

Questions for J.C.
Oral History Project

§ Name, age, birth county, current residence

James Carp, 21. I'm actually not sure what county Berkeley, CA is in, but that's the town I was born in. I, however, only lived there for about six months. I am currently living in Quito, Ecuador, but I have been living for the past two years in and near San Francisco, CA.

§ Could you describe when and how you came to live in Watauga County?

I moved to Watauga County with my family during the summer of 1999, which was immediately before my 6th grade school year. We were moving from a small suburb about two hours west of Chicago, IL. I was thrilled to be moving to a place where my backyard was larger than a basketball court. Our family was generally sick of living in the suburbs, and the decision on my parents part to find work in a rural area had been intentional. They are both academics and teach at ASU. My dad also does some administrative work.

§ How did you first learn about homosexuality?

I have no idea how I first learned about homosexuality, probably from my parents talking about their homosexual friends. I remember when I was very young, maybe in between second and third grade, we were in Hawaii for the summer (my parents were working on a summer institute there) and one of my dad's friends there, Silly Sam, who played Cops and Robbers with the kids, was homosexual. At that time I had a child's understanding of it – that he was in love with a man the way my parents were in love with each other – and I remember that I didn't think there was anything particularly odd about it.

§ You attended Watauga County schools during a time when students attempted to organize a Gay-Straight Alliance, the Day of Silence began.^a You also attended Watauga High School under two different principals. How would you describe the overall attitudes of the teachers and students towards sexuality and gender identity?

Generally closed minded. I did middle school at Parkway Elementary, and there sexuality was never really a big deal – the assumption was that everyone was straight. But suggesting that someone might be gay was a fairly common tease. In my circle of friends we didn't really talk about homosexuality. We didn't tease each other about it, but it wasn't a comfortable subject to talk about because some of my friends were conflicted between political liberalism and the teachings of their church. In middle school issues of gender identity were simply nonexistent. Also, the teachers typically didn't enter into the issues one way or another. I suppose there was a tacit acceptance of the teasing, but to be fair it's not possible to stop middle school students from teasing each other – the issue is when teasing crosses into bullying. I think we may have had one teacher who mentioned homosexuality being “unnatural” from a species propagation stance in a

^a The first Day of Silence nationally was held in 1996.

science class on evolution (which was presented as a theory) but that was 7th grade, and I'm a little fuzzy on the details.

Watauga High School was very homophobic. It wasn't that everyone there was homophobic, but that many people were, and only those who were had loud voices. As opposed to middle school, the jokes and homophobic remarks by students in high school were typically used to control and modify individual's behavior. This was not the rare "ooh, what were they both in the bathroom at the same time for?" tease of middle school, but rather a much more vicious and biting "don't ever look at me like that again you fucking fag." To be out as homosexual in high school, and I knew a few brave souls who were, was to invite harassment. There was one student, a year older than I, who, as a freshman, was harassed to the point that he would leave the Watauga High building to walk around the outside between classes just to avoid being seen in the halls. After a while folks would tend to learn what parts of the school were worse than others, but the homophobic harassment was always present. As for gender identity – it wasn't really on the radar of those who were doing the harassing, most people seemed to be rather ignorant of the entire issue. That said, the occasion for a "cross dresser" comment did occasionally arise, there was one out gay man in my grade who very occasionally wore makeup to school, and I seem to have the impression that these comments were particularly violent. It also bears noting that, at least in what I saw, gay men bore a heavier toll of verbal harassment than lesbian women. As for the teachers at WHS, generally they refused to enter into the fray. Those teachers who had hall duty in places which were also bad about harassment ended up being known for being friendly or homophobic depending on whether or not they enforced no-harassment policies, but typically we didn't know where any given teacher sat on the issue. The teachers who were known for being liberal and gay-friendly were used almost as safe heavens, as well as the programs those teachers ran, but in general the assumption was that a teacher was not safe to talk to about that kind of thing.

Also, it did get better over the years. A lot of that had to do with when the school administration started actually cracking down on harassment. In fairness to Mr. Childers, I understand that he had his hands full cracking down on drug deals happening in the school parking lot.

Notwithstanding, once Ms. Quick came in and put her foot down about harassment in the school (at this point we had founded the Diversity Club and been making a bit of a fuss about it) the harassment got better. The same ill will was still there, but it got voiced less often, and maybe that's how institutions can cause cultural change.^b

I'll touch more on this when I get to the question about it, but I want to be clear that there were students holding the Day of Silence unofficially before I started attending the high school. I actually didn't know about it during my freshman year and did not participate that year.

§ What factors at the high school led to students want to form a GSA?

