

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ZEALY

Q. This is Michael Howell at Appalachian State University. It's June 29th, 2010, and I'm here at Appalachian with David and I'm going to ask David to introduce himself and maybe give us a little bit of basic information and then, David, if you'll sort of talk about your connection to North Carolina...And I believe that you're from here, so if you can sort of talk about the area you've ended up in or stayed in then we can sort of start from there.

A. Sure, sounds great. My name is David. I was born and raised in North Carolina. My family has lived in North Carolina for several generations. My mom actually went to Appalachian State University and so I chose, when I was a senior in high school, to come to App. My parents live in Greensboro. I started school here...did not finish. My coming out process was actually a very difficult one and I left after 3 semesters. I stayed in Boone for 5 years and met my partner the last year I was there. And as a result, moved to Hickory. And have been in Hickory for—because his family actually lives in Caldwell County, in a little mountain town called Collettsville. And...my intention actually was to want to move away from this area to a bigger city, but Derrick...we were both very young at the time and he wasn't

comfortable moving that far away from his family, you know, who interestingly enough, their response was and has always been "We love you. You are our child. We may not understand or agree but we love you still..."—even from the very first Christmas. You know, we spent Christmas Eve with his family. So, you know, we've been very fortunate to have that support system. And my family is wonderful now as well, but it took them a little longer to, kind of, I guess, come to terms with things. I also have a younger sibling that is a transgendered male-to-female preoperative—which creates...there's still some friction within my family as far as handling...handling that and, you know, it's just a very, very interesting situation where as far as my mom, and my father—and I also have a younger sister. You know, kind of that "dual-edged sword" of Jamie wants to have a "normal" situation yet she has--

Q. That's your youngest sister?

A. Yes. Yet she has a gay and a transgendered sibling. And so it creates—it just creates kind of an interesting...I'm generalizing here, but...so it's been a very...*interesting* life up to this point.

Q. Now, you're family is from Guilford County, right?

A. Yes. Well, my mom is originally from Lexington...Davidson County.

Q. Yes, okay.

A. My dad is originally from Goldsboro, which I cannot remember the name of that county off the top of my head all of a sudden.¹ Both families have lived in North Carolina for quite some time. My grandmother's family was actually from Kentucky. My grandfather—his family has been in North Carolina for several generations. And Boone, when I moved here...you know I stayed here for 5 and a half years, it was very much home for me. I felt very comfortable in what is, I guess, the "Appalachian bubble." And, you know, I found different ways of coping with a lot of my issues and things like that. You know, one of those...I did drag for many years. I was a makeup artist...was very enmeshed in anything that was a validating...was perceived as a validating environment for me.

Q. What was your drag name?

A. Davida.

Q. Davida. Cool.

¹ Goldsboro is located in Wayne County, North Carolina.

A. I actually helped organize the first benefit show for what was to be known as "B-GLAD" in 1996.² It was a club night with a drag show at Legends and we actually were part of the group that helped organize the first one.³ I went on to compete in contests..won "Ms. North Carolina," went to "Miss Gay America" which actually is the subject of a documentary—not the year I was in it—but that was the subject of a documentary called "Pageant." And that was kind of a...and Derrick was kind of along the ride for that journey. You know, my partner was kind of along the ride for that journey for a lot...a big part of it. It's...when I think about it it's kind of cool and interesting that our relationship was able to withstand all of those changes. Because we literally went from—when we moved to Hickory—having no furniture in a hole-in-the-wall apartment sleeping on the floor, which was just 10 years ago to both being in graduate school, owning a home...you know...and kind of forging and building a life for ourselves despite the challenges that we had and difficulties we had being gay and living in a straight world.

² B-GLAD, Bisexuals, Gays, and Lesbians Associated for Diversity, was Appalachian State University's gay and lesbian student organization in the mid-1990s. It was originally named Sexual Awareness Group at Appalachian and was renamed Sexuality and Gender Alliance in the mid-2000s.

³ Legends, located in a former grocery store building on Hardin Street, is ASU's student night club.

Q. Okay, so hold on a second...I want to hear more about you and Derrick and your relationship now, but I want to move back for just a moment.

A. Sure.

Q. So you came up through school in Guilford County, then?

A. Yes.

Q. So I would like to hear a little...a little bit about—recollecting now—what do you remember were the kinds of messages that you picked up as a kid, as an adolescent or teen about being gay...about gays—either in your family or in the community you were living in.

A. It was very interesting as far as...It was the nineties. I graduated in '95 and the Rave community was really big in Greensboro—which the Rave community was, you know, basically big parties and was all about diversity and was kind of this...environment that was inclusive or attempting to be inclusive. But what I remember from being in high school is that...is that—I was not "out" in high school. It was very dangerous to be out in high school. You know I remember that there were, I think, 2...2 or 3 people who were out at that time, period. And I remember that there was always this...the religiosity, the religious, you know, backlash...One of my

clearest, most vivid memories of growing up as a teenager was the last experience I ever had with organized—with an organized religion on a regular basis. I...my sibling and I—that is transgendered—were at a...we went to a “lock-in” you know...

Q. Umm hmm.

A. A church lock-in. And she...you know, and at the time, she presented and identified as male and was, actually, identifying as bisexual at the time. I think—I guess I would have been 16 and she would have been about 13 at the time. Interestingly enough, whereas I have always been more reserved and conservative and temper my...I guess my “outness,” as it were, gauging the environment that I’m in and try to be mindful of other people’s feelings first...she is the exact opposite [laughs]. It is pretty much “don’t care how other people feel” and...so in this lock-in setting decides to ask people how they feel about non-traditional sexuality. The conversation was very awkward and uncomfortable and by the time...

Q. She was how old?

A. Thirteen. Whew, she’d be an interesting interview. But by the time that I guess everyone had a chance to marinate on it, it was several days later and we were having breakfast somewhere...members of the youth group. And I’d mentioned, in

reference to her—because at that point in time it was safe for me to talk about *other* people that were self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, you know...well, at that point it was just LGB.

Q. Right.

A. So, in reference to her talking about the MCC, I remember a comment, "Well what do they do? Just tear those pages out of the Bible?" And it was just...it was very hurtful and was just one of those things, well, you know what. So I struggled a lot with—that was my number one issue. I have an aunt that is evangelical, extremely conservative, and she—because my parents weren't really heavily religious—that she was my, my "this is what religion is. This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what..." And so I struggled with lots of depression and a lot of tears...you know, and so what I did when I did come out...and the response from her was so negative...

Q. Umm.

A. And sending me stuff about Exodus and what have you—and..All in a very short three-month time period...you know, here in Boone, actually--had my first sexual experience...period. And it was with my first boyfriend at the time. Had my first HIV scare... You know, dealing with my family flipping out because I'm

not, you know...my parents very much had a model that they expected me to follow. You know, that, unfortunately—my mom was—because—I didn't mention this before but my dad comes from a family where his dad was a dentist, his grandfather was a doctor, his mother was a socialite...very societal expectations—the country club, whatever...My mom came from a broken home. You know, she was raised by a single mother. She put herself through school. So the majority of their marriage she has been very much seeking the approval of my dad's family. You know, so there were just expectations—particularly me being the oldest—of what I was supposed to do. And that's kind of constantly been the narrative of "what I was supposed to do." It's funny, because at this point I'm finally doing what I was supposed to do.

