. Well -- and Beth sat next to me. And Beth is -- she's early in transition, hadn't started hormones or anything. I didn't know these were transgendered people so much as I thought that they were some gay guys in really bad drag.

Q: (laughs)

A: I mean, really bad drag, but it never... So, we're -- they're sitting there talking, and I just liked Beth immediately, and she was talking about that she was a pre-

operative male-to-female transsexual. And, I knew all those terms because I'd read in Jim Morris' biographies and all that stuff. And, I knew the terms, but I was still wondering why I was being attracted to this gay guy in bad drag. So, she's, and then the last identifier was lesbian. So, I thought - oh, OK, there's something here I can work with! (laughs)

Q: (laughs)

A: But, it was an immediate attraction, she's just a wonderful person. And for two weeks -- Now, I had not been in a relationship at that point for almost ten years, and I was totally comfortable with it. I mean, by ten years you get used -- you know I was totally comfortable with it. I had my life, I had my friends, I didn't miss having a personal relationship emotionally or -- 'cause I had my friends for that. But I built up these walls for protection because hey, you know, I'd been hurt, wasn't going to happen again. I'm happy the way I was. So, for two weeks, I was all -- I'd go to the bars and meet friends, and that I went to go, "man, I am in this dilemma," and it wasn't because of her being transgender it was because, did I want to let somebody else in? That was -- It was just odd to me that -- Well, I didn't have a problem when I realized I was attracted to women, I mean it was like oh, OK, and I didn't

have the problem when I was attracted to preoperative transsexuals, but it's kind of amazing that I didn't. And there wouldn't have been other trans -- it was Beth. It was Beth, and if that's who Beth was, then that's what it was. I mean, I've met other -- with the Phoenix Group and gone to some meetings and all -- and there's not been one other person (laughs) at those meetings that I have ever found physically, sexually, spiritually attractive, not a one.

Q: So the chemistry was just there?

A: It was from day -- from moment one. We went out to smoke that -- and it was windy and snow blowing around (inaudible), and so I was trying to be a wind screen for Beth lighting a cigarette and so she was -- my arms were -- she was in front of me, my arms were around trying to be not touching and I just wanted to hug this person whom I had just met like an hour ago. I was like, what the hell's going on? It was so odd and it was so normal at the same time, so...

Q: And so how did that relationship progress to becoming partners?

A: (laughs) Well, the other woman who was with me at that table was attracted to somebody, one of the transgendered. He ended up -- he's just a cross-dresser, but anyway they

got -- they were attracted. So, I'm calling [Adele?] the next day going "oh, what does, you know I got excited, and all this stuff." And, she had to put me on hold because the phone rang and it was [Frank?] who was calling her and so she got with me and I said, "well ask him if he thinks I can call Beth because I want to pursue this but I don't want to call her out of the blue." So, evidently after that phone call, he called Beth, and [Adele?] called me back and said "oh yes, she wants you to call her."

Q: (laughs)

A: So, I was the pursuer in that one which was not my style. And, the first time I called up for an actual date, I lived up on the top of the mountain in Haywood County and it was snowing pretty hard before I was supposed to go in and pick her up and go to a movie. And my landlord who also lived on the property, he's from Minnesota and he could always tell the snow, what was good snow, and what was bad snow, what was going to be heavy snow, and all. So I said, "I'm supposed to go into Asheville tonight," and he said, "no don't do that," he says, "it's not." So, I had to call Beth and cancel like an hour before I'm picking her up and I knew what she was going to think -- that I was backing out. So, I called her and said, "is it snowing there?" and she said "no," and I said "well, it's snowing here and I

live on a mountain and it's going to be too dangerous coming back and I'm going to have to, you know, back out tonight." And she's going "oh, OK, I understand, that's fine." Now Beth's from Eastern North Carolina; she hates snow.

Q: (laughs)

A: She called me about a half hour after I called her and it's the only time in her whole life she said "it's SNOWING!"

