

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project
Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with James Ernest Best
February 20, 2016**

Interviewers: Caitlyn Allen (Madison Kunstman also present)
Interviewee: James Ernest Best
Date: February 21, 2016
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Transcription prepared by: Cara Cline

Total: 58:37

0:00 = childhood in Greensboro, North Carolina (through the end of high school); feeling different and isolated from other children
6:07 = meeting guys in college; participating in an LGBT support group for Mormons
10:03 = coming out to his family members
16:06 = meeting gay people at UNC-Greensboro during graduate school (early 1970s)
17:35 = remembering his college years, as well as working abroad in Europe (at age 24)
21:05 = moving to Patrick County, Virginia, and getting married to a woman
23:48 = leading the Boy Scouts on camping trips; interacting with young men
26:20 = about his marriage (1974-2004) and the aftermath of their divorce
28:21 = discovering his authentic self after the divorce, and having a relationship with a gay Mormon man
33:31 = hitting rock bottom in the late 2000s, then turning a corner and re-establishing the then-defunct Floyd chapter of PFLAG
39:32 = some of the achievements of Floyd PFLAG in the last four years
44:07 = organizing as people of faith in support of LGBT rights
47:15 = on the art of speaking to Christian fundamentalists about LGBT rights; on the art of speaking to politicians about LGBT rights
56:36 = collecting data on at-risk youth

0:00

CA: OK, So, my name is Caitlyn Allen and I'm here with Jim Best. Interviewing about your social history in Southwestern Virginia.

0:10

CA: So, Can you tell us what it was like growing up in Greensboro, North Carolina?

0:14

JB: Well, sure. I can tell you about how my mom used to take me to choir and to piano lessons and all the extra-curricular things. From the fourth grade on, [I was] engaged in special musical events. I always told everybody that I grew up in Aycock auditorium, which is at UNC-G [University of North Carolina – Greensboro]. I was her companion because dad was a pediatrician and he was always busy and she liked to socialize and be out and of course I wouldn't go dancing with my mother because I was just you know a wee-thing. But she wanted to go to the show while we went to concerts and that was wonderful for me. And I knew in Greensboro, when I was [in] preschool, that I had a special attraction to a little boy, [that was] preschool. And we were going to go under the house and as I remember it, you know back then they had crawl spaces. And I think he asked me first, honestly I do, he asks, "Can see your pee-pee?" and I said "Well I'll show you mine if you show me yours." Whatever. And he told his folks, and I was never allowed to see him again. And so that's my first memory, you know looking back because I had no idea that I was different from anybody else.

[JB addition to the transcript: "I was a small sickly asthmatic child. My sister was 17 months younger than me. I had a little friend who little lived across the street about my age. This was preschool probably age 4. I did something that upset my father very much but I never knew what it was. He told my mother to put my sister's dress on me and then he held me tightly in his arms as I struggled to get free and in front of the parents of my friend across the street he told me that if I was going to act like a girl that he would dress me like a girl. I was mortified. It was the ultimate humiliation and I never felt from that day on that I could ever qualify to be a real boy."]

I never heard of any same sex relationship... and then I remember looking back from a different perspective as an informed adult what it was like in my high school. I was extremely lonely. I had one or two, really just one friend that I might visit...still going to choir practice, and all the things that interested me that mama supported and I would go to Steve's house and we would just sort of look at each other, and neither one of us knew what to do or what to talk about, but we just knew we liked to be together, and that might happen maybe three times in my whole life. That was the sum of my understanding. And I remember the ostracism or just the coldness in the out of any kind of social supportive environment. One morning the bell rang and all the kids were at their lockers talking about the night before, all the cool kids, and you know I just felt like I didn't belong on the planet, and I remember going into the auditorium which was dark and just crashing in a pew, in a seat, and just bawling my eyes out, without understanding anything of why I was so distraught.

And then I was engaged with woodcarving since age 11. Every Saturday I would go to a retired industrialist's home who taught me to carve wood, and then I carved the pew ends

for my church and I sang in the adult choir and I played the piano for the high school group because I was taking piano lessons as well, so I was engaged, but sort of as a servant, not as a peer. And people seemed to really value, you know “Oh you carve wood” or “you carved the Calvin’s Seal for the synod office in Raleigh” “Oh you spoke and the minister designed something for you to carve” and I said, “yes, I do adult things, but I’m a kid and I don’t have any friends.” So I couldn’t verbalize that, I just knew that those things occupied me and I would sit for hours and carve wood and in junior high school I carved a free form quail, with sage and it was very realistic and I had no plans and it was three dimensional and it was just something that I could do without any real worry and I would sit for hours and hours and hours every week and carve this, and then I wanted to give it to my junior high school professor, choir director, because that was a place I could be successful. I was dyslexic, left handed, very backward, so my father wouldn’t let me. I did a practice block and I gave that to her, which was something simpler when I was carving with Sidney Paine.¹ So, through high school, I was so sickly with asthma that I folded towels in P.E. [physical education], which meant again no competition, no status on a team. I was just a perfect wallflower. Fragile, I was in an oxygen tent. I remember two times as a child, because I couldn’t breathe well, and dad would actually put me in the car and drive to Sarasota or somewhere in Florida, where the salt air could loosen me up. We wouldn’t spend the night, we would just walk on the strand and come home. We were spending hours in the bathroom with all the hot water turned on so that I could breathe better.

