

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

**Interview with Whitney B. Conley  
February 26, 2016**

Interviewer: Julie Frymier

Interviewee: Whitney B. Conley

Date: February 26, 2016

Location: Roanoke College, Miller Hall, Room 219

Transcription prepared by: Christina Taylor and Victoria Sage

0:00 = changes in Roanoke since moving here in the early 1980s

4:11 = coming out to family members, including her parents and her children

8:04 = on relationships with the local LGBTQ community

10:37 = the gay bar and restaurant scene in Roanoke

11:40 = more on coming out

13:32 = the story of her long custody battle over her children

20:33 = discovering her identity as a lesbian

25:58 = fears of discrimination based on sexual orientation

30:13 = violence directed against LGBTQ folks

34:24 = violence specifically targeted against transgender persons

40:26 = reflections on her transgender (MTF) niece & the world that she faces

46:12 = reflections on motherhood and being a parent to two kids

47:28 = on the differences between being straight and gay

49:54 = on living together with her partner & their planned move to Raleigh, North Carolina

00:08

JF: My name is Julie Frymier. Today is February 26, 2016. We are interviewing Whitney Conley in Miller 219 at Roanoke College. When and where were you born?

00:30

WC: When was April 12, 1968, and I was born in Raleigh County, West Virginia.

00:36

JF: And how long have you lived in the Roanoke/Salem area?

00:42

WC: I've lived in Roanoke city since 1982, I believe... '81 or '82.

00:55

JF: And were you born into any particular ethnic, national, racial, or religious groups?

01:01

WC: No. Just Caucasian.

01:03

JF: What was your experience with the community of Roanoke?

01:08

WC: As far as? ... just?

01:12

JF: Interaction, people.

01:16

WC: I went to school here. I grew up in New Jersey up until about the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and then I came back here. My family is from here. I went to high school here. Normal kids getting into trouble just like everybody else. After that, I went to a travel school in Pittsburgh and came back and had a fifteen / sixteen-year career in the travel and hospitality industry until the bottom dropped out with 9/11.

Other than that, I'm just living here. I mean it's a good town to raise kids. People are generally nice. There's a difference between "Salemities" and "Roanokers" and I'm sure you're aware of that. In general, you know, it's changed. It's grown quite a bit from when we came back from New Jersey. But all in all, it has its ups and it has its downs.

02:13

JF: Could you tell me more about how it's changed over the time?

02:17

WC: Well, it's definitely grown in population. I can remember when Valley View Mall was not Valley View Mall. It was the Huff Farm. We got in trouble on that farm a couple few times. Hersherberger Road was two lanes, going that way and coming this way and that was it. So, it really has grown quite a bit just over the last few years. I've noticed, well actually, this has been happening for quite a while, Roanoke has really been enticing elderly people to retire here. The unfortunate down side to that is, they don't want to pay taxes, certainly not educational taxes, and that hurts the school divisions I think. We could've been Charlotte [North Carolina]. We really could've been Charlotte. And well, we're not because of some really piss poor decisions of our leaders.

03:13

JF: And so, what has been some of the most important events in your life?

03:20

WC: Important events... I would probably start... I would say a turning point in my life was probably when my dad died in 1982 when I was thirteen getting ready to turn fourteen. Then, not too long after that, I went through a huge depression with all of that. My sister was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. She was seven or eight. And my teenage years were just not good. Then, I would say getting married, having kids, you know, your typical huge events, but nothing I would say catastrophic.

04:11

JF: What is your sexual orientation, and your gender identity?

04:16

WC: Well, I'm gay/lesbian. In today's world there's so many definitions. I just say gay female. I'm female, not transgender or anything, strictly female.

04:34

JF: What was your family's reaction to you coming out? I know you've mentioned having children.

04:39

WC: The children... my youngest really wasn't old enough to understand. He was... oh gosh... my oldest was twelve, so five and a half years, seven, so my youngest was seven. My oldest did not take it very well at all. I was divorced from their father. When the father found out about it, that's when kind of all hell broke loose. The custody battle and all that. And he sued.

05:19

JF: Did you anticipate that your sexual orientation would cause such an issue, and how did that make you feel internally?