I should be clear, the dream for a GSA didn't start with me. I inherited it from Ellen and George (Alison, to be technical, but all her friends called her George. To the best of my knowledge she was not in any way trans). Nevertheless I was involved with the project from very early on, and certainly did adopt it as my own. At its core, we wanted a safe place in the high school for

^b Gary Childers and Angela Quick

GLBTQ students. Many of those of us in this group of friends who spearheaded the project were inspired by friends of ours in the piedmont who had started GSAs and managed to get so much good work done – some going as far as having school sponsored awareness days and printing club t-shirts. These were mostly other kids I knew from Unitarian Universalist Youth Conferences, which were occasional weekend havens of accepting and open community for many of us. So, a lot of us also wanted to do this kind of awareness raising and culture changing work as well, and to push back against the homophobic religious and cultural mores of many, if not most, of our fellow students, but the overarching focus was to create safe space for those of us who were GLBTQ. We wanted there to be a place where we/our friends could be out without being harassed, and a support group which could help keep those of us who were being harassed stay safe in the hallways, and a way to find, and provide assistance to, GLBTQ freshman and other students.

§ Describe the school district’s response to the request for a GSA.

My understanding is that George and Ellen first went to the WHS administration about a GSA and were flatly told no. They then decided to take a freedom of expression angle, and petitioned the district, which I believe also denied the request. I distinctly remember something about trying to hire a lawyer through the local PFLAG, but I don’t think that actually ever happened. It was at that point when the school year ended and Ellen and George graduated. James, who was a year older than I was, and I picked up the leadership mantle. I was, at this point, working with the local PFLAG chapter, which had prioritized doing something about the anti GLBT harassment in the high school (they had not adopted the “Q” at that point), and the PFLAG leadership committee was very interested in seeing us succeed with a high school GSA. James and I prepared a formal request for the club, which included finding teachers to act as advisors, and put it through the proper channels at school. We received a very kind, but also frustrating, “don’t rock the boat” speech from Mr. Childers, the principal, who was in his last year as principal. He was very clear that he supported us and our efforts, but he believed that taking the head-on approach of forming a GSA would only cause more conflict and ultimately be bad for everyone, including damaging the learning environment of the school. We insisted that we had the right to establish our club, just as any other student group did, and I believe he passed the decision up to the district level. After some time we received word that the district had denied our request.

I was spearheading the official organizing part of the club, I already had good connections with our only ally, PFLAG, and James was far better at social organizing than I. Upon being denied by the district, I did everything I could to appeal the decision and to make a freedom of expression argument out of it, instead of the “damaging the learning environment” track the school board took. I was entirely stonewalled. This got me rather pissed off, and I wanted to revive the talk of hiring a lawyer. Ultimately, the Leadership Committee of the local PFLAG chapter, of which I was at this point a member, managed to prevail upon the district to get a meeting with the head of the school board, whose name I don’t remember, and the incoming principal of WHS, Ms. Quick.^c I don’t remember clearly how the meeting was arranged, but I

^c The meeting was supposed to be with Superintendent Dr. Bobbie Short; however, she had a family emergency and the Assistant Superintendent met with the group instead.

wouldn't be surprised if the school board was brought to the negotiating table under threat of a call to an ACLU lawyer. Then again, Nancy, who was also on the PFLAG LC, had strong connections to the school system and may have been able to arrange something in a more friendly manner.^d You might remember that more clearly than I, Kathy.^e

In any case, we had a relatively positive, if somewhat tense, meeting. The outcome of which was that there was no way to get a GSA without a fight, but that the same club, by another name, would be fine. Basically, we couldn't say "gay" in the title of anything sanctioned by the school district.

Hence, as a compromise, the Diversity Club was eventually born. It had taken most of the school year to make this happen, but we were pleased to have finally made it through the enormous hurdle of official permission to assemble.

§ You and other students formed the Diversity Club. Could you describe your motivation behind this?

The Diversity Club was really the GSA we had intended to be forming by another name. There was briefly some excitement about maybe opening the purview of the club to include ethnic minorities, but we were a group of white friends and that idea, somewhat predictably, didn't pan out. There were all the same motivations as for the GSA above, and, after essentially an entire school year of fighting for the right to assemble, we were quite willing to compromise the name of the group. Ultimately, the priority was to meet and try to engage in our activism work in the high school. We wanted to create change in the school, having a protracted battle with the school district would only have been a distraction from our real goals.

§ What are some of the successes and challenges of the Diversity Club?

Successes:

We met consistently for more than a school year. This in and of itself was a major success given the difficulty we had getting consistent attendance and the persistent shadow of men making threatening motions in the windows for the first few months. Nothing ever happened, though a few hot headed members had to be convinced not to go make a confrontation of it. We held the Day of Silence successfully twice, and both times called it "Sponsored by the Diversity Club" which both legitimated it for the school administration and got the word out about the Diversity Club. Holding the event through the club let us legitimate the club with the DoS community in WHS and legitimate DoS with the WHS administration. It was a good set up, and perhaps the only unmitigated success of the club during my time with it. I've attached a DoS flier we put together my senior year. We did no surveying or gathering of demographic data about DoS participants. A lot of people just picked up one of the informative statements to pin on their shirt from a friend the morning of the event, so I really don't know who was participating. My sense at the time was that participation was high enough that most students in the High School saw at least one DoS participant in at least one class. It was certainly large enough to be the talk of the school for an entire day, and nobody missed hearing about it, though some of that was probably

^d Nanci T. Nance, a retired Watauga High School English teacher

^e Kathy Staley was the president of the PFLAG LC during this time.

because of the resistance to DoS that ran rampant. In terms of the people I personally interacted with, there were at least 50 students, and I am sure more than that were participating on the day itself.