06.00

JB: So when I went to college, maybe I’m getting beyond your question? Am I okay?

06.04

CA: No, that was the next question I was going to ask you, is about college!

06.07

JB: Oh, okay. So when I went to college it was like, “Woah, look at this, I can meet people!” I had a couple of encounters, you know, we camped out one time with another gay guy and that was very new for me. In college I went out for cross country because I didn’t know any team sports and I had a very handsome wonderful guy that sort of took me under his wing and I would do anything for Duke. He was very heterosexual, but he just sort of shepherded me along and that was glorious. He didn’t mind touching me. He’d put his arm around me and say, “C’mon Jim.” So I ran cross country, but somebody physical in a boyish way, because I never felt really qualified to be a male. I could never measure up. And then when I was 23...24 [years old], my first cousin who was very handsome, a dancer, he was an eagle scout, he was maybe a class president, and he was gay, governors school, I mean how many accolades can one, a very handsome macho guy, accrue, and he committed suicide. I had been to stay with him and his lover in Washington [D.C.] the season before and he came down to our home for treatment or some issue and when he went back to 14th Street, his apartment, he jumped out the window. And I’m thinking, “I’m the nobody.” “Why couldn’t I be the one to end my life when Billy was such a fantastic person?” So I’ve lived with that

¹ On Sidney Paine, see Burke Davis, “Sid Paine’s Way of Worship,” *The Rotarian* 94, no. 6 (December 1958): 38-39.

question in my mind for so long and I was basically coerced out of ignorance to read the script that society would give me as a gay person to be straight. So I tried very hard to fall in love with different girls, and it was always a wonderfully platonic thing. I remember this one girl, how we would just drive through the countryside for hours and hours and then finally the tank of gas would give out and I'd take her home. Because I didn't have any interest in doing what guys do when they go out driving at night. None at all. I remember when I went to Affirmation, which is a 33-year-old support group for LGBT Mormons, out and in Mormons.² My brother in Greensboro would take me to the airport and when I got back he would say, "Well where have you been?" and I'd say, "Well I've been to Salt Lake." "Well what did you do in Salt Lake?" "I went to Affirmation." "Oh, what's that?" "It's this support group for LGBT people." Silence. I said "well you don't make any response." He said "well duh." "What do you mean duh?!" and he said "Do you realize that I grew up with you brother?" "So?" "Do you know that you have never made a comment about a female in your whole life?" I said "you're right." [JB chuckles] My family understood, but I didn't understand. My mother had always said "Jim, I love your brother, I love your sister, but you are special." I'm the oldest, and I think that she really didn't know how to say what she meant and I didn't understand what "special" meant, but I'm guessing that she did.

10.03

Years later, I knew mama was dying, she was taking prednisone, she had become sedentary, she was not as oriented as she had been. I came out to her very formally. I said, "mom, you know I've tried my best to be what you all expected of me, what society expected of me." I survived a thirty-year marriage, and before we were married I introduced my wife-to-be to my graduate school lover. I said, "Neal, this is Peggy." "Peggy, this is Neal." Neal and I wore rings; we wore the same shirts, we were a number, and this was in graduate school, but Neal and I were not together anymore and that's the end of it. And so that's all we considered, and that's honestly all that I understood. So it was a huge revelation to her family that I had introduced Peggy to Neal. That she in her understanding had an opportunity to know before the beginning. So I told my mom that you know that I'd done my best, I didn't have any problems with Peggy as a person, she's a wonderful mother, but that there was just no relationship, we lived married to an institution and not to each other. We were both committed to being faithful partners in a marriage. So she quoted Galatians 3:6 or whatever it is, "in Christ there is no slave, nor bond, Jew nor gentile, male or female."³ And when I told her, she spit that out, just like that. Which is one of the welcoming verses in the bible. So, she was able to speak with me privately and after all these years, like forty years later, she was able to say to me, "Well, your dad didn't like all the boys, some of the boys you brought over, especially one." Well that was Neil, and I said "yes, he was a little affected," but it took that long before she was able to share any kind of response at all. It was like "woah," and that was it. And so I always felt like there was a white elephant in the room, or rainbow elephant in the room, and I remember something about, my dad asked me one time, "What is 69?" And I said "well," and I described the

² Affirmation was founded in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1977.

³ Galatians 3.28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ."

position and he said “Well, I never would have guessed,” and he said “something about Billy,” and I said “dad, well you know Billy and I spent a weekend together and I’m gay and Billy’s gay.” He said, “just never tell.” That was the end of the conversation. So no empathy, no support, just like don’t ask don’t tell, that’s the family I grew up in. After a suicide and after bringing my peers home with me from time to time. Neal’s family was very welcoming and it was like holiday just to walk in their house, because they wanted to know about me, they wanted to talk to me, but not my own family. My sister who is just seventeen months younger than me, we’re sitting with mom at breakfast, oh maybe six months ago, and I decided “no more doormat.” I know from my reading and from my spiritual affirmation and from reading voluminously—I bet I’ve got a hundred books—and going to conferences, that I am not broken, and that I have a right to explore my identity and to celebrate who God made me to be just as much as any other person.