Q. Heh heh. I hope it's what you're supposed to do, to you too.

A. Oh it absolutely is, but it's just interesting that...that..that it's...that it's kind of the dynamic that pushed all of the struggle and the fight at that time. Basically I had a complete and total breakdown at 19. Completely and totally fell apart. I was actually in the School of Music here and it was bad; it was bad. So I actually pretty much failed out of...not failed out but did very poorly and only lasted 3 semesters.

Q. Well, hold on on that for just a second.

A. Sure.

Q. You knew from growing up—outside of your family at least—that gay wasn't necessarily good or it was a problem in school. How early did you recognize that you were, you know, gay—or not straight at least?

A. As long...as early as I can remember. I remember being 4 at pre-school and wanting to play "dress up" with the girls, you know. I can remember...hmm, what else? I mean just as early as I can remember...I mean I don't ever remember—The clearest memory—and I always share this in talking about like what that realization was—because I knew something wasn't right...

Q. Mmm hmmm.

A. You know as my earliest memories, something—I'm different. I'm different. There's something that's different about me. But when puberty hit—and I remember looking at—you know, hanging out with other boys my age—looking at *Playboy* or whatever and finding them *hysterically* funny, but not at all the reaction that was happening with my, you know, my counterparts. But then I remember, as clear as day, this Calving Kline ad of this very chiseled man, head chopped off his body, in a shower, and thinking, "Whoa! OKAY!"

Q. Heh heh.

A. And that was kind of the realization, "Crap!" Heh heh. And I have always—growing up...and it's something I've struggled with—being a "pleaser." And, so to me it was like sort of my worst nightmare, thinking "Oh, *this* is not what I need to be. I need to be *this*; I need to be *this*."

Q. So, how did you manage that as a young kid and teen?

A. I was involved with the church youth group. [Laughs] I hid behind the mantle of "I'm a good Christian boy. I don't do that." So that really is kind of...and I would deflect. In my senior year of high school I began—because of my younger sibling being more vocal and open earlier—I began to have a narrative with her about my issues that I was dealing with.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. But I made a conscious decision my senior year of high school that, everything else be damned, I was coming out when I got to college. That I was coming out of the closet to everybody and, well, to my family. I didn't have any intention of the domino effect that happened afterwards but...

Q. So, your sister who, again—just so I'm clear on this—would have been your brother at that time--

A. Yes.

Q. --had started moving into this track in some way. How was your family responding around your brother?

A. My family's response was to...let's see. With me, because my parents did find some...kind of, I guess you could say, very "suggestive" material in my bedroom put me in Charter, which is a mental health facility. The professionals there essentially informed me that I was being baby-sat because my mother couldn't deal with what was going on. And, actually, I would say probably that that was actually the first setting--in the group therapy there--where I actually started talking about--I didn't even understand the label that I was talking about because --and I should have mentioned this but I completely forgot about this. I had a God-awful therapist as a teenager who labeled me with some things but never really explained it to me--gender-identity disorder and which I--now that I understand all these things, I'm not gender-dysphoric. You know, I express differently than, you know, a traditional heterosexual male. And when I read what those things really meant, I'm like, "Why did this man not explain this to me?" You know, and then a lot of the issues that I was dealing with were issues directly related to a teenager struggling with gay issues. He just didn't know what he was doing and didn't really have the ego to say to my parents, "I don't really know how to help...effectively help your child." So I

ended up in Charter. My sibling, unfortunately, ended up in a long-term care facility. A lot of that was really just because my mother couldn't deal with what was going on with us. I was only there for about 3 weeks but interestingly enough, coming out of that environment, having had this confidential group counseling setting where I could talk about these issues and not have to ever worry about it getting back to my school or anybody—It was literally like being plucked out, put in a bubble, talk about this stuff, try to start working through it, and then plopped right back into high school and nobody there knows what was talked about, discussed, done. I had a complete and total "180" in attitude and just how I felt in general. I stopped and never went back to the therapist. At that point I refused to go, much to my mother's chagrin, but, looking back, you know, she was trying really. She had no clue what to do. You know, she was dealt this hand with these 2 kids that were soooo different and no clue what to do.

Q. So, you ended up coming to Appalachian and why don't you talk a little bit about that now. How did that lead to the things that you mentioned?

A. I came to App. and I did the summer preview program and adapted fairly well. There weren't a lot of people on campus. And I remember going to the very first B-GLAD meeting that

happened that fall because I guess that I just instinctively knew that I needed to reach out to other members of the community. Met Cindy Long from the MCC, Mary Ballard, and just met friends that have been my friends since then.⁴ You know, we call it "family of choice." They became my surrogate parent figures. When I came out, unfortunately my mother's decision was to out me to the entire family. So, of course I started getting-

-

Q. So you came out to your mother.

A. Yes. I was actually asked, point blank, by her. Even though, in my head, "How do you not know?" *You found this... you know, this is a surprise?*

Q. Denial is very strong.

A. Yeah. I'm like, "Yeah..." Honestly, it was one of those things. I was...flabbergasted... that it was such a big deal—or such a "quote unquote" *surprise*. But in my head, I couldn't wrap my brain around the "David, you've been dealing with this since you were—as long as you can remember. You're *forcing* the issue to the surface now. We're gonna deal with this. We're gonna talk

⁴The High Country Metropolitan Community Church changed its denomination and name to Boone Christ's Church United. Mary Ballard teaches in the Psychology Department of Appalachian State University and served as the faculty advisor of B-GLAD in the 1990s and 2000s.

about it. And just that, coupled too with my personality of wanting to please—this was a complete and total game-changer as far as asserting my own identity and—but it didn't go well. It was kind of a train wreck. I was very micromanaged as a child. So unfortunately, being an adult and self-sufficient...I didn't really know how to do that and considering I wasn't going along the path that was expected. There wasn't a lot of assistance coming from home as far as direction. In a lot of ways that's great that happened because that forced me to begin to be an adult and take care of myself. But it was a train wreck at the time. And so, I was—at that point in time I remember I was finally being true to myself and finally trying to live out the experiences that I probably should have had as a teenager.

Q. Hmm.

A. So the last thing I gave a fruit loop about was school or practicing voice, practicing piano. I just wanted to...completely relish in that experience. And trying to balance the two didn't work out real well.

Q. Umm.

A. So, literally half way through my third semester here I received notification from the school that I had not made

sufficient academic progression to receive financial aid. And that was the "gotta withdrawal" situation...

Q. Aww.

A. And began a very interesting journey after that. That kind of became where all of my focus became about—because my family had always taught me that what you needed for validation was education. You know, that this path was the path you needed to take to be a valid or worthwhile human being. And so all of a sudden I took a completely and totally different path from what my family expectation was and it became drag and doing makeup. Those two things—that became what it was all about for me.

Q. Wow. Well, I guess the... having to withdraw from school probably came as a blow to your family—to both of you actually.

A. Well. It wasn't a big shock to family at that point in time. I don't think so. I didn't mention this...my parents, after my first semester, withdrew any financial support. So, I couldn't even pay...my student loan only paid for a portion of tuition...They were—looking back, there I was in an impossible situation. There was no possible way—I didn't even have enough money to pay for school, much less living expenses, and, you know, I was working part-time at a Winn-Dixie here. And there was no possible way I could make it work alone. But that was the thing that was so

devastating when the withdrawal happened because it was an "I told you so" from my family and it was a "I wasn't able to make it work." And it began a really negative, always dark, time period. I'm very thankful for the people that were my support system were here in Boone, that were a part of my life for that time period. Because without them, I don't know where the endpoint might have—I often say with the clients that I work with that had I taken one step in another direction that I very easily could have been in their shoes. It has a lot to do what I'm really passionate about, you know, the clients that I work with, the issues that revolve around HIV and AIDS. You know, it's just using an old colloquialism—"There but by the grace of God go I"—but it really is a true statement, you know, at least within my situation.

