

Elizabeth Wilson

Q: This is Kathy Staley. It is May 4th, 2010 and I'm with Elizabeth Wilson. Could you state your full name, your age, and the beginning of where you lived and when you came to Appalachia?

A: My full name? Elizabeth Louise Wilson and I am 39 and when I came here?

Q: Yeah, how'd you get here?

A: I arrived in Morganton when I was about seven years old when my father retired from the military and decided that he was going to take his family home. And home to him was not home to me. I moved around frequently. I was born in Virginia and I lived in Germany and traveled quite a bit before landing at the age of seven in Morganton, which is not exactly home. My mother and my father both grew up near Rutherfordton, North Carolina and Forest City, so it wasn't too far away from Morganton but he'd found a job in Morganton. So that's how I ended up here.

Q: Did you still have family living in Rutherford County?

A: Yes, both of my grandmothers were alive at the time and my parents, both of my parents had siblings that were still in the area.

Q: Could you give a little bit of context of what home life was like in terms of you had siblings, you didn't have siblings at home, did you attend church and what school?

A: I have an older brother and he was about five and a half years older than me and we did not attend church, however occasionally -- when we landed in North Carolina this was my first experience with church because suddenly we had neighbors who were really concerned with the fact that I was going to perish in hell so they took it upon themselves to invite me to church and lure me to Vacation Bible School for the butter cookies. And I did this and it was fine for a while until the minister, the preacher was replaced by someone who was a little bit more fire and brimstone. It was all about the butter cookies and "Jesus loves the Little Children" until the switchover and then I got a little scared and worried.

Q: When did that happen? How old were you?

A: I was probably eight.

Q: So it was pretty soon.

A: Yeah, I was about eight. And then I suddenly started feeling really ill every Sunday and my mom caught on and said, "you don't have to go to church." And I said, "I don't?" And that's pretty much the last time I went. Had a little brief time as a teen but that was it for me for a

while. My parents would probably say that they're Christian but they don't go out of their way to go to church.

Q: Did they talk about religion at home?

A: No, never. Never, never, never. And my sense is now as an adult looking at my parents in some ways they're very much, they have a very similar experience to me. I mean mine, I feel that being gay definitely contributed to my sense of feeling alienated from any kind of community, specifically a religious community, but even though my parents aren't gay their experience is very similar. They're sort of the odd balls of the family. My dad got out and --

Q: By going in the military?

A: Yeah, by going into the military. I don't really know but they're very similar. I don't think that they've ever felt accepted in any kind of religious community. I'm not really sure. I should ask about that.

Q: How did you first learn about homosexuality?

A: Gosh, I really don't know.

Q: Do you remember it before, let's see, there was the Rock Hudson coming out in 1985. You would have been in junior high. Around that time was when that tennis player was outed.

A: Was it Martina Navratilova?

Q: It was the other one who --

A: Oh, wait, what's her name?

Q: Billie Jean.

A: When was that?

Q: That was in the early '80s-ish.

A: Yeah, that sounds familiar. That might have been. It had to have been prior to the age of 14 and that would have been '84 and I do remember Billie Jean, is that her name?

Q: Billie Jean King.

A: Sounds familiar. I feel like I've repressed those memories a lot because -- I'm certain it must have come up on Oprah, back when Oprah was doing the real talk shows? Because I remember being about 14 years old and being at home on break and walking in the family room watching Oprah one day and my mother came down and it was something about interracial relationships and the camera flashing at Oprah before they went to a commercial break and Oprah saying, "what would you do if your son or daughter came home with a date with a person from another race or something like that?" And my mother was like, "I would kill her." And I remember feeling like, "oh, guess I'm not going to come out any time soon. Whoa."

Q: So by that point you were already self-identifying as lesbian?

A: No, at that point I knew I was gay. I knew I was gay early on. I don't know exactly what point I understood what that meant, probably later, like 13, 14, but I had a relationship with another girl at 14 and I was still in complete denial. I just could not accept it. I did not want to be gay, I tried to convince myself that it was just this girl, and I tried really, really hard to convince myself that I was straight. Didn't work very well. Actually if I have to admit that I didn't try that hard. I did a lot of mental work that never translated into anything. I never, I think I went to a junior high dance with a boy once, one dance and that was the extent of me trying. I just didn't put a whole lot of effort into it.

Q: Can you talk a bit about how the awakening process occurred?

A: That would be moving away from home. I was 14 and I went away to school, to this School of the Arts. I went to the North Carolina School of the Arts at 14 and it was a boarding school.

Q: That's where you met the other girl?

A: That's where I met my first girlfriend who of course did not claim to be my girlfriend but that's what we were. Neither of us claimed to be girlfriends.

Q: Could you talk about what does that look? You're in a relationship with someone but you're denying it to

yourselves as well as to others. Were other people putting a label onto your relationship or were others completely blind to it?

A: No, people were not blind to it. But my girlfriend who wasn't my girlfriend was also dating boys at the time so that helped. I think people knew that something was going on. It was really obvious, but because she kept this steady stream of boyfriends no one ever really said anything about it. Does that answer?