And so I decided that if there was something that I wanted to tell a neighbor, a cohort at work, family, that I would tell it. So I was talking about [Floyd] Pride, because I basically rekindled PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] after it had died in Floyd County several years ago. It was something that was really important. I had invested tons of time, and we found some residents in the community and she [my sister] was real excited to talk about, she has what I call it a ‘persimmon smile,’ twisted up her face, and she said “well I don’t believe in that,” you know like she’s spitting out poison. She’s very religious. And I said “well, I’ve met other people that have those feelings that have expressed those feelings, who have expressed that opinion,” and that was the end of it. So later my mom said, “Jim, I was really proud of you for not jumping down your sister’s throat.” But that was the conversation, period. So now that mom’s gone, I will be able to say to my sister, “I understand where you’re coming from because I felt the same way.” As a self-hating gay man, because that’s all that I knew from the environment that I grew up in.

But I have learned some other things. Would you be interested?

16:06

CA: Yes. So would you say that, you know you said that your family was generally not necessarily unwelcoming, but not welcoming of the people that you had brought home or the men that you brought home... would you say that that was the climate of your overall environment? Where you’d grown up, where you lived?

16:25

JB: Absolutely. I didn’t know any other gay people, except my cousin and even then. Well there was a community at UNC-G, even in the ‘70s, because that was when I got my graduate degree, in ‘72... 1972. And then the professor over the department was a lesbian and her partner was the secretary. So that was the visibility to me, but still there were very few peers growing up, none whatsoever.

17:14

CA: So, you were saying you know that your college years, you said you graduated in 1972, so what would you say...?

17:21

JB: Well that was from Graduate school.

17:23

CA: Right.

17:25

JB: okay.

17:26

CA: Right, Right. From Graduate school in 1972 and so you knowm there were a lot of things happening at that time and previously in the world, so how would you say that those affected you?

17:35

JB: Good question. You know high school ended in '64 and Wake Forrest in '69. I spent another year getting a Master's degree because I couldn't graduate in biology. That was the year of Stonewall.

17:53

CA: Right.

17:56

JB: It was totally not on the map. Even though I had tried to meet a few people on campus, they were all basically unpleasant, not supportive; that they wouldn't fly was still determined to be... I pledged a fraternity and I was chorister for the fraternity and so I actually found a girl that I could take to a hotel. And of course, she would have been just as safe if she had taken her mother to the hotel, and it was very distressing to me that I couldn't understand. And then I was so disturbed that I went and I saved my money from working at a military academy and oh the young men there were gorgeous and they loved me to death and I took them all around the country to visit their families, but still it was totally platonic. And so I was just beyond any solution. So, I had saved my money from working at the military academy. I taught...oh...general biology, anatomy and physiology, and general science, and I had a radio club. I bought a bicycle in Paris and cycled to Normandy and spent a year cycling through France, and Germany, and Italy and Spain, Sardinia and Corsica. And worked in Denmark and applied for graduate school from

Denmark. Trying to get out of the milieu of this white-elephant world that I was living in and I did have one, well I had two, very unfortunate experiences, no harm, but total rejection from the people I met along the way. So I preached to myself, "if you want a relationship you've got to be in a community where you have time to develop it, not a bicycler working odd jobs."

20:00

CA: Right

20:02

JB: So that was my plan coming home.

20.04

CA: So would you say that your time in Europe helped you to maybe understand who you were as a gay man a little bit more when you came back to the United States or...?

20.15

JB: Well it was more frustrating to me. Of course I wanted to see everything and it was a great adventure, traveling to Chartres, going to the Prado, learning Spanish, and getting by in French, and all that's great when you're 24. But no, I was much more frustrated, but I was more determined. I think I had become more self-reliant and I knew that I just sort of had an affirmation that things were going to get better, without any other input of any kind. I still had no counselor or any other personal contact.

21:05

CA: So now what brought you to Floyd where you live now? Would you say that that had any influence when you moved to Floyd?

21:14

JB: I didn't move to Floyd actually. I moved to Patrick County and we lived in Ararat, because I met the supervisor of Special Ed [education] at a speech conference and I told her you know that I like to ride a bicycle and I wanted to work in a place far enough from Greensboro that I wouldn't be in my parent's back-pocket, but that I could go home, socialize, whatever, and I loved the mountains. And so she knew Dorn Spangler. She said this is where you need to go, Patrick County, well it's one of the most conservative [counties]. It's got 16,000 people, that's about the same size as Floyd. It's got two stop lights now, Floyd has one.

[JB addition to transcript: *So, I rode my bicycle from Greensboro to Patrick County, liked it, and took the job as the first speech pathologist in the eight county schools*]

So I lived in Ararat near Peggy's family and in the second semester screening all the kindergarten children for speech, I met Peggy. She invited me to come to her home for supper that very first day and within six weeks we had proposed and in six more weeks we were married. [JB addition to transcript: *She proposed to me!*] Her family was close by in Westfield, a North Carolina farming family.