Q. Well I want you to talk about that again in a minute, but first, okay, so you have to explain to me, what's it like to be: 1) a gay young adult in Boone and, on top of that, a drag performer. How does that work in Appalachian...

A. Heh, heh, heh.

Q. ...and in Western North Carolina?

A. Well, the funny thing was that in Boone I lived in a little bubble. Nobody really gave me that much of a hard time, to be

honest. And you have to understand at the time, my eyebrows were painted on. I had hair down to here [motions below shoulders]-shaved from stem to stern. You know, I was going for the most realistic look possible.

Q. Okay.

A. You know, I didn't live as a woman, but when I-but, everything I did was geared towards my stage presentation to the detriment of how I looked and presented in everyday life. But, in Boone, you know, it's unusual to see a guy with long hair, you know. I was a makeup artist; I was good at getting the eyebrows on so it was hard to tell that they weren't mine. Maybe it's because I had such a tight support group, you know, and I lived the life of a night owl, you know. I didn't have a really hard time here, you know, as far as being out in the community. However, when I moved to Hickory was the first time that I was called "fag" in public by somebody I didn't...I mean, it was just a horrible experience. And, interestingly enough, though, the whole time that I was performing and that my presentation was more androgynous-

Q. Umm hmm.

A. -I was definitely treated more like a second class citizen-I promise you that the way that I'm treated now, the way that I

present now, is very, very different than the way that I was treated...You could take an identical person, and the way that I presented then and the way that I present now, I would have been treated. It would have been two completely different scenarios, because I suppose I wear more the presentation of, or the image, of what I guess is a more traditional, or conservative, image.

Q. Umm hmm.

A. At that time, the only environment I was taken seriously—even then only marginally so—was the retail world or the cosmetic world. I was passed over for promotions. I was never really quite taken seriously. So I guess that's where the negative piece of that was—

Q. Hmm.

A. -is my decision to be involved, be a performer, you know, living in a small rural area, you know, meant, in a lot of ways, not having entry into a lot of traditional things in society.

Q. Mmm hmm. Well, now, how did you come to be a drag performer?

A. Ever since I was very young I had a fascination with, you know, Barbie dolls, things like that, and I was a vocalist, so I loooovvveed being on stage.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And I remember, just clear as day, the first time that I ever got, you know, basically fully in drag and, like, actually performed to an audience was in East Hall here at Appalachian. They had the Miss East Hall Pageant, and it was basically a bunch of straight boys in dresses.

Q. Okay.

A. And I was insistent that it needed to be a bit more like traditional, as far as a drag contest. I lived in East Hall at the time. Great time period. Just really cool. But I remember walking out and I had like this patent leather coat on, and, you know, just kind of "thrown together," but the *applause*—and then all of the compliments too. Because I was a very, very insecure young man. I was very baby-faced, I've always been mistaken for younger than I am, particularly when I'm, you know, a little less heavy, but at that time I was not what the gay community really considered, you know, I guess you could say "attractive."

Q. Hmm.

A. But when I was in drag, and all of the compliments and validating stuff, not to mention being on stage—Oh boy, it just fed all of that and I just loved makeup. I mean, it was just—I loved the fact you can completely transform someone—It's such a cool art—such a cool thing. And it's something that's existed

for centuries and been used in that same way to empower people...it's just neat. So I guess that's kind of where, really, my fascination with all of it-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. I was very—I mean, I was *good*. You know, I was, you know, pretty and...go on stage...and then when I started singing live, it was just kind of like...but then what eventually happened was the realization that it was a mask that was shielding a very insecure and shy person that eventually needed to set it aside. Because that world pretty much revolves around a lot of substance abuse as well and I had a front row seat to things that never in my life I would have seen otherwise.

Q. Hmm.

A. So, which was...and, you know, and seeing, too, a lot of pain and the negative choices happen as a result, in my opinion, of homophobia and, you know, caustic and negative environments.

Q. Hmm. Wow. So...would you say, then, that your experience in this area, it was sort of negative, was as much based on people knowing or assuming you were *gay*, or was it more around the gender presentation?

A. I would say it was "gay." I mean, that's what I would...I *guess* that's what I would say—because I always identified as "gay." I

didn't, I didn't, you know, as a "gay male" but, I suppose to the outsider that it looked, particularly since I didn't fit any stereotypical images of a gay man, that maybe there were some issues revolving around that as well. I always managed to put myself into environments, either by accident or intentionally, that were validating.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. You know either occupational or what have you, because being "out" in the world was difficult and painful and... I have never really blended easily, I would say. The comment has often been made that Helen Keller could tell I was gay, so I guess that's where, kind of, a lot of my choices..

Q. Hmm.

A. I don't know. I don't know. That's a tough call to know what other people's—but I'll say that the epithets or the, the, the stuff that got directed at me was about sexuality.

Q. Okay. Well, so many, so many good questions to pursue -

A. I told you it's an interesting story.

Q. I know. So you sort of described Boone as being a "bubble," protective bubble. Hickory you have not described as a

protective bubble. So how are these...how are these two areas different?

A. Hickory is glaringly conservative. I mean like "white hot," you know, Republican, right wing, conservative ideology. In the ten years I have lived there it has gotten better, much, much better, but I would be uncomfortable when we first moved there going out to dinner with Derrick. That would make me uncomfortable, I mean to that degree, and even still today, you know ... You know, at one point in time, the gay bar that's in Hickory, Club Cabaret-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -people would get eggs thrown at them when they came out of the bar.

Q. Ummm.

A. Would get jumped by the high school football team or, I mean... it's a complete and total polar shift. I mean it was culture shock. When I moved to Hickory, you know, coming from an environment that was really, honestly, very "live and let live," nobody really gave a fruitloop to be honest-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -and if they did I just wasn't in places where they were, you know. I remember going to the K-Mart in drag in broad daylight in Boone. We did panels for Mary Ballard's class in full, high drag in broad daylight. You know, these are all things that I cannot even--and we're talking 1996, 1997 here. In 2010 I cannot fathom that happening in Hickory. You know, there's conversations about having a Pride event--

Q. I was going to ask you about that.

A. Yes. In the Hickory area, you know, Catawba Valley Pride, and that's something that we're moving forward with.

Q. I heard that you met about that last night.

A. Yes, we did. There were 28--but that's the thing that's amazing--28 people showed up.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. I get chills talking about it. It's obvious that this community is ready to say "enough...enough."

Q. That's amazing.

A. "We're here, we have a right to be here" and, you know, "we are *NOT* the," you know, "demonized whatever that we may have been presented to be."

Q. Wow. Men and women? That's--

A. Mmm hmm. Well, there were two women.

Q. Two women, okay.

A. It was mostly, mostly men who showed up. So we're trying to reach out more to women as well as transgendered persons but-

Q. Well, sort of in line with that--were there concerns about the...backlash if you tried to have Pride in that area?

A. That's my number one concern. That's my number one concern.

Q. Hmm.

A. Because, there is a palpable shift happening. A lot of it's because of things that Mitchell Gold's doing.⁵

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. Mitchell Gold's... Lenoir Rhyne University is becoming a "Safe Zone" this fall, and [as] part of their visiting writers series, they had Mitchell Gold there last...last...⁶

Q. I heard it on NPR [National Public Radio].

A. Yes, yes, yes. They had him there last semester and it got really interesting.

⁵ Mitchell Gold is the co-owner of Lenoir, North Carolina-based furniture company Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams and the author of *Crisis: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*, and the founder of the non-profit Faith in America.