We held the Open Arms campaign which included fundraising. I've attached a general Diversity Club flier, from toward the end of my senior year, which mentions Open Arms and a copy of the Open Arms contract. Open Arms came about when we recognized that there were a lot of people in WHS who really just needed a friendly ear. It was impossible for those GLBTQ and "different" students (as meant in the next question) to know who was a safe person to come out to or to talk to about challenges and who wasn't. The idea of Open Arms was that we could change that by labeling ourselves as open, friendly, and liberal. We didn't want to explicitly attract anti-GLBTQ harassment to Open Arms participants, but the fact that we were consistently and intentionally GLBTQ-friendly was something we were careful to make known. The campaign centered on orange silicone bracelets imprinted with "Open Arms" which students wore to signify that they were available as a friendly ear for whoever needed to talk. Faculty, staff, and administration were not invited to participate because state employees are obliged to report certain types of information, and we decided that we wanted to be able to offer more anonymity to Open Arms participants. (i.e. We weren't sure that the best response to admissions of severe depression was the school counselor.) Ultimately, we were hoping to foster a more open, communicative, and friendly atmosphere at WHS. We had some success with the project. Actually, it's very hard to know how much success we had, because it was set up to be confidential. There's no way to know how many or how often the Open Arms promise of a friendly ear was taken up on, because all of those conversations were private and we didn't ask anybody to talk about how often they were called upon. In my participation in Open Arms I spoke with five or six individuals, most of whom were prior acquaintances. I surmise that wearing the bracelet made me more approachable. The conversations were about more-or-less extreme teen issues. One person was having trouble grappling with sexuality and needed someone to say that ze could be attracted to whomever and it was okay. Another needed to escape an abusive boyfriend of ze's mother and actually ended up spending about a week living at my house.

The major problem we had was that people didn't really keep up with their bracelets. The idea was that folks would wear them every day, but a lot of them got lost and needed replacing (which I was not thrilled about – fundraising is hard work!) and a lot of people got excited about the idea, but didn't stick with it by actually wearing the bracelet. Nevertheless, we did have people in the halls willing to be friendly ears for perfect strangers, we did promote the club with the project, and we did raise awareness of the need for friendliness and compassion with posters and word of mouth about the project.

We successfully lobbied for increased enforcement of anti-harassment rules in the school. The rules on the books always looked good. The question was just whether or not they were enforced. I made agitating for that enforcement, which meant administration cracking down on lenient teachers who had hall duty, a topic of every meeting I had with the school administration. We had some limited success with Mr. Childers (again, to be fair, he was dealing with a serious drug dealing problem on school grounds at the time), and when Ms. Quick came in she immediately picked up on the message that something had to be done. Within the first year of

her administration the hallway harassment that I experienced and heard about was meaningfully reduced.

We put out a survey about attitudes toward homosexuality and harassment levels, which received a lot of responses (but I don't know that anything was ever done with the responses). We actually managed to get permission to have the survey distributed during the PATHS time (homeroom) to every student in the school. We didn't get a 100% participation rate, but we did get hundreds and hundreds of responses. The survey was given out at the end of the school year, and the plan was that the responses, which were qualitative, would be read, categorized, and then both representative and exception/anomalous phrases would be lifted for discussion. We could then go, with our analysis and the original surveys, to the school administration and school board with enough information to recommend specific policy changes and evidence of problematic harassment, which the school board still denied. The project came together toward the end of the school year, my hope was that having a project in the works when the next year started, and I had left, would facilitate continuing energy and drive for the club. Unfortunately, I don't think that anything was ever done with the surveys. If I remember properly they got lost. Nevertheless, simply putting out the survey sparked a conversation in the school which I heard echo in the hallways from students I never would have expected to care about harassment for the next week or more. I was amazed, when I looked through the surveys, that the majority of them admitted that malicious harassment happened at WHS, and many of those responses expressed interest in something being done to end it. It's a real shame that those surveys weren't better taken care of, but at least we did get people thinking about the topic.

Finally, I have heard that there is a GSA at WHS, and that it was founded by some of the people who attended and worked on Diversity Club projects. I heard second or third hand through my parents, so I'm not sure if it's true or not, but I would like to think that it is.^f The Diversity Club sputtered on for a few years, but eventually couldn't maintain itself. If, in fact, some of those same people who were underclassmen when I worked with them, as upperclassmen, managed to get a GSA approved ... Well, I don't want to be too prideful, but it warms my heart to think that I may have played a part, at WHS, with the school administration, or with the school board, and however small, in making the reality of a GSA an eventual possibility. Of course, I have no way of knowing if that club has managed to survive or not, but it's a nice thought.