22:19

CA: So what was it like being married to Peggy?

22:22

JB: Well, we both had the best of intentions. We both tried really hard to be loving. Initially, we found some physical gratification in each other, but not on our wedding night, which doesn't prove anything. So we had a child, and we loved Josh beyond measure, but you know there was still this huge emptiness. And she got sicker and sicker and hysterectomy and lost all her femininity as far as I could tell and didn't want to be touched and I just went crazy. So I was basically living as a monk, celibate for twenty years.

23:15

CA: Wow.

23:16

JB: Yeah.

23:17

JB: Yeah, that's when I took up the Shakuhachi as a meditative instrument in the Japanese Zen tradition, and then actually went to play with a group in Washington [D.C.]. I played with them for ten years.

23:30

JB: And, so I've got... you know... go ahead if you have a question.

23:35

CA: No, no.

23:37

JB: Okay.

23:39

CA: Tell me a little bit more about what it was like, I mean you said you were living almost like a monk, so how was that?

23:42

JB: I was very much celibate.

23:45

CA: You know, so how that affected on...?

23:48

JB: Well, it's like living in a vacuum, emotionally. I had no, because I was a Mormon and I was Ward Mission Leader, which means I was in charge of meeting all the young men [missionaries] that came through. I was Scoutmaster, so I had another crop of young beautiful boys with their families who loved me, because I was a wild hair, if they wanted to go camping we'd go, every month of the year we went camping. I took them to all the High-Adventure Bases.⁴ We did scuba diving in Islamorada [Florida], we went to Philmont [Philmont Scout Ranch, in New Mexico], we went to Boundary Waters [on the U.S. Canadian border] in the summer and back to the Okpik program [same location] in the winter. 25 degrees below zero. They loved me to death. I would take individuals; I took my first eagle scout kayaking through the Everglades. He was in his early twenties. I took another, gorgeous kids that I just loved to death. I had just fallen in love with them, but it was totally platonic. No incidents of any kind. And another boy who was just crazy about me and we went kayaking through Lake Powell and camped every night together and with no incidents of any kind. And then another young man, I went back to the Everglades for a second time was just... you know. We still communicate and I've come out to them. They're faithful Mormons, but they just loved me and still do. I played violin with one young man whose mother was a pianist and we still after 30 years we still correspond, and his kids, you know they send me a Christmas card and we really cared for each other. But that's all it was and, of course, I'd had fierce crushes on kids since the first grade, when I was with other boys. I can still remember their faces and how I just pined for them, but look at them and I'll never forget the young man who played trumpet, he was captain of the football team, he was Mr. Everything and his sweetheart was queen of the ball and he was class president and he came over to me and he said, "Let me help you with this problem." And I thought I would melt in the chair. I'll never forget that. So you know looking back I can see all of these things, but at the time it was just terribly disturbing.

26:20

JB: So you asked me about Patrick County, so I came to Patrick, married, spent 30 years there. After the divorce... I had bought land because I wanted a farm and Peggy was sickly

⁴ The High-Adventure Bases are various properties across the country operated by the Boy Scouts of America.

and she was raised on a farm, she didn't want anything to do with a farm, and she didn't even know where it was. I had paid for two pieces of land and so when it came time for us to divorce, I said "you take the house, your daddy built it. I'll take the land if that's agreeable." We had a no-contest separation and that's what happened. I had no place to live. I had a farm. So that may not be germane to our conversation, but...

27:04

CA: No, no.

27:07

JB: So basically I moved I think five times in four years with everything that I owned in the back of my Volkswagen, from one trailer to another. I found somebody with a house that I would just stash my stuff there until the roof caved in and then I'd move it out.

27:26

JB: So I was a nomad, you know. I house sat for a year, just totally no culture, I'd lost all the support from the Mormons, because I was not going to apologize and I was not going to be two-faced and they said "Oh you have to come to our meeting. You've moved into our area." And I said, "That's fine, but you have to understand that I am proud to be a gay man and if that's a problem, then I don't belong." They never contacted me again. So I began to be old and in nine years... well, I moved into my place the same day Obama moved into the White House, so we were married '74, and divorced in '04.

28:17

CA: How did Peggy take the divorce? How did people around you react?

28:21

JB: Well, it was, like I said, I was living in a vacuum so when this little hole comes in, I go [*makes explosive sound*]. It's like complete evacuation from everything in my environment. There's no church, I didn't see the people, there was no continuing contact, which showed me that all of those relationships were based on an ideology and not a genuine friendship, because I could not be myself. So it's really, I date my birth to my divorce. I'm a totally different person than I was then. Completely different person. I mean I spoke to faculties for nursing homes, nursing staff, delivered workshops as a speech pathologist. But not as a whole person. And so I began to visit the MCC [Metropolitan Community Church] in Winston [North Carolina], I played the piano and organ. I played my violin for them. I began to come out and not just among LGBT people, but express myself. Sort of an indication of that, no wanting to be seen, feeling that I'm not worthy of any influence or a social significance, I avoided colors. I did not want to wear any bright colors. Especially I hated blue, because that was the male color that I could not have. It was like my enemy because I couldn't be boy-blue, so I hated it. And I made this [*JB shows a necklace made of blue beads*]

after mama died, because I said to myself you are as much of a male as any other male needs to be. And so I have adopted blue. So I've got blue here and I've got red. And you think "what difference does color make?" Well, color means everything to me.