⁶ Safe Zone is a nation-wide program that trains university and college students and employees to provide support to LGBT campus members.

Q. Hmm.

A. There were religious leaders from the community that got really up in arms and angry.

Q. Wow.

A. And then when the article was—the very, very biased article was published in *The Hickory Daily Record*, there were just slews, a slew of angry letters...and it's funny. at one time I would read stuff like that and it would just upset me deeply, you know, it would really trigger all kinds of intense emotional reactions.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. It doesn't do that anymore because I don't internalize those messages.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. I kind of read it and see it for what it is—ignorance or just plain hatred.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. So, no, I am concerned that there will be some backlash in the community. It's very likely that there will be. But, that doesn't mean that that should stop us from pressing forward with it. So, we'll see how it goes.

Q. Wow, I'm wishing you all luck, and I'm curious to see what High Country Pride can do to be supportive of that too.

A. Absolutely!

Q. Okay, so now we've sort of moved into your present life, but I still want to go back for just a minute-

A. Sure.

Q. -and I'd like, if you want to talk about it, I'd like to hear how you met Derrick and how you all ended up becoming a couple and ten year plus couple...is that right?

A. Yes. Mmm hmm. And it was a--we just celebrated 11 years June 16th.

Q. Congratulations.

A. Thank you! We met, actually, it was what was to be my last year in Boone. We met. He actually had a crush on my roommate. Interestingly enough, Derrick was eighteen and I was twenty-two. We were children. [laughs] I mean, looking back...*children*. We met. We embarked on what we thought would be a summer romance.

Q. Hmm.

A. And...essentially, Derrick was [undeterminable-possibly "confused"] about being on his own or moving back with his family.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And he initially thought that he was going to move back to Collettsville and had told his landlord that he was going to have to leave, but he never signed anything.

Q. Hmm.

A. Well, he subsequently changed his mind. Unfortunately, his landlord released his apartment in the interim. The reality is that he could have fought that since there was no document signed but, at eighteen and twenty-two we didn't know any better. So, I was moving in with a friend who actually also was an ex. It was a *Jerry Springer* waiting to happen. And so, there the three of us were living in this little house in Blowing Rock. And the third person, something ended up happening with funding with school and moved home to Caldwell County. So there we were, having been together for three months, living together. And it was a tumultuous year. It was a fun year. It was—you know, we were in love. But it was, it was kind of a rollercoaster.

Q. Hmm.

A. You know, we moved to Hickory right before our one year anniversary, celebrated our one year anniversary in Hickory-

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. -and been there ever since.

Q. Wow.

A. You know, we just kind of have been a constant, you know, of supporting each other and trying to help each other build. And, really and truly, on our own.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. You know, there really hasn't been a lot of [support]. My parents, once they kind of got with the program and saw that the relationship that I had with Derrick really didn't look any different than a traditional, you know, or heterosexual, relationship. That was kind of where the stigma started to get broken down as far as "okay, it's not this thing that the media says," or it was a cool process. It was just a lengthy one to where now it's that Derrick is referred to as "son-in-law" and "family member" and so it's really cool where it's progressed.

Q. Umm. Well, now, okay, was he also into the drag and stuff or was he supportive of that? No problems with it?

A. He was supportive of it. Well, it was funny because it was a month before... There's a pretty drastic transformation where I'm concerned. Usually people can't see me in what I create.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And, so it was about a month before I would even let him see me in drag. That was generally a rule because at that time there was quite a stigma about dating someone that did drag.

Q. Mmm.

A. Derrick, being so young, really didn't know any better or care about all of that. So, [he] ended up becoming probably my biggest fan, biggest supporter - you know, pulled many a zipper, hauled many a suitcase. It was my dream but it became our collective project. I wanted to be Miss North Carolina and that was what I wanted to accomplish. And, after that was over, it was pretty much over.

Q. Wow.

A. It was done. It was interesting because I didn't mention there was a huge shift about three years before I won Miss North Carolina. I had another major emotional break. I was *not happy*. You know, I loved Derrick and was happy with Derrick, but in general wasn't happy with the direction that my life was going. So I chopped my hair off from shoulder-length to as short as it is now, lost forty pounds, and decided to change directions, competing in a contest that focused on the transformation of male to female, not blurring the lines, that very, very polarized boy *transforming*.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And won the contest in two years.

Q. Wow.

A. You know and started singing live. I look back on it and it was the point where I stopped trying to make everyone else happy and began to live a valid existence. And it's amazing to me that our relationship has been able to survive all that. That we both were so busy trying to please everyone else for the first part of it, and then in the process of that relationship, began to change and try to develop our own identities and being true to ourself but the whole time being able to maintain a relationship. It's kind of cool. I mean, because I could see where at any point that could have, like, not worked out.

Q. Well, you all were pretty young too, so, where-where along the lines did you guys decide that you were gonna stick together and make it?

A. You know, I don't think there—I don't know. I don't know. It just *happened*. I mean it just *was*. You know we loved each other, we were who wanted to be with each other. We were physically satisfied by each other. There was no desire to go outside of that...You know I would say probably in a lot of ways, maybe in the beginning, there was an element of comfort and convenience,

and there was definitely the time period that I was Miss North Carolina and decided to go back to school and the time period when Derrick went back to school to finish his undergrad and pledged a fraternity were the most difficult periods.

Q. A straight fraternity?

A. Yes.

Q. [Laughs] Now *that's* a story! Wow!

A. It *is*. It really is, because through that process and the friends he made with that, it enabled me to overcome a lot of my issues with straight men and my fear where straight men were concerned, because they loved Derrick so they loved me-

Q. Wow.

A. -and it was really cool because it completely changed my perspective on a lot of things but it was a *difficult* transition because Derrick was gone a lot and was acting, you know, he was twenty-eight years-old and acted like he was twenty-two. But it was *his* process of trying-and maybe part of it is, too, my fascination with the social sciences and human development and all of that, that kind of enabled me to really be patient and not take things personally. And then of course the fact that where Derrick is concerned, I would say and he would say, probably, as long as I was happy he was happy.

Q. Umm.

A. You know even sometimes unfortunately to his detriment. I would say with the drag, there were times when a *power bill...costume* [makes a balancing motion with hands], you know.

Q. It was drag along or be drug. [Laughs]

A. [Laughs] Pretty much! Pretty much. So there were definitely some... It's interesting as far as how things have now developed to where a lot of our friends are straight married couples, that we kind of fit into that whole world. I would say the point where we really, in my opinion like that stands out really clearly, "this is it" was when we decided to get married in D.C.

Q. Oh, wow.

A. It was only a couple of months ago, but that to me, and why that was so important, was because it was a very public and legal in one state, or not even a *state*, a *district-*

Q. Right.

A. -declaration of our commitment to each other and our commitment to the conservative ideas and values that we've been raised with.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. The video, we are both sobbing because we wrote our own vows.

[42:40-46:44.4]Interview interrupted.

Q. We were talking about your relationship with Derrick. And I guess one question that I do have for you around is: so what is it like to be a gay couple in Hickory? How has that changed over the time that you've been there?

A. It's been difficult because...[sighs]...in the beginning it was very much how we had to be very wary of how we present but you know what's funny is that even still sometimes it kind of slaps you in the face and a perfect example: Derrick's grandfather's funeral. I chose to attend against my better judgment. It was at the funeral home in Caldwell County.