Q: But both of you all were self identifying or trying to self identifying heterosexual? Did she eventually start to self identify as lesbian?

A: No, she didn't, she never did, but she's definitely not straight. And we're still friends to this day actually and she is married and has a daughter. I think she's bisexual. Actually I think she would identify as bisexual at this point but still obviously married and in a heterosexual relationship. But I think she was very invested in not labeling herself as bisexual. In fact, we had a lot of conversations because eventually I went away and I actually did come out and I think when I came out it really shifted our relationship. I mean we had long since not been girlfriends but we'd maintained a friendship and when I did come out that changed our friendship dramatically. And I

think she realized that, through me she could see, it's hard to imagine what you haven't seen, you know? like a picture of how two women could be together. Her version, her picture, her image that she carried around for her life was what she'd seen over and over. You know, the white picket fence and the man and the child. And I ended up doing the version that she could never imagine. I ended up marrying, not marrying but having a female partner and having a child and I think that she's always been kind of astounded by that. That that actually happened, something that she maybe would have liked but just didn't have the vision. And I don't know where my vision came from. It's just that I couldn't do anything else.

Q: How long was this relationship?

A: It was probably two or three tortured years where she carried on with these boyfriends and I, you know, tortured myself.

Q: Did you during high school have any lesbian or gay role models that you could look towards?

A: Interestingly, the School of the Arts had a lot of gay people and faculty but I was a dancer and it's fine to be gay if you're a man in the dance world but there's a lot of homophobia in the dance world. Lesbians, it's really, I think even still, it's changed a lot but I've been out of

the dance world for quite a while, but I would say it's still got a lot of homophobia especially towards women. So that was really difficult. I was a dancer and I was really closeted -- well, in denial but I think if I would have been OK with it I still would have felt the need to suppress it in the dance world, sadly. So in some ways I could have had gay role models or friendships but I didn't because I was a dancer.

Q: Were any of the teachers out to the students or was it "so-and-so's gay?"

A: No. At the School of the Arts everybody, if you were a gay teacher everybody knew you were a gay teacher. I mean it wasn't closeted at all. Well, actually with one exception. One of the academic teachers that I had was totally closeted. Forgot about that. But in the arts everyone, no one was closeted in the arts.

Q: Did knowing that there were gay and lesbian adults assist you with your coming to terms with your homosexuality?

A: No, not there. And I don't know why. I mean I think primarily it was because I was in a particular art form where being a lesbian was just not a good idea, maybe it was that. Maybe it was just my own process because I was filled with self loathing.

Q: Where did that come from?

A: You know, I don't know. I just always believed that if I actually said it out loud that I would kill my mother. I think that that was the story that I told myself. It was my exaggeration. I just knew it would destroy her. And I didn't come out for a long time, mostly because I feared losing my parents and I just kind of lost it.

Q: Did they say anything growing up that gave any indication of their attitudes towards gay people?

A: You know, I'm sure that they did. I mean that Oprah story, when things would come -- we used to have dinner while the news was going on. And this was probably the worst experience of my childhood. I have a lot of dinner time trauma and I think that's the origin because the nightly news was our dinner conversation and I don't recommend that either by the way. I'm sure that, I have this vague memory that I wonder sometimes if I'm making up of some news story about a gay pride parade and hearing my mother say, "That's disgusting," just completely. Her whole body was just disgusted. And I remember thinking, yeah, that's me, that's what I'm doing to my mother. And it didn't take much, it didn't take a whole lot. Obviously my parents, our family didn't talk very much but I got the message and it was small things here and there, mostly on the nightly news, but whenever something would come up my mother

especially was very verbal with her contempt. And my dad was pretty distant. So I had this vague fear of disappointing him. It was a little bit different than my mother. I felt more responsible for my mother.

Q: While this was all going on what was going on in your school in terms of was there the 'that's so gay' type insult being given in school?

A: No, not where I went to, at the School of the Arts. In elementary school and junior high, I was still in a school in Morganton and, ugh, school was just torture.

Q: How so?

A: It was, "You ain't from around here." I came having lived in many different places and traveled a whole lot and then I got dumped into this small town where the majority of my schoolmates had never really left the county. And I didn't have to do a lot or say a lot to feel like a freak. People can spot you. "You ain't from around here." You don't have the accent, you don't have the right clothes, you're not from around here. And that was really difficult for me. I would always be on the edge of everything. And whatever it is, that's been going on from being gay to being interested in dance and the arts, whatever it's been has pushed me further away.

Q: So it sounds like there was just an overall not feeling like you'd fit in. It had nothing or very little to do with the sexuality component.

A: Yeah. I don't really know when I knew. I have always, always had, when I was a kid had crushes on girls and just always wanted to be with girls, always. From the time I can remember I've never had an interest in boys at all. I'm one of the rare lesbians, rare types of lesbians that's way over on the other side of the scale. I've never been in a relationship with anyone who's had an experience like mine where I've only been with women. Which is interesting. And I sort of lost my place. But I don't know, I feel like I've always known even before I had a consciousness of what it was that I knew.