And so after a few years, I went to a retreat in Baltimore, near Maryland, that Affirmation had sponsored and a gentlemen from Provo, Utah came. Neither one of us knew anyone there and it turns out that he was a former department head, the department of Art and Design at [the University of] California-Irvine for 14 years. He had a multimillion-dollar budget, he had traveled all around the world with his students, he was a Mormon, and a grandfather. We became partners. He had severe kidney issues, from taking too much ibuprofen. We were together 147 days and I was his pallbearer. So John gave me the scholastic, artistic benchmark for my own skills. And to say Jim, "you have innately what I have spent a lifetime trying to teach my students. Your perception of color and proportional form and aesthetic sensitivities are way beyond anything that I would encounter." Only he could say that. And it wasn't because.... And so he was just constant spin. He was older than me, older than I was, but um.... So I had that really mountaintop experience and he helped through his fantastic grasp and he had four extremely successful children and a wife who was a sculptress and she's an institution in her own [right].. So John was very anemic, he went back to sort through all the original art that he had acquired over the years. A sculptor, Trevor Southey, was his good friend. And he asked me to please bundle up what I cared for, it was going home with us. And he had come from Provo [JB added to transcript: *to his apartment in Provo to pack up since we had rented the cabin in Meadows of Dan, Virginia*] and we were in the cabin together and it was just our Blue Heaven.⁶ So, well, you probably don't know that song.

33:11

CA: No

33:16

CA: So you say John was the mountaintop experience for you...

33:19

JB: [mmhmm]

33:21

CA: So looking back on all of these experiences in your life, how would you say that these people have shaped you into the person you are? And not only the people that you have mentioned, but I mean society as a whole as well?

33:31

⁶ Gene Austin's *My Blue Heaven* (1927).

JB: Ok. I need to put a few pieces together for you. So John died, and I was worse off in a way, because I saw that it was possible, but it didn't exist anymore. I was getting older and the quality of person that I met in John I had never met before and had no hope of ever meeting again. Because I didn't party, I love to go dance, but I'd always go by myself. Like I would go from Ararat, get on [Interstate] 77 and drive two hours to Charlotte, three hours, and dance until one o'clock in the morning and get in my car and drive home, by myself. That was the end. That was my social life. Or I'd get in the car, go to Pier 21 or whatever it was in Greensboro, and dance by myself for three hours, get in the car and drive home. Because I wasn't interested in one-night stands, I had no confidence in myself, sexually. And I wasn't going to risk some stupid STD [sexually transmitted disease], so that's as far as I could see, so I was, you know, under a rock. I had pretty much written off the human race.

Then, there were a rash of suicides in Minnesota in the Anoka-Hennepin⁷ school system where Michele Bachmann and her lovely husband who had promoted reparative therapy. And it hit me like a... it completely wiped me out. And so, I had this message and it came to me and it literally knocked me out of bed. The message was "you have a voice and you are not using it!" And that was very humbling, so I quit the pity party and I quit the wound licking, and I got myself dressed and I put on a tie and I went to the fundamentalist church at the end of my driveway and I began to ask questions and I got the movie and I went to workshops and found out what was available, I began to read books, and to make myself an instrument for conversation to open minds, to ask questions to find a way to be [a] neighbor in a constructive way to the most homophobic people that I was living with.

I showed this very typical illiterate—computer-illiterate, basically he didn't read—Baptist minister a DVD called *For the Bible Tells Me So* which chronicled Gene Robinson's life, and the Gephards, their gay daughter, and many others. Desmond Tutu speaks on it, Nelson Mandela, I mean it's a documentary. It talks about the biological ideology of sexual orientation. I went online and showed him the testimony, that—I think his name is Burns [Joel Burns, City Council member in Fort Worth, Texas] and I chide myself for not being able to remember—but I think it was Houston City Council and he came out and he showed the pictures of these kids who were abused and bullied and they took their lives. I'll never forget the comment that this man's wife made to me when I asked her if/how did she relate to the suicides and she pursed up her mouth and she gave me this condescending... "Those parents should have been more schooled in the gospel." So basically she was laying their sexuality at the parent's feet without any understanding that some of those kids were bullied because their parents were same sex. Some of them committed suicide because they were perceived and they weren't actually... they were straight kids. So the whole misinformation of that comment just drilled into me all the assumptions and the misunderstandings that could bring her to say that it was "a matter of their righteousness" that caused them to be... And of course, some of the parents didn't have a clue. They came