Q. And this was just recently?

A. Yes, this was this week—or last week. And I was not allowed to sit with family. Even though his family, in their home and amongst themselves, are loving and I'm welcome—what have you—in a group of people, [it's] too much to explain. And then, of course, the sermon, which should have been—was supposed to be a memorial service—turned out to be a sermon. And I'm like, if the snakes and the oil come out, I'm *hittin'* it.

Q. [Laughs]

A. I mean, from their perception it wasn't intent—even from Derrick's perception—was very defensive—you know, I kind of like

"let that go." But, I called my mom and just cried about it on the way home because it was one of those that-it just felt so crappy, that here we are, we're a married couple, and every other family member has their spouse with them, but-ugh-it's gonna make me cry-but my spouse is [voice begins to quiver] mourning the death of his grandfather and I can't be with him. Uhhhh. It just...tore my heart out. And that is the thing that is so frustrating and irritating-is that ultimately, what we are at this point in our lives, is a loving fairly conservative-valued couple-that has had a colorful history-but that what we want now is just to build our family together. That's what we want and I don't feel like I should have to explain or validate who I am or what our relationship is to anyone, because, quite frankly, at this point, we're doing a lot better than a lot of heterosexual couples I know. And the wonderful thing about our relationship is because of all the adversity, because of the friendship that we share, is really what makes it-adds to the longevity-is the reason that it's carried out, because it was based on so much more than many communities try to make of us, which is just a sexual act, and the reality is, is that the depth and the diversity-not the depth and all of the things that go into our relationship make it so much more than others try to make it. So it's still not ideal. There's still issues. You know, we still have to be very...and Derrick is hyper, hyper concerned still

about societal perception and he would not be comfortable holding my hand in a public place. He would not be—there are still certain things that just make him uncomfortable. And what really just tore me up as far as the funeral thing—but, on the same token, is a good thing, is that the twins, who have known me—he has a younger brother and sister that are twins—they are 10 years younger than Derrick—so they were eight when we met... they tried to pull me into the line with the family and...so it gives me hope that, particularly to *young* kids that live in Caldwell County, that they just see me as the person their brother loves and that “they take care of each other” and they don’t see it any other way. You know, it gives me hope for later and down the road, you know, and in the setting with just with their family I am treated like a member of the family, but in just certain settings, it still has to go back to, you know, “Nooooo...we don’t want to have to explain who you are.” [Laughs]

Q. So was this an issue for you in Hickory, sort of, “setting up house,” so to speak...buying a house, setting up routine things? Getting an apartment?

A. Well, now, when we first moved to Hickory, we rented an apartment from a *private* landlord who was in his eighties, so—God love him—I had long hair and all that—he probably wasn’t sure what the hell I was at first. [Laughs] And...and there was

never a conversation about what we were to each other. You know, it was just kind of like, "We're not gonna talk about it, you don't talk about it—we're good." And that was just kind of the understanding, I guess. One of the most hysterical, hysterical things that ever happened—he's now passed away, God rest his soul, but Edward came over and was knocking on the door to ask me for something, and I was not thinking, you know, just running around the house—had my hair piled up on my head, had "black cherry" toenail polish, shaved legs, and shorts and it was the dead of winter...opened the door and he just looks down at my toes, looks up at me and says, "You must think it's summertime."

Q. [Gregarious laughter]

A. That was it. And then we had a repairman once at the apartment and the spare bedroom was the "drag room," so it's just wigs, costumes, sequins, rhinestones, everywhere. And the air conditioning guy's in there looking up at the thing. And, what it was, was I had put everything in the closet but forgot to close the door, so it's like all spilling out-

Q. It always does, doesn't it?

A. And I walk in and my eyes get THIS big. Yeah, my eyes get this big because I'm like "Oh my God." The guy, the repair guy

looks at the closet and says, "Don't guess anybody sleeps in this bedroom."

Q. [Laughter]

A. And then just proceeded to kind of go on with the program. So it was not really- The person that sold us our house had been a customer of mine at Prescriptives, so I was very able to be very-and this was like three years ago-

Q. Umm hmm.

A. And I knew enough then to be like, "You need to this, you need to do this, you need to do this because we are not legally protected." You know, right of survivorship on the deed, you know. I was able to go in and use the language that, okay, but now one of the things that's tough for Derrick is he works in an environment where Fox News is on the television in the break room "twenty-four-seven"-

Q. What does he do?

A. He sells jewelry. He's a "Jack of all Trades" for a private jewelry store. And when he finished his degree in business he was hoping to find something. Now he's working on a MBA and still trying to find something and it's just the market...what have you...not time yet...you know, what have you. But I've sort of moved on in a professional direction. He's still sort of-you

know, we both were in retail before and so now, I think that creates a little bit of, like dissonance, a little bit. But, but even more so, for example when we came back after we got married—because the whole staff that he works with, other than him, are pretty much evangelical, pretty conservative, kind of racist, you know—*delightful!* But Derrick does a fabulous job. They love him and as long as he is doing all of that, you know, hypocrisy is grand—

Q. So he's out?

A. Oh, God yes!

Q. Oh, okay.

A. But hypocrisy is grand. Let me tell you. You know, it's honestly—what it boils down to is, "You can come into the house but don't sit at the table." Because what happened is, when we came back after we got married, I work at ALFA.⁷ We're an ASO—AIDS Service Organization—and very open-minded—and before that I worked in cosmetics...so, you know, I was very "Oh, *congratulations...dah, dah, dah...want to hear all about it...blah, blah, blah!*" He comes back, stone cold silence. No one wants to hear about it and his mother still won't look at the pictures whereas my family drove up for the wedding.

⁷ ALFA is a Hickory-based ASO that covers seven northwestern North Carolina counties.

Q. Wow.

A. So there is kind of an imbalance-

Q. Did I miss something? I was thinking that you had said that his family was "good."

A. They are good.

Q. So this, though was the straw?

A. But this is too far.

Q. Is that right?

A. This is too far.

Q. Wow.

A. Cause his mother is very, very Christian-identified. His entire family is, you know, Southern Baptist. He was raised in Southern Baptist church. So they are fine-to a point. And his mom still doesn't want to see the pictures. The fact that we took that step made it real and I don't think his mom can really deal with that.

Q. Wow.

A. But not in the stereotypical screaming, Bible-thumping...none of that, just, just silence, just "Nope. Nuh-uh."

Q. Wow. So, you lived in Hickory then for how long?

A. We've lived in Hickory for 10 years.

Q. Ten years. Do you think that your relationship, or the way you live your life, or anything along those lines, would that be different if you lived somewhere else in North Carolina or if you lived in some other city?

A. Hmm. Maybe. I mean we'd have more to do if we lived in a bigger city.

Q. Hmm. Okay.

A. I think there would be *far* less—I think the gay issue would just... Well, it's interesting because my work, and my profession, and the world of social sciences, I don't anticipate ever having a lot of problems with being myself, with being authentic, gay is kind of a non-issue for the most part.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. Derrick, however, going into the world of business, kind of the opposite, as far as traditionally conservative, so—I don't know, I think if we were to live in a bigger city—we've talked about it, we've talked about maybe someday moving to a bigger city and having that adventure—that I think it would be more of a non-issue. But on the same token, ultimately, when I think

down the road, what we would want—like if we weren't gay or if we were a straight couple, you know? Or whatever. If the same two souls just hap[pened to be] male, female, whatever, we would choose to live in the south. We would choose to live near our families, near. When I heard—I can't remember his name—the guy that was on the symposium panel—⁸

Q. Mathias [Detamore].

A. -Mathias hit the nail on the head talking about being in rural communities, and you know, LGBT persons that become integrated and want to stay within those communities because that's where their families are, that's where their ties are. I think about the connections—and what's interesting is that the more we built connections and given people the opportunity to know us in Hickory, the less and less and less the issues we've had with being gay because people see us as more than just "that gay couple;" they see us as "David and Derrick."