(laughs)

Q: (laughs)

A: So, she knew I wasn't lying. But, I mean, so we just got together, we just started doing things and having a relationship. She'd spend the weekends up at the house, and cause she was renting a dump apartment and all. So, we were together about a year... and I started looking to buy a house. I would have on my own anyway. And, then, when I bought the house, we started living together, and that was -- we'll have been together 14 years this December, and I guess it was a year and a half before I bought the house, so...

Q: Wow, well now, so you were in a situation of having lots of friends and a strong social network, from what I hear? I hear you saying, and mainly lesbian friends?

A: No, mainly gay guy friends.

Q: OK, All right.

A: I haven't totally always gotten along with lesbians.

Q: OK.

A: Which sounds strange -- I'm better now that I'm part of a couple; I have more lesbian friends, but when I came out to myself in Chapel Hill... the lesbian community at that time, which would have been '77 or thereabouts, was very separatist. And I, you know, tried to kind of get involved, but politically I just could not do that. I mean, I didn't -- I had long hair, you're not supposed to have long hair if you're a lesbian, you know. You can't like men, you can't -- you know if you ever had sex with them it had to be horrible. And, I -- And very in your face with it, and so I thought - well, OK, the lesbian community is not my community, which I carried over for a long time and when I moved to Asheville... So, I would meet women at work, or however straight people meet people, you know? But, as far as being part of lesbian community, I was not very comfortable with that after I gave it a shot. And then I moved to Asheville which would have been in about '82, it was -- it wasn't political like that so much, but it was -- the lesbian community was very, in my experience, was very closed to outsiders coming in. I think if that person was single, I couldn't meet couples

cause one of them or other would be worried about things, you know, I just wanted some (laughs) women gay friends, but that didn't work out so much either, really, to tell you the truth. And, I've always -- I've been in the gay community with guys since I was about seventeen or eighteen, so, that's where all my gay friends are, are guys. Now that I'm part of a couple and Beth just charms (laughs) -- you meet her you love her.

Q: (laughs)

A: So we have -- Now I have one lesbian couple friend who lives here in Hendersonville, who I met one, Nancy, when I was in graduate school, and so, then I met her partner after that, you know, so that's my lesbian couple friend that are my friends that have always been my lesbian couple friends. But, everybody else I've met has been since Beth, or else I knew of them through [Wincap?] or Loving Foods, but, I -- This is going to sound funny, (laughs) but nobody liked me so much until I was a couple -- Or the women, you know, they weren't comfortable with me, they didn't want to socialize with me. They didn't think to ask me out or, I mean over for dinner, until I became a couple. And then once I become a couple, then everything was fine. Go figure.

Q: I don't know, I don't understand that.

A: I don't either. And I'm saying since -- but because of Beth -- and it might not have been just that. It might just have been the couple aspect. But, I never -- I have not found Asheville to be a very welcoming lesbian community for -- unless you're already here and part of it. Well, how can you be part of it if you're not... ?

Q: Hard to break into?

A: Yeah.

Q: Well, where I was going with that, when I started, you had your group of friends: did they have any difficulties with you, with you dating someone who's transgendered, someone... ?

A: Almost invariably, everybody had some concerns. And until they met her, they weren't sure they were going to like her at all. But, to a person, there was never a problem once they met her and started talking with her. But the concept of -- was disturbing I think, some degrees -- in fact, my Nancy here from Hendersonville, she was very reluctant to meet Beth. But again, once I had her and her partner over and they met Beth it was, like (laughs).

Q: Is there something unique, or difficult about navigating a relationship with someone who is transgendered and especially someone who is preoperative transgendered?

A: It wasn't difficult for me. The earlier sexual stuff was really bizarre (laughs). I mean...

Q: That's a test of your lesbianism right there, isn't it (laughs)?

A: (laughs) But, then I'd already had, I already knew about that appendage and all.