⁷ JB additional note: *Anoka, Minnesota. Eight students in the Anoka-Hennepin school district committed suicide in a span of two years (2009-2011). A large number of these students were known to be members of the LGBTQ community, by family and friends and struggled with harassment. The Anoka-Hennepin school system has since been scrutinized for their lack of involvement concerning bullying against members of the LGBTQ community.*

home and found their kid dead; they never knew that there was a problem. So that really fueled what's led to a new life for me. When I began to research support organizations, I had heard that there had been a PFLAG in Floyd. I researched it, I went online, and there was no record of it. And just by talking to people, "Oh yes. The Quakers did it." I didn't even know there was Quaker group, where is it? I couldn't find it, they weren't on the web. So I finally found it. It was like a goldmine. They accepted me. I met Kim [O'Donnell],⁸ I talked about PFLAG. They did not as a group sponsor it, but individuals there had sponsored it and others. So I asked if we could have a web presence and so now Floyd's Friends meeting is listed with gaychurch.org and they're listed in the cloud and they're listed on the gay yellow pages and that was great. Because we have several lesbians in the group. And so from there I began to ask questions and I had a gay young fellow and his mother who really wanted to start PFLAG, so the three of us started over.

39:30

CA: Wow.

39:32

JB: And so that, because I did not want to drive to Floyd because my work is in Stuart, and it's twenty miles both ways, a thirty minutes' drive. So it's just as good one as the other. And I had been the president of the Ruritan club, well this is the stodgiest, most conservative, most entrenched, traditional group of closed minded people, this is what keeps Meadows of Dan isolated in the '50s, which is fine. That's their choice. And some of the folks, you know... I want to say isolated, I've sort of lumped them too generally... were very perceptive, but they were not willing to buck the crowd. In fact, some of the members left when I became president because they knew I was gay. So I endured that for a year and then I withdrew my membership and said I need to go where I can make a difference. And now, four years later they're looking into grants, they're looking into the things that I asked them to look at when I was there and finally they're saying, you know. So, that's fine. Everybody in their own time. But in those four years we've had, we're planning our fourth Pride. And I'm meeting with the Diversity Club, the faculty advisor, Wednesday, in Floyd. (I forgot to tell Madison while you were out). And we're offering a thousand dollar scholarship and we've been in the newspaper and we've had folks from Equality Virginia come in and Hampton Roads has always held their huge multimillion-dollar Pride the same weekend, but this year the town father said, "You're going to have your Pride on the 18th." That leaves our weekend open so Equality Virginia is coming *en masse* and we will have more outside presence to help us.

41:30

⁸ Kim O'Donnell has also done an oral history interview for this project. See the LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

CA: And that's just excellent and so you've really done a lot for Floyd PFLAG and sort of building it to what it is now and so you're in the news as an advocate basically for gay rights. I mean you go online and you're there.

41:46

JB: Okay, Facebook counts as News? *[Jim laughs]*

41:48

CA: Yes! It does.

41:50

JB: And you know, we had, we've given it three times, prizes at the Mardi Gras *[JB added to transcript: We have awarded prizes for three Mardi Gras]* in Floyd and always before, you know, I'm the wallflower. I still don't feel comfortable speaking before people and so this Floyd PFLAG, my secretary left and I was the only one there, and I supply the prizes every year anyhow and so *[imitating an announcer's voice]* "Floyyyd PFLAG, let me hear it for Floyd!" I was a Banksy character, if you know about Banksy?⁹

42:22

CA: *[mhmm]*.

42:23

JB: You are so cool. Because I had just come from Israel and Pakistan and I really championed, I call it the bouquet thrower. If you know that? That's who I was. I had a huge bouquet of flowers and so I ask them, you know I was going to interact, I was going to be cool, and if they didn't know who Banksy was, that's their problem. I said, "Who can tell me my character?!" and they knew it and that's Floyd. So...it went well. We had the contest and I narrated and that was huge thing for me, by myself. To stand up and say "Yes!" and *[do it alone]*. You have open way here, fill it. So it's just been like that. I could tell you about visiting this Seventh Adventists¹⁰, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the two Black churches, all with very positive responses and compliments and "come back," and I've sung in their choirs. In the two years that I've been visiting the different congregations and now another PFLAG *[regional chapter]* has asked me about my work in the churches and so she says, "Jim, we are People of Faith for Equality in Virginia," and Robin Gorsline came up, who was the founder of that, and he was part of our Pride two years ago. We went and delivered a letter to the clerk of court and I delivered it in front of WBDJ camera, and I'm thinking "Who is that?" And it's like... and he says, "Jim there are two responses that you'll get, one or two:

⁹ Banksy is an English-based graffiti artist, political activist, and film director of unverified identity.

¹⁰ Seventh-Day Adventists.

you'll have a very clear welcome or you'll have a deer in the headlights." Well, guess what we had?

44:06

CA: What'd you have?

44:07

JB: *[Jim laughs]* We had a deer in the headlights! He's standing there just like Boss Hogg frozen to the wall...it was so funny. The funny thing was he knew we were coming. He had worn a purple shirt and it was like he's going to be welcoming and affirming because he's going to wear a pink shirt or whatever... and he just, just like deer in the headlights. It was so cool.