Q. Well, along that line you mentioned a couple minutes ago that you're a couple with fairly conservative values.

A. Umm hmm.

⁸ Appalachian State University, through the work of Mike Howell and Kathy Staley, hosted a symposium about Appalachian LGBT life in June 2010. It was part of the High Country Pride line-up.

Q. So, do you and Derrick, in some way, as a couple, are you different from other gay couples that you know in the area?

A. You know it's interesting, 'cause I know that there's a couple of couples that have open relationships and that's kind of our "ruh-ruh" [no-no] for us, you know, and... it's funny because I've not dated for 11 years, so we're trying to do some online outreach with ALFA and, so, [I'm] exposing myself to that, you know--

Q. Something of a different world, is it?

A. Wooooowww! Like, *good grief*,--none of this stuff was--*none of that stuff* was around 11 years ago! And, and just seeing, just how it is literally "*I...am...going...shopping...to...get... laid.*" And that's it. And to me that- I'm just not into the removing the emotional part of that interaction at all. So it was very foreign to me. So I guess, because in terms of conservative values is that whole, that whole "family values" thing of two monogamous partners that build a life and a family together that is mutually beneficial for them and society. That's pretty much how I think of it and I think that there are a lot of gay couples in rural communities that pursue that exact same ideal, just don't get validated by the people that are selling that particular brand of ideology. But there are some that don't. You know, that take a completely different path and that have no

interest in the, you know, "quote-unquote" "heteronormative" model.

Q. Hmm. And are you looking to have kids?

A. Eventually.

Q. How are you feeling things are gonna to go around that? Is that a concern, or do you think that'll...

A. It is as much a concern that it would be a deal-breaker, if we thought, or if I thought—Derrick wants children very badly. He's much more the "feeler" where that's concerned and I'm more the "pragmatist." And in my head, if we can't ensure that there's an environment that—which is impossible, but because I feel a lot of guilt about the idea of if we were to adopt or surrogate or what have you and that child was really traumatized by that experience. I think a lot about the impact on development and try to read research about LGBT parents, things like that because I think very much in terms of "*I don't want to mess the kid up.*" I mean I worry a lot about it, like I don't think—it's not just like the idealized, you know, of adopting a child, ...so, I don't know. I would not feel comfortable raising them in Hickory. At all. At all. Because I do not want my child being exposed to people that tell them all the time that their daddies are going to hell, or, you know...uh-huh, hell no. So, I

mean, if we were going to adopt, it'd be "We're moving to Chapel Hill." Or somewhere that's like a more inclusive, intentionally inclusive environment, because I, I can become very much like "mother lion" and with a child, it would not be cute for that principle. [Laughter] It would not be good. It'd be a bad day.

Q. Oh... [Laughter]

A. So, you know, it's just, I mean I guess it has everything to do with my decision to go into the helping profession is that I can talk about. We do [HIV] testing at Club Cabaret and I care so much about the individuals in our community and wanting to try to do things that will be a positive impact for them, but as well as the community-at-large. You know, and I definitely am the type of person that loves big and hard...very much.

Q. Well, I want to hear now about your work. So, there are a couple of things, particularly, I'd like to hear about. One: I'd like to hear a little bit about ALFA.

A. Sure.

Q. And what you can say about ALFA. And two: you know, what your work is like there, what you do. And three: I'd like to hear sort of this picture that your work at ALFA gives you of what's happening. You know, clearly there are men who are gay and women who are gay and people who are having sex and people who are

contracting HIV and people who are living with that and going on, and I guess living with AIDS and dying from AIDS...so what's the picture of that in the area that you all serve?

A. Sure. Well, it started out in 1987, I believe, and the gentleman that was our first—like the founder—a grassroots organization. People were dying like, I mean, wildfire. I mean it was, it was bad. HIV and AIDS--

Q. [Sarcastically] But there aren't any gays in Western North Carolina! Are there?!

A. Yeeaaaahhhhhh huh huh huh. Yeah. We have a quilt of, that's called "ALFA's Angels" that has little embroidered angels with the date and the name of a person that passed away. It was *catastrophic*, because the thing that you have to understand about HIV and AIDS is it thrives in silence. So when you have a community that is very, very homophobic, conservative, rural, it is a breeding ground for HIV and AIDS, because, see, the other thing, too, is that you have to understand that with Hickory, it being this big furniture and textile place, designers. I know this sounds very stereotypical, but—you know, members of the LGBT community *do* very frequently end up in creative jobs. So, we had a thriving LGBT population that was under the surface. There's a reason that there's been a gay bar in Hickory for 30 years. There have been six bars over that time period in

Hickory. You know, so the community was there, but it was invisible. And, so, and you add that combination and then you drop HIV into it and it's gonna breed like wildfire.

Q. Hmm. Mmm hmm.

A. And that's what happened. *And no one would talk about it.* People were dying, you know, dropping. Ending up in the hospital ER, what have you. Doctors wouldn't touch them...so...and this particular person went around passing out brochures and things from the trunk of their car. And from there, it grew into a United Way funded agency through a United Way Venture Grant and now fast-forward and so much has changed but so much has stayed the same.

Q. Hmm.

A. By change, you know, we now have all of these medicines and that can prolong [life]. That someone can have a fairly normal lifespan and be HIV positive. The medicine is designed to prevent someone from progressing to AIDS. I mean as long as you're adherent to your medication you can. It even reduces your risk of infecting others.

Q. Huh. Mmm hmm.

A. So, there's a lot that's happened and that's changed the landscape.

Q. I sort of boggle my students' minds with the idea of that the HIV-positive nursing home resident. You know, social workers—how are they going to be prepared to, to think about things changing like that, but—go ahead...

A. Well, and not just that, but to treat them, because, see, the difficult thing about that is that you're not just dealing with your students not just going to be dealing with their stigma. They're going to be dealing with everyone else in the nursing home's stigma and because we have this issue. There's only one public—not public, one adult—what would you call it?

Q. Care facility?

A. Yes, adult care facility that will take HIV positive clients. They have seen a staff that is grossly negligent. And, if you're out, or people find out you're positive, it completely changes the dynamic of the way you're treated in that setting. So, it's also being responsible enough to know that the truth and what the myth is about the virus so if that situation happens you can take the opportunity to—since we have no cure, we only have education. That's all that we have. And, so basically, the thing that's the same and that's not changed. It can take as much as 10 years to go from being HIV-positive to having an AIDS diagnosis, because essentially, HIV's the virus and you may already know this, this is my little spiel.

Q. Go ahead.

A. HIV is the actual infection or virus and it destroys your immune system. AIDS is simply a diagnosis and it just simply means you have less than 200 T-cells per drop of blood and the presence of one or more opportunistic infections. This is the stereotypical very, very ill person-[actor] Tom Hanks from the [1993 movie] *Philadelphia*. It can take 10 years to get to that point. Throughout that process you're asymptomatic. You don't look sick. And you can infect others. In our community, the areas we serve, the nine counties, 45% of the people that are positive found out with an AIDS diagnosis.

Q. Wow.

A. Which means that you can imagine the length of time that they went possibly infecting others. You know, it just boggles your mind—because people won't, don't want to talk about it.