Q: (laughs)

A: But, the thing is she hated it, so we didn't really use it. And, she was married and when she realized what was going on, you know, her then-wife just couldn't deal with it at all. But, I don't understand that because, well they had - - they didn't have a great really -- Beth was also alcoholic. I mean, it would have been difficult living with Beth as an alcoholic. So their relationship wasn't so hot which is probably why [Janie?], couldn't -- didn't care to work through any of that because they already had a bad relationship. But, see, I don't understand why there would be a problem if you loved the person, this is what you're dealing with. I mean, this is... (laughs) you know, it's weird and strange perhaps, but it's not difficult because you're working on this together. It wasn't a problem.

Q: Well, that's your attitude?

A: (laughs) yeah.

Q: I'm trying to understand, I don't know what to say?

A: I'm sure that it could be, I mean, like it was a problem from her past relationship. In which I -- I mean you marry somebody, and then all of a sudden later you find this out? But still and again, if you -- But then all the books I've read about even good marriages, sometimes don't work out after that. So...

Q: Well, OK, so then there is the surgery and you manage to get time to go and you had to go to Brussels?

A: We went to Brussels. It was...

Q: Is that because of the year when it happened, was it just not being done here?

A: It was being done here but the cost was almost half.

Q: OK.

A: I mean, flying there, having a hotel room and the surgery - all of that was about half of what it had been had we done something in the United States.

Q: Wow.

A: And, she did -- and Canada, she was looking at Canada. She did all the research, I mean, she just Dr. [Brugger?], whatever his name his, something like that, had done the most and she was the most comfortable with. But cost was a definite thing, I mean, we could have gone to Thailand but -- for even cheaper -- but it doesn't have such a good reputation as he had, so...

Q: I'm assuming that's costly?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Even... ?

A: Everything, it wasn't -- it's costly. Our whole thing was \$12,000, his -- not Beth his, but the doctor his -- his cost I think was about \$6,000.

Q: OK.

A: And, at that time the surgery was like \$20,000-\$21,000 in the United States.

Q: OK, all right.

A: I'm not sure why we didn't do Canada. You'd have to ask Beth (laughs), you know.

Q: OK, that's, that's not a small chunk of change no matter what. So, you went to Brussels and the surgery went well?

A: Yeah.

Q: How did that change things afterwards, if it did?

A: It changed Beth because she could relax. It didn't change our dynamics. It helped me, though, quit using the male pronoun which I tried -- It's funny because I've never thought of Beth as male, but obviously she presented that way. And she's 6'3", she's got the Adams apple, she also has had some face plastic surgeries since then. But, I mean, she was 50 when she transitioned and so if like, if you -- these kids that who know about it and do it and

aware and they're in their teens or their early twenties, you know, they can pass. Beth's not gonna -- I don't think Beth will ever pass, although I think that... I mean, I don't even think about it, I don't see it, our friends don't see it, but you can -- you go out in public with her in places, you can sort of -- you can see people trying to figure out what's going on. I say, "well, yeah, she's 6'3", how many women are 6'3"?" And some days you look better than others, we all do. But, I think, you know, she's never going to be this little petite person that passes, but so it's -- I never thought of her as a male, but I would use the male pronoun when I wasn't thinking because it -- and everybody did, I mean. You had to really work hard to get the female pronoun. And every now and again I would slip and it would be like, "oh my God, I want to just cut my tongue out," because it kills her, you know. But after the surgery and the hormones had kicked in and all that stuff, I -- Every -- I have caught myself even all these years later talking about Beth to someone, and every now and again the "he's" comes out, and I do not know why. When we're with her mother -- her mother, bless her heart, well, she's 96, she's done really, really well with it, and there was a period there where she got the pronouns right. But that times gone, I mean, she's 96, she had a son for 50

years and she'll use Beth, and everything, but pronouns -- So, we go visit her mom once a month and it's always "he" and I'm always going -- she'll say, "how's Beth doing, is he doing well?" And I'll go, "she's doing fine," you know, so you have that. But that's an understandable thing. But, the surgery itself didn't affect our relationship, except like I said, she got way more comfortable with herself, so -- And it's hard when your partner's not comfortable, you want to fix things and make it better, so, I guess there was a little bit of easing off of tensions, but not tensions between us, just tensions of the situation.