Challenges:

We had to contend with personality/leadership clashes. Specifically a young woman in my class and I agreed on all the politics but disagreed on all the philosophy and strategy. The specifics of the debates are no longer fresh in my mind – they were unpleasant at the time and something I wanted to put behind me. We were both leaders in the nebulous group of “different” students at the time, and the outfall of our disagreements was that Diversity Club lost this young woman as a powerful ally, though we did consistently put our differences aside for Day of Silence organizing. It was a very unfortunate fight, and was both political and personal. Ultimately, however, I fought for working within the system and against trying to make the biggest nastiest fight we could over the approval of a GSA, and I won. It was unfortunate to split our efforts

^f A GSA was approved in Fall 2008. The faculty adviser retired the following year and no GSA was listed in WHS's student organization webpage for the 2009-2010 academic year.

like that, but I think it was more important to be able to work in a collegiate manner with the officials involved.

At the beginning we were constantly made to feel intimidated. Once it became clear that I was the driving force behind the new “gay club” (as the Diversity Club was known in the hallways for some time) there were several angry young men who tried to face me down. Now, I knew that I was asking for it, and, as with all bullies, if you just don’t back down and refuse to be intimidated, they will ultimately leave you alone. These young men were from the clique that we uncharitably referred to as “red necks.” (We were an embattled minority, but I look back and regret the prejudices we carried.) Typically I would be accosted and accused of being gay, sometimes including accusations of specific sex acts. I think the attempt was to anger me to the point that I struck out at someone. It never came to blows, and rarely lasted for a minute or so before my refusal to be perturbed took the heat out of the confrontation and we went our separate ways. Also, at the beginning of my senior year, when we were advertising our meetings at little bit, there were several instances of angry young men behaving in threatening ways outside the windows or in the halls right outside where we were meeting while we met after school. I, at least twice, had to dissuade one of our more hotheaded members from making a confrontation out of it. Happily, our faculty advisor, Mr. Larry Beasley, was not shy about telling these people to leave us alone and it all stopped after a little while. Mr. Beasley typically stayed in the room with the meetings, but was not an active participant in them, with the exception of very occasional decision making advice or leadership assistance.

We didn’t have very consistent membership, which I gather is the scourge of all clubs and organizations. I was constantly cajoling people to come to the meetings, and there was a lot of turnover. But we always had people there, and by the end of my time with the club there were a bunch of 1 of every 3 or 2 of every 5 meeting regulars.

We were held together by one strong personality. In part because of the leadership clash I mentioned above, I was the only personality in the club my senior year who was both a strong leader type and committed to the work we were doing and sufficiently organized to be an effective leader. I tried to groom a couple younger members to take the leadership once I graduated, with limited success. Part of it was that I was so new to activism I didn’t really know what I was doing. Part of it was that I was afraid that if I let up the whole thing would come crashing down about my ears. In any case, it meant that we had structure and support and stability while I was there, but that there wasn’t much continuity or great leadership once I graduated.

We didn’t have the larger institutional support structure of a GSA. As I understood from my friends at schools with GSAs, the national GSA network provides resources to clubs which are, in fact, very helpful. Things like flier designs, leadership resources, training information and opportunities ... we would really have benefited from being able to focus our energies on organizing instead of all of the institutional maintenance work we had to do.

§ Were there any havens for students perceived to be different?

Yes, there were some havens. Now, I should be clear, I can only speak for white students at the high school. The ethnic minorities at WHS may well also have had havens, but they were not the same havens that I was aware of. Racial slurs were at least as common as homophobic ones in

school hallways, and I am aware of several vicious physical fights which seemed to be, at least in part, exacerbated by racial tensions. I had initially hoped that the Diversity Club could address these problems too (and perhaps anti-harassment enforcement helped a little) but we just weren't able to reach out to the ethnic minorities at WHS.

In terms of institutions that served as havens at WHS the art and theater programs were the main areas for GLBTQ students, self styled "freaks" and, to a lesser extent, liberal students. This included the crafts classes which focused on pottery and leather work. Because the layout of the school placed the classrooms of these programs in close proximity to each other, the nature of the classes was relatively loose, and there was ample opportunity for students to hang out in the spaces outside of class time (to finish art projects or rehearse for plays) these programs provided an ideal space for the fermentation of a community of "students perceived to be different." It was very much a culture of us "different" students and, because of that culture, students who were not GLBTQ- and liberal-friendly, or at least accepting, typically didn't work up to the advanced classes. Hence, what ended up happening was that, by junior year, and sometimes as early as sophomore year, students would be able to consistently have one, or on occasion two, classes per semester with a loose group of students all of whom were allied in having this haven for ourselves and each other. Also, within this loose group of students, there was typically a core group of students who had art and theater classes and were friends.