Q. Yeah.

A. We have someone right now—a person that tested positive in the ER—that ended up in the ER and tested positive—and we had to test his wife and two year-old child. You know, and I don't know what his story is or how he became infected but I know, right now, that I'm trying to convince someone to come in and get tested that's been married for 15 years, has a child, and

identifies as gay and doesn't know how to deal with it—doesn't know how to work through it—doesn't know how—has considered suicide as opposed to losing everything—his wife, his children, all that because he can't make the gay go away. You know, so, that's our work, and fortunately I'm going to have the opportunity to actually do clinical counseling with our clients for my internship—to maybe even get even more of a "front row seat" to what they're going through. But I was so furious when I did a... Part of how I became involved with ALFA, I was a volunteer first and then I did a practicum with them with a crisis intervention and consultation class in grad school. It was basically a consultation as to whether or not they needed a counselor or their clients would benefit from a counselor.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. And, so I went and interviewed two of their clients at this adult care facility and was *furious*. And we had to sequester our—I mean it was just the way that they were treated. It was obvious that the care that they were getting was substandard. It was just really...EHHHHHHH! because there is just still a lot of ignorance and a lot of stigma surrounding the virus and even so, not just in the the mainstream community. In the gay community there's so much ignorance and so much stigma that people that are positive are kind of getting it from all sides, you know.

Which, of course, as you can imagine, leads to tremendous depression and, so that's kind of my "charge" at the moment is trying to battle that stigma and encourage. One of the things that we did at the testing event at Club Cabaret this past weekend is we had this huge projection screen playing slides with CDC facts and statistics and things about the virus. We actually had a condom demonstration on stage which was kind of hysterical. My exact comment was, "My momma would be soo proud!" [Laughter] And we did testing downstairs. Just trying to make a really intentional effort to provide education and that, "You know what, we're gonna talk about this."

Q. And, so, did people get tested?

A. Thirty people.

Q. Wow.

A. Thirty people. I was absolutely blown away. It was a huge. The comment was made that because I was there and had been a part of that community as far as doing drag—and that even though I'm no longer there and no longer a part of it—that that probably lent a great deal of trust.

Q. Mmm hmm.

A. The fact that I was kind of leading that charge into that, a lot of people that were in that setting that might not have

gotten tested otherwise did because they trusted me. You know, you think about trying to do research or what have you with marginalized populations, you know, that are really tight-knit, you've got to have a gate-keeper or somebody to kind of get you in. Well, it just so happens the gatekeeper was part of the organization. So I can see that—that it probably did facilitate it being a little easier.

Q. Wow. So, now what's the landscape for treatment and care in the areas you serve now? I mean, how...how—oh, what's the—? Oh, well, I lost my train of thought for a minute. ALFA, does ALFA run into resistance? Is ALFA pretty well supported across these communities?

A. Well, it's interesting because the entire model for AIDS service organizations has completely changed. Now, for case management, they are now medical case managers. And for their medical—and then education and testing is all focused on very intentional testing and education, looking for at-risk populations, whereas before it was "educate everybody," "test the masses." Not anymore. And a lot of it has to do with funding, and cutbacks, and things like that, because, of course, the economy has a negative impact on any sort of community-based organization. Interestingly enough, the most conservative or rural communities, we cannot get in. It is difficult. Like

Lincoln County, [shakes head], "nehh." Caldwell County schools, like Lenoir, "neh ehh." Not happening. Burke county...no. Alexander County, we are in a high school there. Burke County schools—nope. Now the community colleges, we're able to gain access there. But it's interesting because—interesting slash frustrating—you know you go to CCCC in Hickory and do a presentation and it's just awesome. It's great. It's a good experience. There's some ignorance but a lot of knowledge as well. Go to Caldwell Community Technical Institute—Wooooowwww! Walk away with the impression that we have so much work to do. Because in that setting, that's how that virus thrives. That's how it's able to continue to infect other people. It's because people are afraid to talk about it. They don't want to talk about sex. They don't want to talk about things that they need to be talking about with their children. One of my favorite analogies on one of our videos is that when your child is young and you explain to them to look both ways before they cross the street, it's not permission to go run out into the street. You know, much like having conversations about safer sex is not permission have sex. It is simply being prepared. You know, and knowing, knowing the consequences if you do choose to have unprotected sex. So, arming your children with the best knowledge to protect themselves is not permission.

Q. So does it make that work even harder here in the region than it would be, you think, in other places?

A. Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm. Absolutely.

Q. The religious element or the economic element or the educational element--

A. The religious element. Religious element makes it very difficult because the general consensus in small communities: "We don't have a problem with that here. Our kids aren't having sex. Our kids aren't..." *REALLY?* Because I tested a 13 year-old at one of the community colleges because they have high school programs there and that was one of those, like, eye-opening, like "Oh my gosh." Doing that interview with her, I was like "I didn't think about any of this at 13" but, anyways...[Laughter] But I would say that the religiosity is really a big part of the barrier. That and the lack of education and information, that it's still thought of as a "gay" disease or, you know, "We don't have that problem here." We know that there are X number of people infected in this county, this county, this county. Yes, it does exist here, you know, and all you have to do is go onto Craig's List, or Manhunt,⁹ or wherever, and you can see all these

⁹Craig's List is an on-line search posting site for multiple interests, such as jobs, apartments, and dates. Other internet sites, such as Manhunt and gay.com, specifically connect men who seek sex with other men.

different counties or locations where people are that are looking to hook up. Yeah, yeah, there is a concern here.

Q. And do these tend to reflect just basic men who have sex with men or are these men on the downlow?¹⁰

A. I would say Craig's List from what I've discovered is a lot of men on the downlow.

Q. Hmm.

A. And we don't have a very large minority population. So interestingly enough we're very behind the curve as far as the national model. National model, HIV is disproportionately impacting minority MSM population—very disproportionately. In our community, it's still like 60% men who have sex with men. But we don't have a lot of minorities, and a lot of our minorities are Latino and Hmong.¹¹ We have huge populations of Latino and Hmong. But that's not to say that there are not African American individuals--

Q. Right, oh, I meant, I really meant as much married men-

A. Gotcha! I gotcha. I would say Craig's list seems to be where that's going on where it's just-you-NSA, discreet, blah, blah,

¹⁰ Down low is a late 1990s era term commonly used within the African-American community and spread to the general population to refer to men who present themselves as heterosexual but have sex with other men. Public health workers use the term "MSM" (men who have sex with men) for these men. MSM may also be used for gay/bi-identified men "MSM".

¹¹ Hmong is a minority ethnic group originally from Vietnam.

blah...I mean you see all of that, whereas, things like Manhunt, Gay.com, by their nature they're very out there and out and proud, so it seems to me that there's more openly gay men on those sites.

Q. Hmm. Wow. Hmm. And so ALFA's clientele tends to be mostly men who have sex with men or is it pretty diverse?

A. I would say it's diverse. I mean, it's about 60% men who have sex with men. I forget the percent of intravenous drug users. It's small. And then the remainder are heterosexual-but interestingly enough, any case manager will tell you, heterosexual-identified you know that there may be some question about how they actually contracted the virus. So.

Q. Wow. Hmm. I'll ask you a question, because I think you'll have some insight on this. Someone came and made a presentation to us from Chapel Hill who had done some work with with the Disease Intervention Specialists at the public health departments and the presentation really sort of suggested there was a bit of negativity for that group of professionals and that could cause some issues with care.

