

lweiner

Q: This is Kathy Staley on February 19, 2010 with Laura...  
Why-ner?

A: Wee-ner.

Q: My apologies. Let's start with your name, age, and where you came from.

A: My name is Laurie Weiner. I just turned 60 this month, and I was born in New York City, and I have moved to Miami, Florida when I was five years old, and lived there -- I lived in San Francisco in between for a few years, but lived there until five years ago, when I lived up here.

Q: OK, so you moved to Avery County or Watauga County?

A: Avery first, and then, now a year, we've lived in Watauga.

Q: OK. So, before you moved to Avery/Watauga Counties, what were you doing in -- I guess you were in Miami last?

A: I was in Ft. Lauderdale, and I had my own business. I owned restaurants most of my life. I'm a master chef and did that for most of my life. And then I went into construction, doing renovations and woodworking, that sort of thing. Plus building kitchens and bathrooms and that sort of thing. And I was very happy with the Gay and Lesbian Community Center down there, and the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, I was on the board for years, so I

was very active in that.

Q: OK. Could you describe how you came to live in the High Country of North Carolina?

A: I'll try to give you somewhat of a short version. I used to come up here and vacation twice a year in a timeshare, and loved it, and so, at some point in time, my partner at the time and I decided to buy a house, which we did, and in between I renovated over a few years. And then that partner and I broke up, and I got the house, and then met a new partner, and we came up to visit one time, for a weekend, and we both said, "My gosh, we've got to live here. This is the greatest," and we did. We moved within two months.

Q: Wow, that quickly.

A: Yup.

Q: And your partner is still working, and you're working up here?

A: I'm working up here. My partner is a financial planner, and she's working up here, although most of her clientele is still in Florida.

Q: OK. How did the difference in regions play with your decision to relocate?

A: Well, it could've played a big part, but we were together, so we figured wherever we were going, we would meet people.

We didn't know anybody up here. And we decided -- I really decided, for the most part, because I had a huge group of friends, and I was so active in the community down there, that I thought, "Oh my gosh, I couldn't live somewhere where there's not lots of women and lots of people to interact with." And there wasn't when we got here, and so we were on a mission to find lesbians, and literally to seek them out. And we started our Friday Night Chat Group so that we could make friends and find other women who were likeminded and that wanted to do social things.

Q: And could you describe how you sought out these women?

A: (laughter) Oh, yes, we sought them out. My girlfriend and I used our gaydar, and we had business cards printed for my Friday Night Chat Group, and Carol had started a dining out group once a month, or wanted to at that point -- had not yet, but wanted to. And anybody -- if we were in Wal-Mart or Lowe's [Hardware] or anywhere, if we looked at someone and they even had the slightest look that maybe, Carol would go up to them and go, "Hi! I'm a lesbian, and I hope I'm not offending you, but if you are, we have these things happening. Get on our mailing list." And that's how it started. And now we have hundreds of names and hundreds of people that come in various times to some of our things that we do.

Q: And when you say your mailing list, you mean it was Internet-based, right?

A: Yes. Totally internet based.

Q: And how did people respond to you coming up in public?

A: Well, first of all, we were rather discreet and quiet. But we got great responses, we never, thank goodness, had a negative response, although there were three women together at the Farmer's Market, one time, and I went up to them, and I said, "Are you a sister?" and they looked around and said, "Yeah, we're sisters." And I went, "Oh... " and they went, "And we're those kind of sisters," and I went, "Aw! OK." So it's been a good, positive response.

Q: One thing that people have brought up previously is ASU's presence in their determination of moving up here. Did you have any connection with the University? Because we do have established gay and lesbian groups and things of that nature here on campus.

A: There was no connection. I met -- some of the first women I met were somehow connected to ASU, but it had no influence. We were thrilled that it was here, because we knew that it had a lot of activity for alt shows and all kinds of anything, but it didn't have any influence.

Q: How has your life been like, in general, being an LGBT person specifically up here in the High Country.

A: Fabulous. I don't know if everybody can say the same thing. My partner and I have -- thank goodness -- have had no negative things happen. We are kind of demonstrative, I guess. We hold hands, you know, we do just like every other person does. We feel we have the right to, and so we do, and we've been fortunate. It has not been any different than in an area where we lived which is Broward County, Florida. That's huge gay and lesbian, and we did whatever we did there up here. Probably the only people that have been sort of leery of that have been other lesbians. The hetero people -- we've never had it. In fact, we've made tons and tons of heterosexual people friends, so -- but the lesbian women were a bit leery, conservative and concerned, and some of them kind of stay away from us, I'm sure in fear of their jobs and whatever else they thought they could possibly lose.