Q: Wow, that's really an interesting experience.

A: (laughs)

Q: I just can't imagine.

A: Well, nor could I have, 'cause I remember that two weeks that I was walking around going - "oh, jeez, what's going on," and yeah. If you had told me the night before I met Beth that I would become involved with a preoperative male-to-female transsexual, I would go - "yeah, right, you know, I don't think so." (laughs) But, there you go.

Q: Wow that's something. And did your mom know that about Beth?

A: No, when we went to Brussels I just said that -- My mom had had some face surgery, she'd been in a horrible automobile accident before I came along and had plastic surgery that wasn't -- it was fine for her face, but her eyes -- it wasn't good back in the 50's, and she never had more. So, I said that Beth was -- that we were going to Brussels for some surgery that Beth needed on her face. Now, which was a lie, but it -- mom totally understood all about that, you know. She never knew the transgender stuff, all she knew was that I was involved with a woman. I just didn't see any point (laughs), I mean if I wasn't gonna come out with one way, I was certainly not going to say "oh, by the way, how do you feel about transgenders?" (laughs)

Q: That's a big and - and! (laughs)

A: (laughs)

Q: So, you actually live outside of Asheville?

A: Yes, we live in Haywood County.

Q: Haywood County. Compared to Asheville, is Haywood as open as the stereotype at least about Asheville, or not, do you think in terms of... ?

A: No, Haywood County is not open, of course, we're not going into individuals 'cause there's always individuals that are broad minded. But, as a community, I would not have survived in Haywood County had I had not had Asheville to

get to. And that was even before Beth. I mean, I had a job offer at Berkley, which thank God I didn't take because where the hell would you go? Atlanta, maybe, or something? So, we moved to Haywood County in '82 and didn't meet Beth until '96, and so I would -- Asheville was just a haven, and not necessarily for the sexuality part, but just for the alternative viewpoint. And I would go into Grove Street -- which was in cahoots at time -- which was, again, a gay restaurant which isn't there anymore. I would just -- I wouldn't know people, I'd just go in and sit at the bar and have a drink and listen to the gay people and be around family and then go home, and that'd be fine, you know. Had I not -- Or go into (inaudible) where's at an independent book store, you know. Yeah, but Haywood County is -- they didn't turn blue in the election. (laughs)

Q: Is there a reason that you live in Haywood?

A: That's where the job -- I mean, the job was with Haywood County Library, and you have to live in the County.

Q: Oh, you have to live in the County?

A: Yeah.

Q: And Asheville was actually how close?

Q: Between 20 and 30 miles, depending on where in Asheville you're going, and then where I lived at the time. Because Haywood is pretty big county, but I've always lived -- I

think I've lived in, what, three different places since I've been there, and I always lived on the Eastern side. And I would always -- Well, for first two years I lived in sort of a neighborhood, but then when I could find -- I've always lived out where you can't see neighbors (laughs). And have been able to just fade away or blend in, or whatever.

Q: Now, you said that you're, you'll be retiring within just a couple of years? Will you all stay in Haywood, or will you -- do you have plans of leaving?

A: Well, I love the mountains and I -- Beth hates the winters. And, this past winter was -- Even I hated it.

Q: It's hard, hard winter everywhere.

A: It was awful. It's hard for me to envision living somewhere else. It's -- I mean, not necessarily, in the mountains. It's hard for me envision not living in the Appalachian Mountains, I really, really love it. I also hate living in neighborhoods and stuff. We could live in downtown Asheville and Beth would be happy as a clam, you know, and maybe I could too. We couldn't afford it, you know, but... That moving elsewhere's not out of the question. We haven't talked about it and I think that moving every two years when I was growing up, even though that was less time than now -- I've lived in Haywood County

for 29, 28 years. I only moved around ever two years for 18 years -- But, that was, of course, during your formative years, so I don't like moving.