Another haven was the advanced academic classes. These were less of groups of friend or opportunities to form bonds as they were classes with teachers who would not spout anti-homosexual rhetoric and who were, at the very least, sympathetic to GLBTQ and liberal students. Much of the culture in these classes had to do with the fact that they were mostly populated by the children of ASU faculty, and these families were generally more liberal than the county norm. Additionally, there were a few scattered teachers whose classes were known to be havens.

Finally, there were a few social havens where skaters, stoners, and other "different" students spent time. Often, in my experience, this group was more about there being safety in numbers while resisting the hegemonic culture than it was that we all necessarily had much of anything in common. Those of us who gravitated into the art/theater or academic havens stopped spending much time in these social conglomerate havens rather quickly. The conglomerate social haven was ... was more for people who didn't want to be a part of what else was available, for people who wanted to skip school or come to classes high or whatever else.

§ Some students and teachers treated LGBT students very poorly. Could you describe specific instances of anti-gay behavior?

So, in terms of the day to day ins and outs of being a high school student, my memory is a little fuzzy. It has been five years. I mention some instances of anti-gay behavior above which have been particularly memorable above. Also, I remember a student in my PATHS class asking me if I was "a God damned fucking faggot," though we later learned to leave each other alone.

At another point I heard the teacher Mr. Jones (there were two Mr. Jones, this was the one referred to as G.I. Jones because he never stopped talking about his military service) speaking casually with a student in a hallway about how gay men were of inferior to straight men and this was why they were not allowed to serve in the US military.

If something else pops into my head, I'll be sure to send it along. I'm sorry I'm not coming up with a lot here. I have tried, at the time and in the years since, not to dwell on the difficult and unpleasant memories.

Oh goodness! I had put that horrible attack that happened to Simon out of my mind. Thank you for reminding me, Kathy. Simon was attacked and rather badly beaten up, if I remember correctly. I remember seeing him with his face black and blue. He worked very hard to be strong and tough about it, and I remember how well he did at that, though he was clearly badly shaken up by the attack. He also distanced himself from the activist community I was involved in at that point, I seem to remember that he took the very innovative step of looking for safety in becoming popular and protected by popularity, without trying to go back in the closet. It seems like that may have been by joining the cheerleading squad, but I could be remembering wrong.

Now that I'm thinking about it, there was a very similar attack on a young gay man in my grade during, I think, the second semester of our freshman year. This young man was also badly beaten up, and responded to it by becoming more manly and being tougher than anybody else.

§ Other students and teachers were supportive. Could you describe specific instances of this?

Again, my memory on this is five years old, and I've mentioned some instances above. That said, the group of students that I worked with was rife with supportive behavior for each other. It was consistently heartening to see someone take time out of their day to walk a friend to class as moral support against harassment, or to just sit together and decompress after a hard day.

In terms of teachers, some of the little things were really heartwarming. The drama teachers, Mrs. Cheney and Mr. Pope, were always amazingly supportive and repeatedly would let students whom they knew were having a hard time with whatever (and this was not infrequently some sort of trying to deal with family/friend reactions to being GLBTQ) take a day or two off from class to relax in the drama department. I remember one week a student spent all class every day sleeping on a sofa in the storage area because she had been kicked out of her parents house and was having trouble getting sleep during the nights at the ... I think shelter but it may have been a friend's house ... where she was staying. Typically teachers didn't weigh in on a student's sexuality, and it only came up in the most liberal of classrooms. Yet, when it did come up there were things like "good for you" or, in a context of trying to maintain identity in the face of opposition, "don't let anybody push you around." In terms of student responses to GLBTQ identity, well, folks were careful about who they came out to, so responses were almost universally positive and supportive.

One thing that particularly touched me was Mrs. Stollings, my freshman honors and senior AP English teacher, who definitely attended a conservative church and, when pressed, would admit to conservative Christian values, staunchly defending a lesbian student against an insulting comment in class. It was the kind of small aside that, in many other classes, would simply be ignored, but Ms. Stollings stopped class, singled out the student who had made the comment, and took him to task for it. By the time she was done he was red with embarrassment. Then class continued as if nothing had happened.

Again, if anything more comes to me I'll be sure to pass it on.

§ The Day of Silence and the Day of Truth also began being held at Watauga High School during your school career. Could you describe the differing responses from year to year and by the different administrators?

To be clear, the Day of Silence was being held, in at least an unofficial capacity, at WHS for at least a year, and I think two or three years, before I began attending. At that point it was very small (I think it started with a group of fewer than five friends.) and did not have the official permission which we were told to solicit as the action grew in participants. My freshman year I was made aware of Day of Silence when I saw a few of my friends participating. I was only dimly aware of the anti-homosexual t-shirts, and knew nothing about the administration's response.