Q: Did anyone ever talk to you about that?

A: No, actually, no, we just felt there were groups of people that didn't like us. And I was OK with that. My girlfriend was not OK with that. She felt there must be something. And finally somebody came to us one day and said, you know, we said, "That group of people, they're so unfriendly to us. What's the deal?" They said, "Do you want the truth?" and I said, "Yes, we'd love to know." And

they said, you know, they're concerned because they're with you guys and you'll hold hands, or you'll lean over and kiss each other, you know, even if it's a quick kiss, whatever, and they're shocked, to say the least, that I guess I could put that mildly. So we realized that, but we weren't going to change, and we certainly had no problem with it, so people make their own choices.

Q: You said that it's not that much different for your daily experience from Broward County. Had there been any other differences in the lesbian community here?

A: No, of course there's more to do down there. I had a Monday's women's rap group, oh, for ten years, and I had 40, 50 women every Monday night different women coming and going, and there's just so much more to do there. Which we tried to, you know, do things that we liked and have participation other women liked, and, but, in general, it's pretty much the same, I think, in other regards, we had found. I don't know if other people from South Florida would come up here and go, "Whoopee, this is great!" but we found our niche, and we're very happy. We love it.

Q: What types of activities did your chat group do down there, and then, compared to up here.

A: Well, there were lots of dances. And there are several lesbian bars in Fort Lauderdale. There's theater groups

and basketball and softball, tons of teams and various things like that. Bingo, they do, there's a whole GLCC community center there -- in fact, the new one, now, that's even bigger and better and all that. So there were a million things to do. Movie night, and there was the Stonewall Archives library there that has just a wealth of information, they do art exhibits, and all different kinds of things like that. So there's much more to do there than here, no doubt.

Q: And that's specifically gay and lesbian?

A: Specifically, yeah, totally. There's the film festival still that goes on, and it's expanded to eight or nine days. It used to be a three-day festival, and now it's a nine-day festival, and it's attended so enormously that they keep adding on days to accommodate.

Q: And what type of activities has the chat group -- what did it start out doing? Where were you meeting and --

A: Up here, we started at a church, which many people, unfortunately, found a turn-off. They just didn't want to go in a church, even though it was a lovely space. But we had nice groups, and they told other people, and more people came. We were doing it every Friday night, but that was too much. So we did it once a month, and we had nice attendance. We've been in several different spaces.

Somebody had an office space that we used for awhile. We went to another church and we were there for awhile, and then our good friends in town, in Valley Crucis have a big house, and they said, "Please do it here. We'll make desserts, we have coffee, we'll have a real nice thing," and that's what we've been doing ever since.

Q: You started as soon as you moved here, or was it before you moved permanently?

A: No, no. What we moved here, and then maybe four or five months later, we started to do that, because we finally had a group of women that we actually knew, and so we could start with that.

Q: OK. And then Carol started doing the dining out group.

A: What happened was we had a bunch of, you know -- a handful of people we knew, and we were going out for dinner one night, and we said, "C'mon, meet us," and that started it. And after that, once a month, she picks a restaurant. We've never repeated a restaurant, and she's had that, probably, for at least four years. And we've never repeated it, and we probably never have less than a dozen women, and usually between 20 and 30 women every month. We try to pick -- she tries to pick the more expensive, then the less-expensive, the casual and the fancy and that sort of stuff, so we mix it all up.



Q: And how has the response been?

A: Fabulous. Fabulous. I think most people are glad if the food's good, but don't really care, because they have so much fun. It's such a -- it's great. There's nothing like being with other women that share your feelings and emotions and having a great time. We laugh -- we just have the best time.

Q: Did you describe what type of people are in it? Like age, race, jobs.

A: It's so varied it's incredible. And that's another thing, that we're more -- in Florida, it's a little more segregated kind of thing. Probably not on purpose, but by interest. And here, we have some ASU students, we have faculty from here, so their ages vary. I think the youngest -- we don't have very many under 30, but there are a handful. And then there are probably 40-year-olds, a good chunk, and then 50 and older. So it's a really nice cross-section... I'm trying to think. Unfortunately, I guess, just in this area, there's not many black people. And various occupations. And a lot of retired people, so, big variety.