Q: You've almost been there long enough to claim that you're from there.

A: Well, I thought that when I first moved there, there was this patron who had been there 25 years and we were talking one time and she said - "you know, I'm still not considered from around here." And I thought, "my God you've been here 25 years?" So, I've been there 28 years, and you're not from around here unless you're, you know, you've gotta have probably at least three generations.

Q: (laughs)

A: Then you might be from around here.

Q: I think you -- that you mentioned that you had had a positive experience in this area, and the study itself -- that the Collection's not necessarily about discrimination -- but are you aware that of that being an issue in this area for people?

A: No, but I know that we all fear it. And so, talking about my circle of friends, nobody is -- I am a political gay woman, but I choose not to live that way in my personal life where I live. You know, I -- Except, I mean, I would do [Wincap?] and Loving Foods.

Q: Now, what is Loving Foods?

A: Loving Foods is a food bank for HIV-positive people and it's in Asheville and it's at [Kendallworth?] Presbyterian Church. And what I do is two Saturdays a month, I drive people home 'cause they'll get there on public transport, but they got these buses so, you know. And -- But anyway, I guess I'm just not with -- I'm not friends with anybody who's in your face, you know, "we're here, we're queer." Which I totally agree with and in my younger days did, but -- or would have done -- well, I did, but I just -- when you're at Chapel Hill and doing it, it's no big deal (laughs). But we're all older and more conservative and we live in rural North Carolina, and we don't even make more waves than we have. Of my friends, everybody who knows, even the straight friends of my friends know that, you know, and I think some of them are like me at work. People know, I mean, maybe not officially because we never come out and say it, but you know, you talk about your partner all the time and people going to figure things out. But I -- When -- I have, except for not being able to take family leave time, I've not felt the discrimination and when Beth was doing her, jeez, Benjamin Harvey, when you transgender, you've got a year of things you got to do. You got to live

as the other sex, you gotta get your name changed blah blah
blah.

Q: All right.

A: Well, interestingly enough, she couldn't get her name
changed in Asheville because the clerk of court refused to
do that. For not just Beth, any trans, he would not change
a name from one gender to another. So, we got her name
changed in Haywood County. (laughs)

Q: Wow (laughs). Sort of a surprise?

A: (laughs) It was a huge surprise. It was like, well, okay,
fine, you know.

Q: Now, OK, so that leads me to another question: The Loving
Foods, you said that's part of a church?

A: Well it's at [Kendallworth?] Presbyterian Church, but it's
-- I mean there's, that's every weekend, a different church
sort of mans the food bank. And, well, for years and years
and years, there were only two drivers, and we both came
from [Wincap?], basically. Because a lot of people didn't
-- they wouldn't want to drive them home, you know?
Letting them have food is one thing, but driving them
home... There are more drivers now, and each week a
different church runs it. So -- But I'm like,
unaffiliated, I'm not there with the church; I'm there to
drive people home. You know?

Q: That's what I was going to ask you, ask you if you're connected with some kind of religious or spiritual group?

A: No, I was raised Episcopalian, but I've actually gotten away from churchgoing, 'cept for when you had to with your family. By the time I went to college, I just -- There's just too much hypocrisy in most organized religion, and I know a lot of different individual churches are getting away from it, but I feel like I've been burned by organized religion enough that I don't need that, and I am a very spiritual person by, but my God, I find on the mountaintop. That's when -- I got nature, I think being a good person is pretty good enough. And this is even before the gay issues and all, but when I came to North Carolina and started meeting Baptists -- and one of my best friends is a Baptist, she considers herself modern. And I say - "honey you are so liberal Baptist" (laughs).