My sophomore year was either the first time that the Day of Silence needed official permission to happen, or the first time that the administration threatened to deny it. I distinctly remember Ellen being absolutely furious about being told that, if the event didn't have permission the participants would be disciplined. I believe the administration was, as always, worried about disrupting the learning environment. I'm not sure exactly what Ellen did to get permission for the event, but we ultimately did get it. This is also the first year that I was aware of the shirts. On the Day of Silence those students who most strongly opposed GLBTQ rights, and were most comfortable being vocal about it, would wear home made T-shirts with offensive anti-homosexual slogans on them. These would typically be along the lines of "God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve" or "Save a Deer, Shoot a Queer" or a downward pointing arrow on the back of the shirt of a male student with the caption "exit only." There were not strong administrative actions taken to control these forms of harassment this year. Also, George (Allison) who was one of the most outspoken of us that year, was pushed down a flight of stairs during a break that year. She didn't fall far because of the throngs of other students, but we were all shaken by the specter of violence. The next day, I heard about, but did not have any experience with Day of Truth.

My junior year I was the one who went and got the official permission to have Day of Silence. The request was initially denied by a vice principal, and I was not shy about taking my issue up with the principal. This was toward the end of the fight to try to have a GSA at the school, and I was fairly pissed off in general. If I remember properly I had a meeting with the vice principal who had denied the request and the principal, Mr. Childers, which I began with claiming my first amendment right to free speech. I was asked "not to rock the boat" and explained that I couldn't prevent the Day of Silence from happening, the best thing to do would be to sanction it because nothing was going to stop it. That, with the bit about having a right not to speak if we didn't want to, was ultimately effective.[§] The number of students participating had been steadily growing, and this year there were enough of us to fill a classroom during an informational meeting. (I was trying to organize in preparation for the club.) And we probably had more participate on the day itself. We were clear that students were only asked to be silent with their friends – if called upon by a teacher it was recommended that the student respond. Many teachers respected those of us who didn't want to speak, but there were a few who would single

[§] Courts have ruled that students are required to respond to questions posed to them by teachers.

out students wearing the Day of Silence identifying and explaining note to talk in class. This year, administration made an effort to crack down on the most offensive of the T-shirts. Two students were sent home for refusing to take off shirts with quotes from Leviticus which condemned homosexuality. (To Mr. Childers' credit, this was a big deal. The story got into an international conservative Christian news letter and he received death threats and an overwhelming amount of international hate mail for standing up for us.) Additionally, students wearing the "exit only" and "shoot a queer" shirts were made to efface or remove them.^h Other shirts were permitted.

Also, after the school day had ended one female DoS participant was accosted in the parking lot by a group of male students. They surrounded her to prevent her from escaping and then, while taunting her with accusations of homosexuality, repeatedly poked her with their fingers. In the grand scheme of sexual harassment this is perhaps mild, but I think it is fair to say that she was sexually attacked. She was sufficiently traumatized that she dropped out of all of our activism work. Nobody could blame her, we were all very on edge about it for some time. (This was when I began to make myself as much of a figurehead of our activism as I could. I wanted to draw any possible attacks to myself and away from my friends. Of course, I can't know what would have happened if I'd acted differently, but I'd like to think that the confrontations I had happened instead of confrontations with other GLBTQ activist students.) Ultimately, the young woman in question decided not to try to identify and charge her attackers. She wanted to put the entire ordeal behind her. Also this year was the first year that I noticed Day of Truth being out in force in the hallways, and I had a DoT participant in one of my classes. I found the anti-homosexual propaganda highly offensive, and the Day of Truth folks were not following the same rules that we had for Day of Silence. We had been explicitly forbidden from handing out flier or literature of any form, but they passed out propaganda pamphlets with audacity. I complained to the vice principal who I had worked with earlier, and was told that it had been an "oversight" and wouldn't happen again. I was decidedly offended, but couldn't, of course, openly accuse the vice principal of favoritism.

My senior year things were quite different. We had a new principal, Ms. Quick, who was happy to work with the Diversity Club, and I had been careful to be sure that she was familiar with the harassment we had faced in previous years. We were again sure to consult DoS participating students, and there were again more than the year before, to speak in class when called upon, and Ms. Quick was, I heard, very firm with the school faculty and staff that no harassment would be permitted. Also this year, a serious attempt was made to crack down on the t-shirts, which was very appreciated. Ms. Quick had determined that they were offensive and disturbed the learning environment and that provided sufficient reason to ban them. A lot of the people who had wanted to wear these shirts, or who had been forced to change or turn their shirt inside out so it couldn't be read, were very upset about this. The story of the attack that had happened to the young woman the previous year was also shared among participants in pre-event meetings. We arranged to try to travel together in the hallways and to meet for a "Breaking the Silence" party after the school day, largely in order to be in a group and be sure that, when people left, they did so in groups. Also this year, Day of Truth was well organized and out in force. We still outnumbered them, but were not as forceful a presence person for person because of the evangelical nature of Day of Truth. This year, the rules were applied fairly, and I heard that

^h See Scott Nicholson's "Anti-Gay T-shirts Spark Suspensions" in *Watauga Democrat*, 28 April 2004.

some Day of Truth participants had their fliers taken away (by the same vice principal who had been problematic in earlier years). All in all, my senior year was the most successful Day of Silence we had during my time at WHS, and it did in fact seem that we were slowly raising awareness of GLBTQ issues, though the work of the Diversity Club was likely also a part of that.