Q: Before you had a word for it?

A: Yeah, before I had a word. I've always known. In elementary school, I was aware of what being gay was, again before I had a word for it. And I remember kids who were tormented, mostly boys, very effeminate boys, one boy in particular that I still to this day wonder if he's still alive, ridiculed from early on, as far as back as second, third grade.

Q: What types of words would they use?

A: It wasn't so much words in elementary school. Gosh, can I say his name?

Q: As long as you don't say his last name.

A: He would be walking into the gymnasium and everyone would say Deewaaayne, you know, just the way they would draw it out. And then some of the boys would like flick their wrists as they were saying it. No one ever called him a fag. That came a little bit later in life but they definitely were calling him for being feminine, for being effeminate.

Q: What was the teachers' responses?

A: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. There was no support, nothing. And I was just cowering. I just felt like all I did was try to not be noticed. Like please don't notice me, please don't notice me. I just tried to like hunker down and push through it and attract as little attention as possible. And that was my usual strategy. It kind of fluctuated every once in a while. I would attempt to blend in instead of stay out of the way but I always failed at the blending in part. I could never quite pull it off the way everyone else was doing. Like I tried to be a cheerleader in 7th grade I guess and I made the squad because I was a dancer and I was pretty athletic, in terms of dancing, not sports, but there was something just not

quite right about me. So that was the last time I tried to blend in, I think.

Q: What led you to decide to go to the School of the Arts?
Because it's far away from Morganton.

A: I honestly think that I knew that I was gay and I just could not see how I was going to survive high school. And I tried to tell myself that I really did want a career in dance, and I think I did, but really I think my main motivation for going there was it was a way out. It was a way out without hurting my parents really. What do you call it? I'm losing the word for it.

Q: Directly.

A: Yeah, without directly hurting them. I just knew that I couldn't grow up in Morganton.

Q: So it was too limiting?

A: Yeah.

Q: I'm giving you leading words, I'm sorry.

A: But it is. That is exactly it. I spent from the time that I landed at the age of seven to the time that I left at the age of 14, seven years I planned how do I do this? I mean I remember thinking about running away and two things prevented me. One, I was very protective of my parents. I just couldn't bear to hurt them and I knew that that would be devastating if I would actually run away. And the other

thing, I was a pretty smart kid in terms of I didn't see myself surviving on the street very well. I thought of things, like where am I going to get my asthma inhalers, how am I going to do this? I wasn't very street savvy in small town North Carolina. So at seven I just began trying to devise plans. How am I going to do this? Then I learned about the School of the Arts. I'd started doing some theater at 12 and learned about the School of the Arts and that became my goal. I used to sell lollipops to pay for my summer session, which was again part of my grand plan. I learned that I could go there for the summer and audition without telling my parents. So I sold lollipops and earned my tuition for the summer and auditioned and got in and then had to convince my parents to let me go. Which was kind of tough, especially convincing my dad. And fortunately his sexism ultimately paved the way for me to go because he was very against the arts, very, very against. My brother was actually a very talented visual artist, really very talented, and all my brother wanted to do was go to art college and my father constantly told him art was for sissy faggots. Yeah.

Q: What happened to your brother?

A: It's so interesting, the thing, because now as I'm talking things are starting to come back to me. You know, you were

saying when did you first hear about gay people. For me, it was mostly men. All the references were men and like the boys from early elementary school and junior high school, any gay reference was always male. And that makes another difference. I don't know what I'm trying to say but --

Q: That it wasn't related back to you.

A: Yeah, but on some level I connected that to myself. I did. The words aren't right, I'm sorry.

Q: So you were hearing these words about your brother from your father?

A: On some level I knew that my dad calling someone a sissy faggot meant he was doing it to me. Early on I felt the blow. Anyway my brother tried desperately to please my father and did not pursue art and tried to do every kind of job my dad wanted him to do and he now waits tables for a living and sells stuff on eBay. It's really sad.

But my dad has a really strong opinion and it was absolutely connected with homophobia. I mean inextricably linked with homophobia. The arts equals gay people to him. But when I say my father's sexism ultimately was an asset for me, he ended up relenting because, you know, girls have to have hobbies. I guess you can go because it wasn't

really a career choice; it was a hobby and that's how I won out.

Q: So getting back to the process of coming out, you and your girlfriend, off and on girlfriend, kind of fizzled out I guess towards 12th grade? What was the next step for you?

A: She was a year older than me and the relationship pretty much ended when she graduated and I had a year to go. And she visited me my senior year here and there but that was pretty much it.

Q: Did you know any lesbian students?