Q: (laughs)

A: Which may be moderate in the rest of the world, but, you know, "oh, only this way, you can only do it this way." You know, if you're Hindu or a Jew you're going to hell. I never understood that, and the Episcopal Church when I was growing up, I never got that feeling. I just had trouble with things, (laughs) you know, I think it was around ten when I quit being into organized religions because I was --

I always had trouble with the immaculate conception, it was like - "you've been lying to me, there's no way this lady had this baby, you know, this way." If you're -- And, I didn't understand myth or parables or whatever, you know, and then all of a sudden, "you mean the Red Sea didn't part?" (laughs) You know, it's like so -- And I never got a good enough Sunday School teacher to help me with that, so, it started there, but, I don't remember any of the Episcopal Catechism and stuff, any of "it's our way or the highway" business. I remember when I went to Wake Forest and was talking to people in the dorm room, and then most of them were Baptists, and I'd be like - "do you have trouble with the Methodists being able to go to heaven?"
Yep.

Q: (laughs)

A: "But you're all Protestants? You know, doesn't that mean something?" (laughs) No, no. So no, I don't go to a church.

Q: Are you all involved in any kind of organized groups, activities?

A: Not unless it's [Wincap?] or living groups-oriented. No, Beth has her AA stuff which she -- and some of the transgender, she'll go to Phoenix every now and again. But, we're not, you know, we have our friends but we're not

-- we don't do groups. She would, I mean, she's so social. But no, no organized activities unless they're politically-oriented. You know.

Q: Right. So how do you think that -- at least compared to the rest of North Carolina -- how do you think it's similar or different to live in this area as an LGBT person?

A: How similar is it to the rest of the state?

Q: Yes, is it different from -- in your experience or in your impression -- is it different then you think it is in other places? Or more similar, really? Or... ?

A: I think that the closer that you are to a major city -- of which I would say Asheville, Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh, the Triangle -- the easier it is. Because we've vacationed some on the Eastern side: that seems even more of wasteland than Appalachia does, to me. There's just nothing, you know like -- When I try to travel, I'll try to look for gay stores or gay restaurants. I'm too old to do the bars, I can't stay up until 2 when it starts or whatever. And every now and again, you'll find a gay B&B, but it's not gay-run, usually, it's gay-friendly. And, Asheville used to have a gay restaurant, now they don't have a gay restaurant any more. When we go to Charlotte I like to try, you know there's -- It's more accepting. But, of course, when you're traveling you don't get the whole

deal and you got the travel guide or go on the internet and find it and some of these places are out. But at least, when you're in a bigger city, you know it's there, you know people aren't staring at you, you know. But I would say that the western and the eastern part of the state are pretty much (laughs) the Sahara (laughs) as far as it goes. But then, I think also I found in -- every community will have its gay folks that are from there that they know and love. And, "Denny's not gay, he's just, he's just Denny," you know. But then there's somebody else, some gay flamer comes in and is in the grocery store, or whatever, and everybody's spooked because they don't know him. I think that certainly was true in Haywood County when I first moved there and I still think it -- I still know it is. But having lived in the Piedmont, I didn't -- It was eye opener moving to western North Carolina, it really was, so...

Q: So, in Haywood County, especially, I'm assuming that you and Beth go out and do things as a couple? Does that in itself just sort of provoke a response? Is two women doing something or?

A: No, not two women doing it, but sometimes Beth -- it's just funny to me, sometimes Beth gets looks and sometimes she doesn't. And then sometimes she sees them and I don't.

But there's nothing -- It's not an uncomfortableness that she won't really go to the grocery store in Haywood County; she'll go in Asheville. But then, I'm the grocery shopper so it doesn't matter. We go out to eat as a couple quite a lot, and there's really no problems, so...

Q: I've wanted to ask you a lot of questions, and sort of moved things along. Where -- What would you like to talk about? What else would you like to say about your story, or yourself, your experiences?

A: I feel like I've covered it.

Q: Do you?

A: Yeah, yeah. I could answer more questions but I don't -- I don't feel like I can... Because I wanted to talk about the library not letting me have family leave, but I feel like I've pretty well represented myself, but...