Q: And you've talked a little bit about how you've developed this cadre of heterosexual friends. Can you talk about what your neighbors' immediate responses were?

A: Well, when we were in Avery County, it was just -- it wasn't really a neighborhood, but there were some houses around there, and they were all local people who grew up around here. And one couple across the way lived here their whole life. And they were a married couple. When we first moved up here, the wife, when she saw us, would literally run inside the house. She was so petrified of us. And my girlfriend's one of these people who, no matter who you are, she's going to smile at you until one day you're going to smile back at her. And that's what she did, and finally, one day, Ruth was standing at her mailbox and saw us and saw Carol and didn't want to move. She didn't know what to do. And Carol walked up and said, "Hi, Ruth. You know, we've never had a chance to chat," and proceeded to chat and over time -- almost instantly, after that -- we'd stop in and bring them cookies -- they were an older couple -- and we'd sit, they'd invite us in, and we'd sit on the porch with them. They loved our garden and our wind chimes. So it was fine. And another neighbor was also born and raised right there, and his parents lived down the street from us as well. And we had no problem whatsoever. None, ever. I mean, we went to their houses. I wouldn't call us best friends, by any means, but we got along great, and did some things with them as well.

Q: It helps when you're a social person.

A: Yes. We both are, and that does help. There's not much shyness about us, so it makes it easier.

Q: (laughter) Have you noticed how the chat group has affected the lesbian population in the community?

A: I think it's a big help. And that's one of the reasons why I did it. In Florida, a friend of mine had started it, and then she moved away and I took over. I had more people coming up to me saying, "Gosh, it really helped. I just broke up with my girlfriend. I was so lost, and I came to this group, and everybody was so friendly and welcoming, and I found myself talking about myself, and I never do that, and I felt a great relief." And so my thought was, I think it is worthwhile. It's not for everybody. Some people think they're coming to a help program, or whatever, but it's really nothing like that. It's just women getting together, I pick some topics, and we talk about it. If somebody says, "Oh, you know, I just broke up," and everybody participates. And so I think, in generally even here, it's a good source of camaraderie, and that you're not alone, and there are other people who call and confide in. And then just socially, it's a very social thing.

Q: I've heard one person say that being around y'all has helped her feel more comfortable in her skin as a lesbian.

That she wasn't as comfortable being demonstrative or even really letting people know that she was a lesbian, but seeing y'all just being yourselves, she realized that it was her. That she was placing this prejudice on other people, but y'all haven't had problems here.

A: Right. And, boy, that's great news to me. If one person felt better about anything about themselves, I think, I feel -- I get goose bumps. I think it's the greatest thing. So I think it's been a positive thing. I think any time something like that could happen to make people feel better about themselves, and more accepting, and even take a look at themselves and say, "What's the matter? Why am I doing that? I don't need to. Look, everybody else seems fine with it." So I think it's music to my ears.

Q: One of the questions that I've wondered is why the gay men in this area haven't developed anything like -- and maybe they have, and it's completely underground. And I was wondering if you have any insights in that.

A: Well, it's really funny. We met a few gay men couples, and they said to Carol, "Carol, you know, can't you include us in these things? Let us come to dinner with you, let us bring some guys." And Carol said, "Listen, this is our women thing. We can do a brunch together and have it mixed, but this is our --" she said, "There are guys! Go

out there and find them and go out there and tell them, you got this group going, you're going to do dinner on Monday nights." And, sure enough, that's what they did. And the first time they said they had six guys, the second time 14, the third time 18, they've had as much as 27 men going to their once-a-month dinners. So the guys are here. We don't see that many of them, but we know a handful, through Gay Pride, mostly, or Boone Pride, High Country Pride. We think that's the name now, which is great. So yeah, now we know a handful of men as well.

Q: Some people have speculated why there are more lesbians up here than gay men. Do you have any thoughts on that?

A: No, but I think it's really funny, because when we first moved up here, when we asked people, some people that we kind of met, we asked, "Are there lesbians here?" or we met one and said, "Do you know any other lesbians?" and they've be like, "no, not really." So we didn't know there was a lesbian community up here. I mean, when you talk about Asheville, everybody says, "oh my gosh, there's a huge lesbian community." Nobody said that about Boone, or the surrounding area. But now, I think that there is, because we're visible. We've taken in a lot of people. So now I think that people would say that -- they look us up on the Internet. I have people who come up here from other places

and I get a phone call from them. "I found you guys on the Internet. Is there something happening? I'm going up there in two weeks." So I think there is a little lesbian community.