A. Negativity with which group of professionals? The DIS?

Q. Umm hmm.

A. The problems that, that are happening...One...are medical adherence.

Q. Umm hmm.

A. You know, because people want to take a med vacation and, which, of course, is catastrophic because HIV mutates. So if you stop taking your medication, it can kind of wiggle its way through. Your meds can stop working and there's only so many of the meds.

Q. And right now we're the state that has the longest waiting list for people to get their meds-

A. Six times higher, six times higher than the closest to us, the ADAP program.

Q. And how many people...?

A. Six hundred people-

Q. Six hundred people...

A. Probably closer to 7 now, probably closer to 7. People that are on a waiting list. And it's all lower socioeconomic persons because people that have health insurance are able to get medication. So ADAP really is for, you know, a certain type-I think it's 300 times the poverty level.

Q. Okay.

A. But they're now going to cut that to 150 times, so now they're automatically going to cut people out of the program that are even in the program now.

Q. Wow.

A. Which will be a disaster because, you know "Save a million now, pay a hundred million later" when people are in the ER and aren't able to get their medication and just not a good situation. DIS-their responsibility is for partner notification. That's kind of what their role is. In my observation, from working with two of them for just a brief period of time, there was a bit of a disconnect about the human service part of it. It's very much directed interview-wanna know who your partners are. The goal is to find out who have you possibly infected so I can go and tell all those people that you've been infected. So, I can see where maybe that would inspire some fear about people finding out their status because then it's gonna kind of create this, you know. You have to accept it and own it and acknowledge that you may have infected others with it. One of the things that we talked about at ALFA is comparing it to the stages of grief. And it takes awhile before you get to acceptance.

Q. Hmm. Makes sense...hmm.

A. And also with medical adherence. If you're in denial you're not going to want to take a pill every day that reminds you that you're HIV-infected...even though it will save your life, even though it will save your life. You know, we see that and our case managers see that all the time— people that just don't want to accept and embrace that they now have a chronic illness that they have to manage.

And also, unfortunately, a lot of our clients are also lower SES [socioeconomic status] and don't have some of the best life skills and, so, being on a schedule and taking [meds]...You know what I'm saying, like is not something they're part of—is not something they're real good at anyways because you have to take the medicine at a certain time every day. It has to be the same time. You know, so it's in your system the way it's supposed to be and that's difficult for a lot of our clients, so...

Q. So have things changed for people who contract the disease, HIV, or who move to AIDS? Are there still issues with doctors treating them or hospitals treating them?

A. We have a really hard time finding dentists for clients. Even though everyone should be using standard precautions, period. And we know that approximately—it could be as many as 10,000 people in North Carolina that are positive and don't know they

are—so when a dentist says, “Oh, we don’t help clients like that,” *that you know of.*

Q. Mmmm.

A. You know, or when a gay man comes in and says, “Oh I would never, I’ve never slept with anybody that’s positive” *that you know of.* You know and, because that’s just the truth, you know—and now with the advent of medication when people find out, there’s kind of a window—even with people that progress to an AIDS diagnosis and then they get on meds they get their numbers better and then they get healthy. You know, modern medicine is miraculous.

So there’s a window period where it’s real obvious that you’re sick but then you’ve kind of progressed back to looking and feeling pretty healthy, you know. And despite some of the side effects of HIV medication, some of which you can visibly see, and so we even have issues sometimes with secondary infections, with partners. People that they know they’re positive and they don’t tell sexual partners. So, it’s still kind of a mess.

Q. Oh, my gosh. I was thinking about something I read in Chapel Hill, I guess it was, I guess they actually convicted a D.J. who had violated not sharing information, I guess he’d done it a

second time—are there cases like that? Around the area that y'all serve?

A. The tough thing about that—the tough thing about that is... There are laws in North Carolina. There's public health law that, basically, if you're positive and you know you're positive that you have to wear a condom, you have to tell sexual partners, you can't donate blood or plasma. The thing about it is, is that if somebody breaks those laws and you know it, then the county has to also then choose to prosecute it. And, in Catawba County, yeah, somebody would follow up on that. If somebody was intentionally infecting people in Mecklenburg— [shakes head] "uh uh," no, "We don't have time and it's your responsibility to protect yourself."

Q. Hmm. Wow.

A. So, I mean, I would say, from what I see with our clients, it's not a malicious "*somebody gave this to me, I'm gonna go give this to everybody I can.*" It's more a "*I want someone—I want to be loved—I want to have human intimacy and interaction and telling people I'm positive will make that not happen.*" And then you also have the whole denial thing, "*It's not my responsibility,*" you know. Well, the scary part is the whole bare-back thing, that's becoming really popular and a lot of

young people that just don't think that they need to be worried about HIV and - just a mess.

Q. Wow.

A. You know, and, and unfortunately numbers in the MSM community are rising. It's the only group that is steadily rising.

Q. Wow. After 20 years of trying to educate...prevention-

A. And the attitude is, unfortunately, too, is that because you see people that are HIV-positive that are muscular and healthy and, you know, seem perfectly fine, because of the medication- and what you don't see is when they're crippled with nausea, diarrhea. You know, their teeth break because it makes your bones brittle or losing subcutaneous fat tissue. You don't see any of that anymore.

Q. Wow.

A. So people think they'll just take a pill. You know, an 18 year-old that has absolutely no point of reference, never saw the AIDS quilt, has no point of reference for the devastation that this virus caused, is just like, "Ah, well, if I get it, I'll just take a pill."

Q. Wow.

A. And the fact that that pill is between \$900 and \$3000 a month, you know, just absolutely that's always the shock factor when I do education about the virus.

Q. Yeah, I'd say I was sort of, sort of surprised when you said health insurance. I'd assumed health insurance wouldn't cover it.

A. No, it will. Just for example, we have a client that has health insurance, but between the co-pay for his meds and the spike in his premium, he pays a thousand a month.

Q. Wow. [Startled]

A. And that's with health insurance. If he didn't have all of that, it would be that times three.

Q. That's amazing. I don't see how people can manage that in many situations.

A. So you see it creates a very clear... With HIV, you either have money and can manage it, or you are destitute. It takes somebody from middle-class to-*BOOM*-poverty.

Q. Wow.

A. You know, and either that or you are *barely* making it. So, it's very unfortunate and it creates something, too, where you're almost sort of a prisoner of it in a lot of ways. You

know, because you have to have your medicine to live, you know, so...

Q. Well, I know that you have an appointment coming up, and we've talked for quite a bit now, but I did want to ask you, is there anything else that you want to talk about-

A. [Laughter]

Q. -about your story, about ALFA, anything at all?

A. No, I just appreciate the opportunity to share this with you. My hope is that through the telling of these stories and people, and them maybe being accessible in some ways, that kind of like Mitchell Gold's book, that it can provide a sense of peace and a sense of...*familiarity*...for people. I've spent almost my entire- about every project that I've done in grad school has revolved around this community, and this population. I joke, I said that I'm getting tired about talking about LGBT anything but that was as much for me and kind of working through my own stuff as much as it is for, you know, a community that is so colorful, and special, and unique, and wanting it. To be able to see it be able to thrive and not be constantly demonized, and stepped on. So, I just sincerely hope from this project that that's something that can help with that. Because I mean, and-you know, we are a very special and unique community, and-across the

entire spectrum, and I sort of, rode the whole thing through the whole experience and somehow or other managed to come out the other end okay, and, I guess I'm thankful for that.

Q. That's awesome. Well thanks for sharing that with us. I appreciate it.

A. My pleasure.