§ How has living in a rural Appalachian town affected your personal gender expression and sexuality development?

Gee, I've never really wondered about that before. It's hard to know, but I imagine that it delayed, at least in some ways, the experimentation with gender and sexuality expression I have since had fun with. Though, it is hard to say if this is more because of a lack of attractive options for this type of experimentation or because it would have been socially frowned upon. Then again, I also had a relationship I was very happy with and am not sure I would have done anything different had I had the opportunity. Certainly, I don't think that there have been any lasting negative or limiting effects on my gender expression or sexuality. Actually, being so deeply offended by the limited and hegemonic nature of masculinity in Boone may have contributed to the self work I later did to identify and break with what I view to be negative aspects of western masculinity. Right, that term is pretty dense. Basically, I've worked to distance myself from the ways in which men are typically socialized to interact with emotions and sexuality and to find a more holistic male identity. In that sense, living in Boone may well have prompted some of the hardest, most important, and most valuable work of self-formation that I have yet undertaken.

§ What would you consider to be the biggest differences between rural Appalachian and non-Appalachian (urban) communities in terms of LGBT life?

So, I can only really comment on differences between LGBTQ life in Boone and San Francisco, because these are the only two places where I've lived long enough to have a sense of it. As for that, the difference is as stark as night and day. As activists in Boone we worried about staying strong despite constant harassment. As activists in SF we worry about the right to marry. LGBTQ persons in Boone worried about non-friends realizing they were a couple. LGBTQ persons in SF worry about what their costume will be for the Gay Pride Parade. Now, clearly, there are still challenges to be overcome in SF, but SF is entirely different. In SF we have LGBTQ specific events all the time and, in the Castro (SF's historically gay neighborhood), it can be awkward for straight people because the assumption is that you're gay. In short, the single biggest difference is the resounding lack of fear in SF that was a constant part of life in Boone.

§ Have you noticed any aspects of Watauga County life in general and specific to LGBT life changing since you moved away in 2006 and why do you think this is?

Honestly, I haven't spend enough time in Watauga County since I left in 2006 to know if it's changed or not. I've only been back to see my family and a few friends and haven't spent any time getting reacquainted with the county.

§ How do you think having a state university in Boone has affected LGBT life?

In terms of the high school GLBTQ life, it was an escape, and a danger. LGBTQ students, particularly upperclassmen, who felt they needed a larger, more accepting community could go party at ASU, and that was almost always an option and a place where folks could be out and not worry about reactions to it. At the same time, when 16 to 18 year olds are partying with 18 to 22 year olds it is altogether too easy for the younger kids to get in deep over their heads. I heard about several people who when looking for a good time and ended up regretting what they'd done.

Of course, I also think that the university is a culturally liberalizing influence. That is, there are a meaningful number of people who live in Watauga County who wouldn't be there if it weren't for the university, and most of them are more liberal than those residents who live in the county for other reasons. In terms of the Diversity Club and our student allies, the majority of us were children of university professors. There is also the body of liberal ASU graduates who stay in Watauga County and are slowly changing the culture there, if not even making a larger GLBTQ life possible.

--What did he know of the lives of people who were LGBTQ who were living "out" (or at least "assumed") in the area? Was his sense that it was ok/accepted...or difficult--that kind of thing...

At the time I knew of my adult friends and allies, and of my parents' friends who were LGBTQ and out to me. I did not take any steps to find out if these individuals were out in their larger communities. Overwhelmingly, the sense I had was that people in stable, monogamous lesbian relationships could go about their lives with little to no problem. However, it seemed that gay male relationships were more threatening to those who had objection to LGBTQ lives, and hence it appeared to me to only really be possible for lesbians to live more or less openly in the county.

--At that age, what did he know about gays' lives in general? And where were those messages coming from?

At that age, and all the way to today, I prefer not to generalize groups such as "gays" into assumptions about their lives in general.

--At that time...how would he have described what gay "culture" meant? And how has his understanding of it changed over time and due to his experiences since school?

At that time I would not have described gay "culture." I was focused on specific advocacy against a homophobic culture and for a side ranging and open support structure for those oppressed by this particular homophobic culture. Now that I have spend a meaningful amount of time living in San Francisco, I could characterize the hegemonic "gay culture" of that city. However, there are numerous counter examples and points of resistance, even in SF, to this "gay culture." Again, I don't think that the phrase "gay culture" has any meaning, just as the phrase "straight culture" doesn't. Both phrases embody far too much diversity and division to be summed up in any responsible way.