Q: Do you think that that'll change? Issues like the family leave, or for County Government, domestic partnerships, anything like that?

A: Not in my lifetime.

Q: It's all right, it's pretty staunchly... ?

A: Yeah, I mean Asheville is working on it, but Haywood, no.

Q: Does that does that even get much political coverage? Or is that even an issue on the radar in this county?

A: Oh, no, I mean, they -- My County is so concerned about prayer at the Commissioner's meeting, I mean, that's where they're worried about. I can't even conceive the issue coming up, and were it to come up, there's just no way in hell it would pass. And it would just -- it would almost rock the boat to ask that because the -- What was I saying, the minimal public acceptance that you've got with it would be totally erased. And all the stuff that people hide because "oh, they know this gay person and that gay person is OK," or to hide it because of my mom's -- we don't talk about things that are uncomfortable. It would -- Just all the worms would come up, is my feeling, there's just no point in it. And it makes me mad, but again, it's kind of like, I mean, I've worked all these times with young mothers who get time off when their kids are sick or this, that, and the other, and working flexible schedules and all this. And, you know, it's not fair, and I have talked -- I've got small staff and they both know that my -- they understand this, but on an individual basis is different than on a policy basis. And no, I don't even know why I should pay school taxes, to tell you the truth, but I do. (laughs) I mean, how am I going to fight it, you know? (laughs).

Q: Did you run into any difficulty buying a house, did you buy a house together?

A: I used a gay realtor.

Q: OK, all right.

A: Who I knew from -- God, I don't even remember where I met her first. She was a hostess at a restaurant in Haywood County and then she went into real estate. And the thing is, see, she's a gay woman and she's from Haywood County, she's had a partner longer than Beth and I have been together, and people in her work all know about Suzie and everything, and she's, she's sort of like - "you know I'm not going to let it bother me, I'm fine with it." But she -- Again, she's not out there in people's faces - I'm gay and I demand these rights. The only way it's going to change in rural America is for it to change federally, it's the only way. And that's, you know, we could go get married somewhere, but when we came back we wouldn't be married here, I mean, what's the point? If that elsewhere is going to change -- I mean I understand state -- it's good that it's changing in some states, it's wonderful, and I'm not saying it's not. And maybe it's gotta to do some of that before the Feds get in on it or not, I don't know. But, as far as rural America that I see and live in, (laughter) it's not going to come from within. And it's

just -- It's maddening, but that's just the way it is, and you gotta deal with it. Now, on the other hand, you know, we've done the wills and all that stuff so that if, by God, better not let us not be in the hospital with each other because we've got the Power of Attorney and health care rights and all of that stuff. So, we've done everything we could to be allowed to be a couple. But I can guarantee you if something like that happened, if she were in the hospital and they said - "oh this isn't good" - then I'd be in my face about it. Because, maybe naively, I think I've taken care of it. So, I believe in activism and I'll -- Act Up was one of my favorite groups in the world -- and we'll have these conversations about how, "oh you can't be in your faces," and yeah, "you can be in your face and I want to be in your face it's just I can't -- for this life I'm living now," but if you don't have the in your face people then you're not going to get change at all, so forget it. You know, you gotta have people.

Q: So living where you live and in this kind of environment, how do you express your desire for activism? How does that come out?

A: I give money to a lot of groups, and I do feel like I put my mouth where my feeling, actions are, where my mouth is, or whatever, with doing [WinCap?] and Loving Foods. And

when I first got alone involved with [Wincap?], I made sure everybody knew what I doing and what it was because I wanted them to quit doing that talking when I was around. And I felt like that was a pretty political action, and I feel like driving in Loving Foods is my political action, and going to the AIDS auction and going to Dining Out for Life, and sign petitions and all. But -- And when they have had Gay Pride in Asheville, two if not three times, and I've always gone. And if asked about politics, I answer the questions. I haven't been asked personally, and I can't if I'm asked at the library, I can't politically -- no you can't espouse your political beliefs at the library one way or the other, but, I can -- I've always -- When someone comes who might want Rush Limbaugh's latest book and ask me how I feel about it, you know, I can say, "well, I don't really agree with the man." You know, what else can I say, at work as a public servant? Now, if they were to ask me in the grocery store, I probably should still be circumspect, but I probably wouldn't be as circumspect.