A: Not really. I knew some but they were in college and didn't really run in the same circles. And were also involved with drugs. Just a specific scene that I wasn't a part of, fortunately. Like I needed one more thing to overwhelm me. But really I finally came out when I came to Appalachian [State University]. And interestingly, I ran into a classmate of mine from the School of the Arts who'd gone there for high school and had gone off to another college and had come back here [Appalachian State University]. And when I ran into her we of course bonded immediately because anyone who goes to the School of the Arts has a bond forever regardless if you even knew each other at the school. It's such a unique experience. So we started hanging out and we were just fast friends. We knew

each other at the School of the Arts but we weren't really close. We became really close here and after a couple of weeks I remember she asked me to come in. We had just done something and I was dropping her off at her apartment and she asked me to come in. So I went in and she said, "I just really need to tell you something because I don't want you to find out from other people" and she told me that she was a lesbian. And I just completely broke open. The minute I heard that word I just spilled my guts. I was telling her about my relationship at School of the Arts and it just all came out and that was it. I finally said OK, I'll say it out loud. But that was the first time. I was 18. And I still didn't tell my parents. I didn't tell my parents for years. I ended up moving all the way to Albuquerque before I actually came out to my mother. Only my mother. I did it 2,000 miles away.

Q: Over the phone?

A: Yeah, I figured that was a good distance. And she didn't speak to me for a while. She said, "that's fine. I don't want to talk about it." And I didn't really hear from her for a while and then suddenly started getting packages in the mail. I think the first one was a juicer and then came the food processor. She started sending me kitchen appliances and apparently this is something that's happened

to other people I know when they came out to their parents as lesbians. Their mothers began to buy them kitchen appliances. I think this is a very interesting thing.

Q: Have you ever looked in anti-gay literature to see if that's the recommendation?

A: Oh my gosh, I need to check that out.

Q: Send your child makeup and kitchen appliances.

A: That's so funny. No, but seriously I did have a conversation with another lesbian up here and she told me the same exact thing happened to her. Her mother started buying her random kitchen appliances. I've got to go look that up. Probably on the Internet. But then eventually she started talking to me again but never, ever, never talked about this issue. It was just don't bring it up, don't tell me about it, don't show me, I don't want to meet your girlfriends, I don't want to know your girlfriends, I don't want to know anything about it and whatever you do, don't tell your father. So I didn't. For a long, long time.

Q: Is he still living?

A: Yeah. I actually got a desperate phone call from my mother about 14 years ago and apparently some friend of my dad's had a connection to Boone and there was someone who knew me. Because I was out here, totally. Totally out. And

something or another and my dad started asking questions. Did my mom know if I knew so and so or that person was gay and suddenly he started asking questions.

And my mother was terrified so she called me and basically begged me to please not ever let my dad know that she knew all those years. She was so scared of being, of whatever was going to erupt from that. So I decided to tell my dad and I wrote him a letter and I didn't hear from him for a good month and I finally, and I was really torn up. Because in my heart I felt like that was it. It was over. I'd been written out. And I just expected the worst and I assumed that that's what had happened.

So my partner, who's still my partner now, at the time urged me to just call because it's better just to get it over with. So I called and that was not the case. He didn't know what to do with it, you know, the information. He didn't know what to do with it at all but he wanted to tell me that he didn't understand me, he didn't understand the things I did, but that he loved me. And that's all he's ever said.

Q: Is your partner welcome at your parents' home? How has that played out?

A: That has been kind of rocky. But I mean at this point they're very accepting. I think they realize that she's not going anywhere.

Q: You all have been together for how many years?

A: For 14 years. And my dad doesn't say anything... I guess he just accepts it. Which is kind of a weird word to use with my dad but...

Q: I know they come up here to visit y'all and help take care of your child. Your mother does?

A: I mean they come to visit. It's kind of strained but as the years go by, it gets a little easier. I think my dad has actually been the most well behaved. He doesn't react. I don't know what else to say.

Q: Why did you choose to come to ASU?

A: Again it was how do I get out of here. Because I had actually gotten extremely depressed while I was at the School of the Arts and I was in a college program in high school so I had one year of college, one year to finish out the program I started my sophomore year at high school. So I did that and became more and more depressed and really felt like I needed to stop dancing but I didn't know what else to do. My whole life I'd just focused so hard on dancing and I didn't know what to do and I didn't have anywhere to go so I at 18 after my first year of college I

went home and went to the community college and took some classes and was still knowing that I was gay but still suppressing it at that point. And I just knew that I had to get out. And I didn't know what else to do so I figured I'd apply at Appalachian. I'd been to Boone and I liked the mountains and that's what I did. It was all about getting away from home, getting out of my parents' house so that I could be myself and not worry about them.

Q: What did you find at ASU? Besides your high school classmate.

A: I had a lot of gay professors and one of whom was very open and out but didn't stay here for very long. She was very supportive of me and really helped me see, have a vision, have an image of what's possible which was really important. It's like going through life without any, I don't know, without any expectations of what -- you know, marriage was never something that I thought of. I never believed that I could have *that*. I never really envisioned myself growing up actually because everything that I saw about becoming an adult did not match how I felt inside. I don't know, it sounds really extreme to hear out loud but I couldn't picture myself growing up. I couldn't picture myself having a relationship. I couldn't picture marriage for sure. I couldn't picture children at all. I just never

believed that I could have, I don't know, that I was allowed to have anything. So having gay professors was really helpful. Not so much relationship-wise but just seeing that people were living their lives.