--What impact was his advocacy efforts in school having on his family? I imagine this could have been tough for them.

My family was universally supportive of my advocacy. Though my younger brother did not join the Diversity Club when he started attending WHS, that was more about having an independent identity than about the work itself. We changed the message on the answering machine to be more formal, and had absolutely no problems. Both of my parents are very liberal, and thought that I was doing worthy and important work.

--What were the ways he coped with being "different," being harassed, and being "the leader" for that population of students?

I have a personal history of harassment and being ostracized from grade school, which happened in IL. (One different kid in the suburbs of Chicago doesn't go over terribly well.) So I was personally prepared to be harassed - the opinions of my peers outside of my friend group had long since ceased

matter to me. As for being "the leader," frankly I wasn't. I was the main organizer in an influential school group, yes. However, I was not the core of the group's social life, and I did not try to lead, so much as develop ways for everyone to participate. Yes, it was at times stressful and difficult. I was lucky in that I had a very meaningful relationship with someone who lived several hours drive away. In this way I had a base of support and a safe haven that was not immediately related to my work at school.

--Did he, or any of his gay classmates, experience depression, trying to deal with sexuality by "medicating" it with alcohol/drugs, or consider suicide?

Of course these things were present. "Camping" parties in the woods where people would get drunk/high and be sexual with each other (not always sex) were more about being able to experiment with and be relaxed about sexuality than anything else. (This was not always experimenting with homosexual behaviour. At times confirmed homosexuals would experiment with heterosexual behaviour.) Some people drove too fast, or partied at ASU, or any number of tolerably common coping behaviours. There was even a suicide of a young man a little older than I, whom many people had speculated was gay and in denial. But to say that all of this was about sexuality does not recognize the realities of being an adolescent. Sexuality was generally one aspect in a larger, and more complex, web of challenges and desires.

--How did he/other kids navigate romantic (or sexual or whatever) relationships within this environment?

I found a wonderful person to be in relationship with and stuck to that relationship as if my life depended on it (and given where I was in my personal life before this relationship gave me belief in myself ... it may have). Some other kids denied relationships and sexuality, others dove into a sexual practice meant to be devoid of emotion or relationship (though that often didn't work for long). The homosexual relationships were kept quiet at school, and often at social events others made a bigger deal out of it than those in the relationship. But there were those few exceptions of homosexual couples wanting to be in everyone's face about it, or someone wanting to flaunt their sexual freedoms and prove that they could "turn" the heterosexual people. It was a complex and rich environment.

--Would he return for his high school reunion? And, if so, what would he expect?

I might return for a high school reunion only to try to reconnect with those few individuals I was friends with and with whom I have not been able to maintain connection. Then again, I have Facebook. I would not expect the people I worked with in LGBTQ activism to return, and I would not expect much to have changed, though I would be happy to be surprised.

--what was his high school relationship's nature? What was its significance then, and in retrospect? How have his relationships changed since graduating?
[ks--you don't self-identify your sexuality... I would add the question is

that because you don't like labels or simply didn't want to ... which once again you don't have to answer]

My high school relationship was, as is perhaps not uncommon in young love, faster and deeper than we were truly ready for. It was wonderful at the time because it provided an unshakable stability and foundation of self worth for me at the time. It provided me with a level of acceptance and ego affirmation which I had never before had outside of my family, and this was crucial to my ability to function and come out of the deepening depression I had spent most of middle school in. Nevertheless, I was too young to be able to make the kind of commitments we tried to make in that relationship, and it would have been wise to have waited longer before sex and found ways to define myself outside of the relationship, before the relationship itself ended, which was about two years after graduation.

I am aware that I have avoided identifying my sexuality, or even the gender of my high school love. I do so for two reasons. One, it is a way of using my enormous privilege, as a white middle class man, to try to break down stigmas and presumptions surrounding sexuality. I try to force people to deal with me as a person of ambiguous sexuality, because I do not believe that, outside of my private life, such information is important. Secondly, as part of the **"self work I ... did to identify and break with what I view to be negative aspects of western masculinity"** I left behind thinking of myself as having a set sexuality. While the gender of a person I might be romantically interested in is important, it is only important in the larger context of who that person is and how we relate to each other. While the easy option here is to call myself "bisexual" that label falls short. It propagates a false form of gender binary, is culturally associated with a host of practices (fundamentally a need for sex with both statistically common genders) which I find perturbing, and has not proved useful when trying to explain myself to various friends and romantic interests. More importantly, in my inner dialogue, the term never sits well. Much like many gay men know, before having a term for it, that being attracted to women just isn't quite right. I don't identify my sexuality because, at this point in my life, I don't think of myself as having a set sexuality.