Q: Do you see a change in number of participation depending on when the second-home owners are in town?

A: Oh yeah, definitely. Definitely increases. In fact, we did one dining out in the summer that had, like, almost 40 women. So it was huge. And all the things increase then, which we love. We have a great time. We know we have five months or so of lots of people, so it's been good.

Q: Yeah, I'm sure, in the winter, because of the weather, that affects it in ways.

A: Yeah, we had to cancel. We used to do a dance class thing that we did, that we had so much fun with, and --

Q: Who did that? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

A: Yeah, that was great. We were kidding around about dancing, and we wanted to do ballroom dancing, and one of the ex-teachers from here said, "I used to teach that." And we said, "great!" So we sent out an e-mail, we had, like, 20 women come, and we danced, and she taught us line-dancing and two-step and waltzing, and I tell you, we had the most fun. So we were doing that not every week, like

every few weeks we would do it. And we had a great turnout. Of course, we'd always bring munchies. And it was a big social time as well. One girl brought her mother, her 84-year-old mother, and she just danced with all the girls, had a great time. So just one more thing to do. But, yeah, in the winter, it's a little stifled.

Q: In more ways than one. (laughter)

A: Yeah, it's really true.

Q: And I've heard -- well, I've read that you're also doing the going out to the pool halls.

A: People do that. There's a great little billiard hall, beer hall kind of a place down in Foscoe. So we just send out of a thing and you guys, you know, will you call a few friends to make it on Wednesday. Yup. I just send out an e-mail, and we get anywhere from, oh, eight, ten women to 15, 18, 20 women. It's fun, it's cheap food, it's good. We hang around, we yap a mile and minute. Some of us go play pool, and the rest of us talk. So it's been great. And one more thing to do, you know, it's not expensive -- so it appeals to a lot of people.

Q: Are there other activities that people have said they were interested in doing, and because y'all are already involved in things, they've gone and taken on.

A: Oh, boy. I'll have to think about that. Well, I guess,

[ASU retired professor] doing her -- the dancing thing, she really sent that out and got that done, because that was her thing. And there probably is other things, but I just can't think of it now.

Q: Have you all become involved in any of Appalachian State University's activities -- Women's Studies or Women's Center or the LGBT Center like the Queer Film Series?

A: We definitely -- we go to the Queer Film Series. We were -- we couldn't believe that that was here. We were so excited about it. Jill [Ehnenn] and Kim [Hall] are incredible. The movies are great. We go to almost every single one of them every year. And publicize it. And, in fact, Carol and I talked about -- we want to do a fundraiser thing for them this time, and get -- put it out there more, and have it even more social, because it's a great thing that they're doing. We love it.

Q: I was wondering if you had considered doing fundraising. Because other parts of North Carolina that have -- well, that are metropolitan -- they have organizations that give grants to people who want to do something for the LGBT population of that county or that area. And we don't have anything like that to help support people to include things that need improving, or to develop more activities in the area. And I always wondered if there were people out there



who have put that in the back of their minds, but don't know where to go forward.

A: Well, we could definitely be one of those. We were talking about it, even talked to Jill and Kim to say, you know, we really want to do something. We've talked to a bunch of friends, and we really don't know where to go with it, but we're talking about trying to do something for it, because it's a great thing. And I was really active in the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. And the difference that it made, even having the heterosexual people in the community come to see some of the films are such a benefit for all of us, and them, too. So if you have some ideas, or anybody else, we would love to do that.

Q: (laughter) Yeah. You advertised the chat room -- of chat groups, sorry -- in the newspaper originally. Are you still doing that? And how was the turnout from that?

A: It was sort of funny. I mean, I thought, why not? As long as we don't give out the address, and they call me personally, so I can kind of screen it. We got some response, not huge, but we got some response. A lot of times, people from out of town, though. It was -- they'd be up here, and they'd call me and say, "I'm reading this in the paper. It's not the right time, I'm not here, not going to be here for the chat group. What else is going

on? I can't believe we have this, and it's in the paper."  
I didn't get one nasty phone call. Nothing negative at  
all. So it was good. We'll do it again. We've been kind  
of lax over this winter, just because...