Q: Having a model?

A: I wasn't really privy to their personal lives but just kind of knowing that they have this life outside of the university was really helpful. Seeing that they were successful people and that they seemed happy. And I had a really big crush on one of my professors who was not out but who was selective about letting people know. You know, I don't think that she ever came out but definitely let me know that she was gay. And I had just a humongous crush on her and I'm really grateful to this day for her presence and for her complete respect for me and for her position and for the boundaries that she had in place. I just feel so much gratitude towards her for being so, what's that word, ethical.

Q: Yeah, professional --

A: And warm, you know? I mean always made me feel important and special but still maintained that clear line. Allowed me to have whatever crush I had, it didn't take that away from me but maintained her --

Q: Didn't take advantage of you?

A: Yeah, didn't abuse her power which is definitely something that I experienced at School of the Arts. Not to me but all of my friends who were young gay boys, their gay professors completely abusing power was common. So I'm really, really thankful for that experience because I think that crushes are really effective. They're motivators, they have some positive, they have a positive place in the university experience I think. Especially when the professors are aware of their own power and are ethical, you know? So I had a really good experience with that.

Q: While you were here at ASU, SAGA formed. I guess it was then called Sexual Awareness Group at Appalachia. And you knew some of the people who (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). It changed its name to BGLAD around 1992, '93 but you knew Lee [O'Malley] who was the founder.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you talk about what gay life was like on campus for a student?

A: Gosh, I don't know. Again, it was really kind of an outsider. I mean OK, there were lots of gay students actually but there was a big division. There were different types of gay students. There were student athletes, there were, I don't know, my gosh. All I know is I didn't fit into any one category. There were the

academics, there were the professors, there were the athletes, there were the --

Q: Were there lipstick lesbians and sorority type people?

A: The friend of mine who would probably be considered a lipstick lesbian but not too many of those here in the late '80s. Still more of the flannel shirt remnants from the '70s. But because I didn't really fit into any one of those groups of people really neatly, I kind of floated around for a while trying to weasel my way into one but never quite did. But I did find the most friendship that I found was with the gay guys like Lee. Can I name these names?

Q: If they were officers of SAGA.

A: I don't know if they were or not. OK, so Lee and his friends, there was a group of guys that all worked at Kmart during that time and I found a lot of friendship with those guys. They were probably the most accepting gay people to me. I don't know about the lesbians but I did have some sense of community with them. I wish I could remember more.

Q: Do you remember how people in general navigated relationships? Both within their groups as well as walking down Sanford Mall [of Appalachian State University].

A: Gosh. I don't really remember. I'm sorry.

Q: That's fine.

A: I mean I remember maybe a couple of girls who were in a lot of my classes who were obviously in a relationship but completely closeted. I think that especially, they belonged to the group of kind of the hippies and it was not, that particular group I remember was not very open and they were completely closeted the entire time. Which was strange to me because it just seemed really obvious that they were together. Their body language, the proximity to each other. I mean it seemed obvious but --

Q: So there were definitely people who were closeted?

A: Oh yeah. Mostly people weren't but yeah, there were a good handful of people who, yeah, it was very private.

Q: Did you participate in SAGA?

A: A little bit. I went to the first few meetings. Who were the officers?

Q: Lee was one of the founders. There was a female and another male.

A: I don't remember what her real name was but she called herself, can I say that? She called herself Artemis, do you remember?

Q: Was she the pagan?

A: Yeah, pretty sure. I knew her and Lee and I don't know who the other officers were so I don't want to name any names and get them wrong. But she and Lee were the ones that

encouraged me to come. I've forgotten a lot but I do remember feeling very much welcomed by especially Lee and Artemis and encouraged to participate. I can't say that I did very much but they worked really hard to get people to come together, I do know that. I think that I was still in a lot of pain at that point. I was still operating on that I'm over at the edge of society and inching my way towards something but never really feeling an authentic connection.

Q: So after you finished school at ASU, you went on to do what? Because you eventually came back to Appalachian so how did that all pan out?

A: I actually left Appalachian in 1990? Let's see, I got here in '88. I came for a year and I came out that year and I really wanted so badly to be in a relationship and couldn't really find a fit here. I still felt so much like an outsider. Like I couldn't fit into any of these groups and I felt very frustrated because I was just generic. I'm just like a generic lesbian. I wasn't an athlete although I kept feeling maybe I should go over with the athletes because I mean, as a dancer I kind of have a connection, but they didn't see it the same way. It was just not the same thing. Anyway and so, I started dancing again and I thought OK, I'm going to try this one more time, I'm going to give this another try. I was trying to get through this

depression so I took this big road trip and went to check out some schools. Went to Boulder and I went to Arizona and then I went to Albuquerque. And I really liked Albuquerque a lot and they had a great dance program and so I moved to Albuquerque and said I'm going to try to major in dance. And found a much happier gay community in Albuquerque, a lot more variety. Again, a lot of different groups, none of which I really completely fit into but I was able to find a group of friends and --

Q: Why do you think there was the difference between the two?