Q: Well, now, that you work with [Wincap?] I think is an interesting thing. That's out of Asheville and in some of these other rural communities? And it's a prevention and care service?

A: It's normal, its big thing is prevention, and -- well, and care, too. They -- well, yeah, definitely, I don't even know why I'm saying that. Yeah, prevention and care and education, and some of my buddies were in Haywood County.

Q: What's the reaction to HIV and AIDS in this area? I mean, has that changed any over time?

A: No, it hasn't changed, it's very negative. One -- now, see, I haven't had a buddy for six years, but I can't say that I would -- I have seen no reason to think that it would have changed in that amount of time. But these guys, they'd go get tested in another county, they wouldn't get tested in Haywood County. You know? And...

Q: Because... ?

A: ... because it's not as anonymous it's supposed to be, you know, your cousin probably works at the health department, or somebody knows your cousin and says -- "oh I saw so-and-so come in for an HIV test," you know, word gets out. In fact I know of -- I've known of cases where that happened, and one of my buddies when he actually developed HIV -- I mean AIDS -- I mean, he had HIV but when he developed AIDS and had his first crisis his doctor, Haywood County doctor, dropped him because he didn't know what to do, he wasn't educated in that, and I said, "well, aren't you a doctor, aren't you supposed to educate yourself on that?" You

know? He dropped him so he had to come in to Asheville for doctor and hospital care.

Q: Wow, and was Asheville pretty responsive, did they develop the expertise pretty quickly to be able to serve people?

A: Yes, and [Wincap?] is a wonderful -- I mean, it's a referral service, it works with the doctors, it helps them with money if they can -- it's a wonderful service, but of course, funds are getting cut right and left which is why the fund raisers are so important, and I don't know, Thursday was one in -- there was only one restaurant in Haywood County that had dinner. There were three restaurants that participated. One was a breakfast place and one was breakfast and lunch, and then there was one dinner place. And last year, the same restaurant did it and we went, it was packed.

Q: Wow.

A: And this year we went there, and there were like four tables. I think [Wincap?] dropped the ball, I don't they did very much advertising.

Q: So, at least there's some, for lack of a better word, at least sympathy for the issue?

A: Yeah well, of course, yeah. I don't know why Joey's Pancake House is involved, they always have been, and that's in the main valley and it's a mom-and-pop place.

But there's probably some personal thing there. The Old Stone Inn is gay run and owned so they're going to participate.

Q: What was it?

A: Old Stone Inn.

Q: Old Stone Inn, OK.

A: And then [Panacea?] is sort of the hippy haven so (laughs) it's... And there were -- there have been other restaurants that have participated in other years that haven't been participating recently. All they have to do is give 20% of their profits for one day's intake. Wait -- but Dining for Life for the AIDS thing was the first of that kind of fundraiser that I knew of, was for AIDS. And now, a lot of other organizations do it, too. I've noticed that in the last five or six years, other charities have done it. Which -- It's a great idea, but then maybe some of these other places would rather be seen doing breast cancer or animal welfare, or whatever, and you can't do everything.

Q: A lot of causes.

A: So, that that might be part of it, our idea was stolen (laughs).

Q: (laughs) Might have been. Well, Virginia, I really think that I've asked all the questions that I can think of (laughs).

A: (laughs) That's fine.

Q: I appreciate you talking with us.

A: I don't talk this long in a period of time.

Q: So, thank you, I think this will make a great contribution to our collection.

A: Well, I hope so, it'll be interesting, and then we'll get to see our transcript when you see the finished result of everything, or whatever the project is?

Q: I think so.

END OF FILE