Q: Talk about the weather. (laughter)

A: No. (laughter)

Q: Yeah, the intense snow has really affected many things.

A: Yeah, we've had to postpone and postpone. We had a dinner,  
we had a something else. We just keep postponing it until  
we can get to somebody's house to do some of the things.  
We couldn't get up the road. So we postponed.

Q: I wanted to talk about what you thought were the successes  
of your group, but I think you've already gotten a lot of  
that, and where you envision it going. And --

A: Well, when you say "group," we're not really a group -- we  
make -- unfortunately, we make no money from it. We don't  
have it -- we're not structured for specific, except that I  
know that I can do a newsletter. I'm doing a blog now,  
which is the first time to do that. Not quite great at it  
yet. Good at writing, but not good at what to write about,  
necessarily, so I'm working on that.<sup>1</sup> But I think where  
we're going is to just find other things that interest  
people that we can do, and maybe have some of the things

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<sup>1</sup> <http://HighCountryLesbians.blogspot.com/>

that interest people that we can do, and maybe some of these offshoot, where somebody said -- which, we do have some, come to think of it. We had some people who wanted to go tubing and wanted to go skiing, so we put that out there, who to contact, and try to do things in that way. But I think many of the women would like to find ways to help the community as well. So we're all for that.

Q: Well, are there any other anecdotes about things that have happened since you've moved up here? I would be interested to hear what your Florida friends think about you moving up here.

A: Well, none of them were surprised that, once I got here, I started networking immediately. And everybody said, "We knew you'd desert us and have a group up there and do all kinds of things," so that was encouraging to know. I was going to tell you something funny that we have, in particular, there's one straight friend, woman friend, who's been a friend of my family's for years that lives up here part of the time. And she's always kidding that, you know, "why can't I go to the brunches? Why can't I go to this? I want to go, let me go. I'll go leave my husband at home." And I said, "Listen. This is for lesbians and you're not a lesbian, so you can't come." And, of course, she thinks that's so funny. And, you know, she hasn't come

to anything. But I think it's funny, because -- interesting, really -- that so many straight women that I've met up here, and, really through my life, I've found this to be true: that when we're all in a group, we're having so much fun. And everybody's being themselves, and having a great time. And people want to be a part of that. So I've found that straight people go, "We don't do that. We all kind of go out for dinner, but it doesn't seem the same. You guys have so much more fun." So (laughter) we have to, you know, "You can't come if you're straight."

Q: How has been the response of going out to the different eateries? Do any of the restaurants say, "Can you come back?"

A: They almost all say, "Can you come back?" because we -- and the waitresses and waiters love us, too, because we make them tag on the 20%, so they're happy with us, too. They almost all want us back. We've got a pretty good reputation, and most restaurants, having 15 to 30 people come at one time, they're happy. And Crippen's [Country Inn and Restaurant] opened the restaurant just for us to have a dining-out group on their night off. And provided a piano player, to boot! Yeah, so most of the places -- every place has been welcoming. They're glad we're there, and we've had just great times. And Carol goes on my blog

and does a restaurant review blog thing. So that's very fun, too.

Q: I was going to ask if y'all did do some types of reviews like that.

A: We do, we do. And we've had mostly great experiences. It's amazing, coming from a more cosmopolitan area, like South Florida, it's amazing how many restaurants there are and how many good restaurants there are out here. I mean, we love it. Eclectic and different types, and it's amazing for just both our little Boone, you know?

Q: Yeah, and as someone who was a chef, you can really --

A: Even better, yeah. Yeah, totally true.

Q: My last question is, have any aspects of Watauga County LGBT life changed since you moved here, outside of the growth of your groups, of course. And why do you think that is?

A: I'm not sure if I can say they're more tolerant or not, I've -- we just never had a problem, so I'm not sure what has really changed, except that we just keep making more and more friends, and that's great. I'm not sure if anything has changed -- I'm not sure if I would know, because we've never had an issue with any of it, so... but a lot of people seem to know that there's lesbians in town now, and not just one or two, so I kind of like that idea.

I'm all for being out and open, because I'm just as normal as anybody else, for the most part -- (laughter) many times, it's scary to think I'm more normal than some other people. I'm thrilled that we're out there, and just being ourselves, which is what we're supposed to do. So.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're very welcome.

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