A: I don't know. I think it's North Carolina, a curse on it or something. I don't know. Maybe it was psychological. Maybe it was that I needed space, like physical space from this place and everything it represented to me. But I think it's possible that it could be more than that, you know? It's hard to tell because of my connection to the place and my parents' connection.

But I do know that my real reason for moving was because I wanted a relationship. I mean it took me long enough to come out and the only real relationship that I'd had was with someone who wasn't acknowledging that we were having a relationship. So I was kind of looking forward to having a girlfriend.

I had a lot of catching up to do. I hadn't gone through all those rituals of adolescence. It's kind of sad when I think about it. I know that that's not, that's a pretty common experience to not go through all those phases. I don't know, maybe it's not so common because most of the people that I ended up dating actually did date boys, you know. They did things like that, even when they knew they still went through the motions and were able to pull it off. I don't know, I wasn't so good at it. I just ducked and tried not to call attention to myself. So you know, here I am going on 20 and I still don't even know dating etiquette and I'm an adult and I'm supposed to have already gone through all the immature stuff and suddenly you're moving in with someone and you haven't even experienced dating yet.

Q: So when you got to Albuquerque, you...

A: I did get involved with someone and had a really, really sweet relationship and did feel a sense of community there. It was pretty balanced too. There was a group of friends that I had that were bisexual and lesbian and straight and lot more mixing of people there, just by interests. Like these people were really politically active and did a lot of volunteer work and things like that, and sexuality was just around, not really a focus.

But yeah, if it weren't for Judy Grahn and her book *Another Mother Tongue* I would have no idea what lesbian culture, history, anything. I feel like I didn't really have people to help me come out. I was, you know, thank god for books. Really *Another Mother Tongue*, she helped me come out. I have two copies of this book at all times because I have to give one away every once in a while.

Q: So in Albuquerque, did you meet your present girlfriend?

A: No.

Q: So you stayed in Albuquerque and decided to change your major to?

A: Oh, I know what happened. I got sick. I ended up getting a really bad case of mono and it was during a major production that I was in and I had just gotten it and didn't know it right when the performances started. So it was a very rigorous piece that I was in and I had one of the leading parts so that was rough. And I pushed through it and pushed through it and I remember the last performance was on a Sunday. It was a Sunday matinee and I did that performance and I went home and I went to bed and I didn't get up for two days. Found out I had mono and it was just a really bad case and I had to drop out of everything and during that time I did a lot of thinking and

I realized that I didn't think I could do dance professionally.

So at that point I decided that I would come back to ASU and finish an English degree, which is what I was mostly doing. It was all by default because that's where my professors were, you know, the ones that I sort of took over and over again, that encouraged me to stay in school and it just so happened they were English teachers. So that's how I became an English major by default.

Ended up having to graduate at some point, counting up my credits, oh there are a whole bunch of credits in English, I think I'll be an English major. So decided to come back and finish that out. And my girlfriend at the time came with me and had a really tough time in Boone. She actually was from Vermont and had a really close group of friends in Vermont and always felt connected there and came here and had a similar experience that I did, feeling kind of alienated, hard to connect with people, hard to feel part of a community. Although she was sort of her own community because, I mean everybody loved her and she ended up managing BeansTalk for a while so it was sort of the hub back in the day.

Q: BeansTalk is?

A: BeansTalk is a local coffee shop that's right across the street from the university. It's still in existence. I haven't been in there lately but the original owner, I think it's changed hands a couple of times since the original owner but when it was first opened it was a pretty popular hangout so everyone knew [Romney?] from her job at the Beanstalk. And I used to read poems over there, I think.

Q: So at that point you were already creating your creative writing and poems?

A: Yeah, I ended up getting into Joy Harjo's workshop while I was in Albuquerque and that's when I got really serious about writing. So I was writing quite a bit at that point. But so my girlfriend at the time, we were together about four years, and she ended up moving back to Vermont and got married to a woman in Vermont. Yeah, it's the place to be.

And so my partner who I'm with now I met after my last relationship. And we met in a writing program in Vermont actually at Bennington. And I was living in Boone at the time. It was a low residency program and so when we met, she had just moved from New York to San Francisco and we talked about getting into a relationship and decided that

we didn't want to do a long distance relationship and so I went to visit and decided that I was going to move to San Francisco because I had nothing here in Boone.

Q: So you ended up in San Francisco? And then?

A: For a year and then moved back here. [Laughter] I don't know why I keep coming back. I'm never very happy here and it seems to be a vortex.

Anyway I came back with my partner and we lived in my parents' farmhouse for a very briefly in Rutherfordton and that was about the scariest thing in the world. That is a very scary place. That's where I got to meet gay people who go to church and get married to other gay people and pretend to be straight and have children and go to church and that's terrifying too. [Laughter]

Q: Did you meet lots of them?