So Robin has retired with his partner Jonathon. Others have taken over, so I knew him and we were good buddies. So folks have added People of Faith for Equality in Virginia to Equality Virginia as another group, a subgroup. So now they're asking me about what I'm doing in Floyd County. And I'm saying, well, I went to the Reformation Project, which is Matthew Vines' brainchild. He's a 24 year [old] Harvard dropout who wrote a book.¹¹ If you haven't seen it... Have you seen it? So he recruits these world class people to come and speak: Allyson Robinson, a transgender [woman], a superb speaker, a minister; and David Gushee who teaches at Mercer, he's I think president now of the Evangelical Society of America or some, you know, big stuff. I don't really know, but I mean we're friends on Facebook. So I went to two of their conferences and the whole purpose of conferences is to school yourself. We have role-playing, you're going to be the evangelical, you're going to give me this pushback, you're going to quote the scriptures, and I'm going to take a positive response. We have these workshops to learn the facts.

45:55

CA: Right.

45:57

JB: And so I went through that, at some great expense to myself, you know, Atlanta and Washington [D.C.]. And so I said, you don't have to go far away. And so I'm listening to this inner teacher and just like the spirit that knocked me out of bed and said "you have a voice" it's so very tender to remember that. And so I don't ever really know where I'm going to go, or who I'm going to meet, but I have a very clear direction.

46:35

¹¹ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent, 2015).

CA: Which is absolutely amazing; I mean that is....

46:38

JB: You ask Kim, she went with me to the Seventh-Day Adventist [congregation].

46:43

CA: Yeah, I'll make sure to ask her. In her interview.

46:45

JB: Yeah, that'd be cool. She would, I think she'd enjoy telling you.

46:47

CA: Well I would love to hear about it.

46:48

JB: Yeah.

46: 49

CA: You know, I guess my final question, one of my final questions for you is you've done so much to build Floyd PFLAG up and you know for yourself you've come such a long way. So how is it advocating for Gay Rights in such a conservative area? I mean you...it's got to have its rough patches I'm sure and I know that you're the man for the job.

47:15

JB: Well in learning that in truth I was them at one time. To consider myself in their shoes and to not engage in an emotional ping-pong match, and never bash scriptures, but to find common ground as a passing peer. Because I'm not afraid to ask a question. I'll give you one little example: I decided I have to get out, I have to meet people, so I went to the community chorus... "Hello," and I live on a beautiful farm. Have you seen pictures of my place?

47:58:

CA: Yes, they're beautiful.

47:59

JB: So you know I never leave the place. So I said, "okay, you love to sing, go to the community chorus." Who do I meet? You know one time in this choir practice. She comes in. "Hello, I'm an alto...da da da." So I meet her in the grocery store that very night, the very first time I had ever met her. "Well, gee, I just met you, that's cool, you know, how do you

like the chorus?” “How long have you been in Floyd?” I learned how to introduce... “you know I’m the president of Floyd PFLAG.” “What’s that?” It’s the oldest support group we have for LGBT people.” “Oh, oh I’m so sorry; you know you’re going straight to hell.” And I said “well, you know I’ve heard that feeling expressed before, tell me about yourself.” “Well, I was a professor of biology at one of the universities in California and I’m retired...” “Did you realize, have you ever heard that the incidence of left handedness is 40% greater in gay men?” “You show me the proof! I want to see the scientific evidence!” “I’d love to share some things with you.” So. Hello? Do you think I have resources? I’ve got a book, written by a law student from BYU [Brigham Young University], and being Mormon that really rang a bell. “Did he get excommunicated?” I said, “No actually, he didn’t.” He is now, because he chose to stand up, but not when he wrote the book. A straight BYU student’s perspective on homosexuality. *Homosexuality: a straight BYU student’s perspective*.¹² It’s got 574 references.

49:32

It’s a brilliant work. I had it spiral bound and enlarged and gave it to our representative Morgan Griffith in Congress—our representative in Congress—when I lobbied with Floyd PFLAG. I mean with PFLAG National in 2011. Yep. And I gave one to [Mark] Warner and [Jim] Webb who were our senators. So that if they really wanted to read, and I have been so many times to speak with the field rep for Morgan Griffith, who is awful. I mean he is a coal man, we’re going to burn coal until hell freezes over, we don’t want that climate stuff, and we do not need gay people in our schools. That’s the end of his, well, you know... I went to talk to his field rep and I was really, huh, well you can imagine, me and a woman I had never met. And I said, “you know, I’ve come to talk to you about something very important. It’s really a matter of life and death,” and I couldn’t, I was not fluent with her. I turned red as a beet. I said “this is so important to me I just got to get it out.” And so I talked to her about suicide and I talked to her about... and I went back and I talked to her again and I talked to her a third time and because she had a field office in Galax or in Stuart, at the courthouse or whatever... And the fourth time, she said “Jim, I have a question for you.” She said, “I’m on the finding committee for my Presbyterian church, do you have anything that would inform me?” I said “as matter of fact, Jack Rogers, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church U.S. wrote a book, *The Bible and Homosexuality*.”¹³ “Ahhhh, really?!” I said “oh yes, it’s very scholarly, well documented. I gave it to my mother to read.” I said “would you like her copy?” and she said “no, I’ll get my own.” Came back to see her another time. “Well gee Angie, How did that go?” “Well” she said, “Let me just tell you about it.” “I only had one question of the interviewees.” “Well what was your question?” “How do you relate to the LGBT community?” I said, “Well what responses did you get?” She said, “Well, they beat around the bush or they said ‘you know, we don’t support that.’” One guy...he said “we need to welcome all of our neighbors and learn to love each other,” and I said, “well how did the committee respond?” He got the job, and then she pointed at me and she said, “Jim Best, I’m giving you credit for that.” So that was another high point where getting over

¹² Brad Carmack, *Homosexuality: A Straight BYU Student’s Perspective* (2011).