A: I met several, yeah, like at least three people.

Q: Three people or three couples?

A: Three couples and they all had, you know, the gay men were married to lesbians and they all had kids and they all went to church and they all stayed in the same place. And it was very just tragic. To me, it felt very tragic.

Q: How did they feel about it? Did you ever explore that with them?

A: Oh, that's a very dangerous thing, you know. I can't even describe it. It's like my professors who didn't come out but they made sure that you knew that they were gay. I don't exactly know how that happens but it's like an intricate elaborate system of clues and codes.

Q: Like saying partner instead of husband or wife?

A: Yeah, things like that. I worked with a couple of these people for awhile and I was out so they knew that I was out so the conversations, the words that they chose, and the looks that they gave, they were communicating. They were letting me know that we were "family," you know? They have a very elaborate system worked out. I wasn't privy to the inner workings, I don't know how things worked out in there, but yeah, I was allowed to know but not told. I don't know how to explain that because I don't have the words to, yeah. Do you know what I'm trying to say?

Q: Yeah, there were codes back in the '40s and '50s there were things that you would wear that people would recognize you as "in the life."

A: It was very interesting. In some ways that brief time in Rutherfordton I felt more accepted and connected to the closeted people that I was around than I did here with people who were out. Like there was this secret club kind of feeling to it and we were exciting because we were out

and we were like, you know, the rebels in some ways. But I think it's also kind of dangerous to be associated with someone who's out.

Q: Because?

A: Guilt by association. You don't want people to kind of catch on. Especially these people, I don't know how they did it because they were so, I mean the men especially were so, so flamboyant and effeminate and just out to anyone. You know? Gaydar, it's real and it goes off. And these guys definitely had the gaydar going off. So their marriages were their covers because as long as they were married, people accepted them. I don't know, that's just the way it works there. It's a scary place.

Q: For you and your partner, how did people who weren't these closeted folks respond to y'all?

A: I'm in a unique situation because my partner is mistaken for a man probably a good 50% of the time. And in that particular place, more often than not people just assumed she was a man. What became tricky was if someone said her name out loud and the look was like, whoa, wait, hang on. Or when she spoke people were like that sounds a little, it doesn't sound like a guy. But as long as it was just from afar or just catching a glimpse, people generally assumed that we were a straight couple. So it's good and bad.

It's good when we can just skirt through and it's bad when there's a question because it's extremely threatening when someone starts to suspect. They feel, it's like this, I don't know, you can see the anger that they feel like they've been made a fool, you know?

Q: Been tricked?

A: Yeah. It's really quite scary. I've been in some scary situations. Most often involving public rest rooms. Yeah. Scary. So I mean most of the time people just assumed that we were straight.

Q: Do you have any examples?

A: Of which part, the scary stuff? Men following Katie into the bathroom and beating on the door. But see, that's complicated because they followed her I think because they thought that she was a guy. I'm not sure actually. Things like that happen a lot. Women screaming. (Laughter) Which is kind of frustrating because with the women, they know. You know, because if they really thought, I think it's more about policing her gender because if they really thought that she was a guy that came in the restroom, they'd leave. They'd get out as quickly as possible. They wouldn't go [exaggerated gasp] and do all this. Like if they felt threatened they would leave. Does that make sense? It was about you're not doing this right and I'm

going to show you. With men it's not clear if they, I don't know, it's never clear with men. It's just scary.

Q: Does she get that when she's in larger cities? Like you all lived in New York City for a while and in Boone does she get that more?

A: It's everywhere. It's scarier here but definitely it happened in the city [New York City] too. You know, in locker rooms and gyms.

Q: So it's just an increased amount of gender policing and expectation of certain type of gender norms?

A: Yeah. It's just scarier here because in the city you can still maintain your anonymity and here you can't. I mean you're just, you're out there.

Q: I would like to talk about your having a family in Appalachia and I know you started your family, weren't you somewhere else when --

A: In New York, yeah.

Q: So could you talk about that whole process?

A: Which part?

Q: However you want to talk about it.

A: My partner and I both wanted to have children and it took me a long time to see that possibility, see that it was possible. But definitely living in New York helped me because finally in New York I felt like I was part of the

gay community. I had a group of gay people especially and the work that I did was with the gay community. So that was really positive for me and I saw people who had children, gay men, gay women. I saw all kinds of different families and it was just what I needed to help me believe that that was possible. And in New York second parent adoptions were legal and so we decided that I would get pregnant and we used a sperm donor and went through the second parent adoption process in New York. And what else should I say about it?

Ended up spending a lot of money just to try to protect ourselves. Mostly for Katie, to protect her parental rights because my parents are pretty unpredictable. I mean Katie didn't really trust them. If something were to happen to me, I think my mother, she'd probably, I don't know, might have tried to take our son away. I like to think not but I think realistically when people are dealing with grief they can do crazy things. So always better to be safe and I felt like I had to support my partner's need to feel protected. So it was a lot of legal stuff to do and even then you can't guarantee anything. It can be contested. So we went through all that and our son is going to be seven this summer.

Q: How long did you all stay in New York, was it?

A: We lived in Manhattan in the East Village and, oh boy, again, what were we thinking? We decided to come back and I've lost a lot of memory since then so I can't really tell you exactly what the rationale was but part of it was that my parents were getting older and they were coming around. My mom, when I was first pregnant I didn't tell my mom for a long time and we talked a lot about my parents and how we didn't want to go visit them with our son because often my mother would not acknowledge Katie if we were visiting and we were out in town shopping, the grocery store, anywhere, my mom would run into people all the time that she knew and she would introduce me as her daughter and ignore my partner who was standing right beside me. And it was kind of rough.

We didn't want that to happen with our son because there's so many times that he's going to experience that kind of shame, we don't want to do it on purpose. We don't want to purposefully subject him to it and we thought about it a lot. And of course welcomed her to visit us but let her know that we would not be coming to see them.

And that really, really motivated my mother. She just, it triggered her to just completely out herself everywhere. It was kind of scary. You know, I'm glad she's still alive because she did some crazy things that I really wish she had not done. But she went overboard, you know, by us explaining that she felt like she had to come out to everybody. She came out to her family. You know, they don't talk to me, I don't talk to them, and she has this very strained relationship with both of her sisters and her mother.

Q: Does that predate you coming out?

A: Mostly because of me coming out. And I feel bad for her because of that. And at a traffic stop showing the police officer the baby picture and how her grandchild had two moms. "Mom, you don't need to tell the traffic cop, really I don't need you to tell everyone that you see. Really, it's not a requirement."

Anyway she went way overboard. But she needed to obviously. I guess maybe it cleared her conscience. So anyway that happened and we started thinking about the possibility of being closer to them and Katie had done some adjunct work here the last time we were here. When we were living in

Rutherfordton she was working at a prison and then doing adjunct teaching here and was getting her Ph.D. at the time.

So we thought maybe we could come back here and she could teach part time and I could maybe try to get on part time too. And as someone who'd gone to school here, I knew the outside community, I knew what it was like, which was not something that I would want to bring my child into with two moms. But because I had a positive experience at the university as a student and felt supported as a gay student, I believed that there would be a gay community for my family in the university. And really that's the only reason why we came back was because I felt like we could have that sense of community, that it was possible. And it has not turned out to be the case and we're pretty unhappy at this point, but we're stuck.

So it turned out that what I did not anticipate was a big class division and yeah, there's a gay community but typically it's just for the tenure track. And there's a huge, huge division within my particular department here and it's just all out war between non-tenure track and tenure track and tenured folks. And many of those people who are most vocal happen to be lesbians in my department.

So we've been excluded from any kind of gay community that we would have access to otherwise. Does that make sense? It's been very disappointing.

And it's very complicated with my son at his school. He doesn't really want to rock the boat in terms of supporting him around having two moms and also a mom that's gender variant. So half of the kids in his class think that Katie is his dad. They just call her his dad because they think that she's a man.

Q: Today is May 4th, 2010. This is Kathy Staley with Elizabeth Louise Wilson. So your son's school has about half the kids thinking that his mom is a man and then others know?

A: Yeah, and then others know. So they call her his mom and then they'll see me and they'll say things like, "So you're Gaelen's stepmom?" You know, half the kids are just really confused. And then he's *still* answering questions. By now, my god, if the school would get on board and just deal with it, I don't think that he would have, I don't think it would keep going on and on and on. It's really frustrating because I feel like we're not doing a great job supporting him because things are so difficult in every other respect

in our lives that we haven't put the energy that we need to into making things better for him in his school situation. At this point it's OK, it's sort of mellowing out, but it still comes up. It's making me feel guilty.

Before we came here we had many conversations and both agreed if we ever felt like it was not a good thing for our son that we wouldn't stay and now we're trapped.. By a bad economy and a mortgage.

Q: You had changed schools for him. Could you talk about the experience that your family had with the public schools? Because he is at a private school.

A: Yeah, at the public school we talked to the principal, I mean he was there for a half a second really. It wasn't going to work out. Part of that is that he is a little bit gifted academically in some areas and he was going into the first grade but reading on like a high school level and we realized that he was going to be pulled out of the first grade class. So he'd be with his classmates and then pulled out into other grades to do reading and things like that. But it just felt like, we didn't really want to do that because it's just one more way that he's different and he's separated and called out, you know? So that's part of it but the other thing is we'd had a conversation with the

principal about him having two moms and how he would approach it. And basically it's just "we treat all our students the same and we're not going to tolerate any bullying or anything like that and we're not going to bring it up and we don't think that you need to either." Which is kind of the way that things are going at his school now. And it's typical of the south, I think. Just don't say anything about it and it'll all go away. You know, if you don't say it, it doesn't exist. So it's unfortunate, it really is.

Q: How did it play out?

A: Which place?

Q: The couple of days he was at the school, the don't ask, don't tell policy that the principal had wanted to have done?

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