¹³ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Westminster Knox Press, 2009).

my defeatist attitude brought a church closer to acceptance and may have helped some kid. And I could never have done that. I could never have orchestrated any of those factors. I just followed my, I'll say it, the inner teacher. The spirit said "get your butt over there and sit down and wait for that woman and just talk to her."

52:34

Just like I passed the Jehovah's Witness Church and I said, "Lord, don't send me down there, those people hate my guts." The spirit said to me—this is the truth now, ya'll are going to think I'm a wacko!—"You knock on the door and I'll take it from there." So my job was to get out of my car and walk to the door and knock on the door and I said, "okay, I've done my job." They about shook my hand off and I sang their hymns, they invited me back. So many of them are first and second generation from Rwanda. And so we have all of this instant comradery, they try to come out and preach to me and I'm reading their scriptures you know in Romans and they say, "Well you know we have the most accurately translated scriptures in the entire world." I said, "Well that's very interesting, did you realize that you're using a word that wasn't even invented until the 1800s?" "Oh. Oh. Is that right?" "Uh, it has nothing to do with the original Koine [language] of the New Testament or Hebrew, because those words and those concepts didn't really exist in those cultures." "Oh. Oh really?" I said, "well, yes, honestly. Homosexuality is not a New Testament concept and sexual orientation was not addressed in any form in the scriptures. Only behavior is discussed." "Oh, well I need to do some more homework." And that was the end of the... that was the end of it. So if I see them on the street, "How are you doing, Jim!?"

54:05

Same thing with the Assemblies of God. Ohhh Buddy. And his brother... did I know this? No I didn't. I see the sign and they... it just gnaws at me when I go by, so I said "okay, alright, next Sunday I'll go there." I go in, there's like five people in the whole congregation. I sing with them, he comes by and shakes my hand and I really chawed down on that hand I wanted him to know I'm serious business. I said, "You know, Clyde, why I'm here?" "Well no, why are you here Jim?" I said, "I've come to be [a] neighbor. I've come to learn how to be [a] neighbor. To you and your congregation." And I said, you know, "frankly some of us are harder to love than others." And he just dies laughing, and I said "Clyde, sometime I'd just like to speak with you." So we have this hour and a half conversation just him and I. And he's never heard this information before. No one has ever, he's never heard someone say "I'm grateful for the sexual orientation that I have." His brother is chairman of the school board. Did I know that? No. And so I go back and I sit down in their fellowship hall and they're having fried chicken and you know, "please join us for lunch"... "great!" I sit down, don't know the lady... his daughter-in-law is a social worker, worked in Montgomery County. "Jim, I understand." She gets it. She's worked with the at-risk kids. She knows sexual orientation. She knows that we don't help them by condemning them. She welcomes me to bring her the Youth Risk Behavior Survey [published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]. I'll write OCR, the Office of Civil Rights. I said this survey is intrinsically flawed because it doesn't ask questions that relate to at-risk communities. It only has male or female. How are you going to differentiate the at-risk kids? If they can only

choose between the gender binary. Guess what? OCR writes me back and says, “you’re right.” And we’re talking to the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and we’re going to add two questions to the survey next year. Now that wasn’t because I asked them, but it happened that they had already been working on it apparently, and there’s a long list of stuff that I discovered because I asked the question.

56:34

CA: Wow.

56:36

JB: And so that went on our conference call with PFLAG National, they’re working on generating a survey, not just in defining the demographics, but also in the interpretation. So they had racial numbers, “certain percentage are black, certain percentage are mixed,” they had all that. They had male and female, but all the results are tabulated without any indicators, so they don’t know if more females and males... 33 attempted suicides in just the 50% percent of the kids who identified themselves as “A” and “B” students. What does that tell you about the kids who weren’t so successful academically? ...Nothing. What is their risk? More? Maybe so. And that’s only in two grades. So they could have defined the results by a racial profile, they could have said, “well, you know, our minority kids...three times more likely to...for ideation or for self-injury or for attempted suicide.” And there were three different questions. They don’t know. The heinous part of it is, the results are all tabulated verbally—I think I presented this, I don’t know—and the verbal description was, “slightly above” the national norms, actually 178% above [JB added to the transcript: *the national level for suicide attempts in the 10th and 12th grades in Floyd County High School.*]

So anyhow, I know we’ve spent a lot of time...is there anything else I need to...?

58:16

CA: I mean your story is just incredible. I mean really, you are an incredible person, and I thank you so much for sharing with us...just everything. Yeah, thank you so much Jim.

58:30

JB: Well thank you all for being so prepared. Yep.

58:37

END.