05:30

WC: I don't really think that... well... let me back up just a little bit. I was in a relationship prior to my kids finding out. So they did not know about that relationship. I had told my mother. I had come out to my mother at that point. She's from the '60s generation. Nothing really surprised her much, and my sister had had a female affair as well and she's not gay, but you know, most people experience that at some point in their lives. The coming out, as far as with my children, came with the second relationship, but I didn't give it much thought I don't think. I really did not think that it was going to be as big a deal as it really was.

06:26

JF: How did the relationship change within your family after you came out?

06:31

WC: It didn't, not as far as like my mother, my relationship with my mother. My grandmother, she was on my mother's side [maternal grandmother], she didn't say anything about it, but you knew because of religion and stuff, she didn't accept it. But she didn't treat me any different. But, by that point, she was so getting to the point of dementia and all that. My other grandmother on my father's side—well my grandfather on my father's side he was already in full blown Alzheimer's—but my grandmother she was cool. She loved Terri to death, and that was like her second granddaughter, so on and so on. The dynamics there didn't really change much.

07:17

JF: What challenges do you think we still have within things that need to be done within changes in the LGBT community here at Roanoke, or here within Salem and Roanoke?

07:29

WC: Well as far as the College itself [Roanoke College], I was only going here for one semester, which was last semester, and of course I had to drop because of some personal things going on in my family, had nothing to do with the gay issue.

But, no one knew I was gay, so I couldn't answer that question honestly. I couldn't give you an honest answer.

07:54

JF: What was life like for you identifying as a lesbian then when you first came out, and how have things changed now?

08:04

WC: You mean as far as my personal [life] out in the community?

08:09

JF: Yes

08:17

WC: When I had my first relationship, it was with a girl I had worked with who I knew from high school. It was a very tumultuous relationship. And she ended up losing her job, but then 9/11 happened and then I lost mine being laid off—half of the whole staff was laid off. But the people there at work knew, but that didn't really change anything. They really kind of helped me get out of that relationship. But as far as the community, and I hate to say this but it's really true, I don't look the gay part. I don't have a shaved head. I don't have—and I hate the word—the “dyke” look. I don't have that. I can get away with more things in the community. It's true. It's the unfortunate side of it. So, it really hasn't changed for me honestly.

09:24

JF: Ok. And do you volunteer, or have you ever volunteered for an LGBT organization?

09:33

WC: No, I don't have time to.

09:37

JF: Do you feel as though Roanoke and Southwest Virginia / Roanoke has enough of these groups and communities for the LGBTQ communities? That they have enough resources and groups?

09:50

WC: You know this is a really odd thing, I don't know. Because, our friends are gay, but no one really talks about it. No one seems to be involved in anything. There's the Pride in the Park. Never have been to it. Just not something... some people don't go out in the community, especially teachers don't go out in the community because they don't want to be found out. For whatever their reason is, I don't know if that's retaliation in their employment, which wouldn't surprise me. So, there are things around the community, but ...I don't know...

10:37

JF: Ok. What community spaces do you frequent? Where do you like to go?

10:51

WC: Well, I used to go... I don't really go out anymore. Macado's downtown would've been like the gay hangout. We would go to Community Inn, gay friendly. I've been to the Park, the dance club. It's not quite my scene, but that's been around for eons. My sister used to go there in high school to dance. But, a lot of the times, it was mainly getting together with friends at their homes. That's kind of what we all did. We did that. Or we met at Macado's for a Friday evening or something like that. That was about it.

11:40

JF: Great. And how were your friends supportive in the ways that you chose to come out and things like that?

11:47

WC: When I came out, I wasn't really what you would consider in the community. I just came out when I was dating this girl. She's not gay. It was just one of those fly by night relationships that just developed. It wasn't until I met Terri that I was kind of introduced to the community. So, I didn't have the typical, "I need to go to a gay place to learn to come out." I just kind of, there I was.

12:16

JF: Great. And how have your plans changed from when you were younger to where you are today?

12:27

WC: As far as....? Life plans?

12:33

JF: Life plans, life goals.

12:37

WC: Well, eventually I would like to go back and get my bachelors. I have the associates [degree] but I want to go on to get the bachelors wherever I land. At this particular moment, my goal is, because my partner took a job in Raleigh, and we've been apart for almost three years, so it's time to come back together, so that's why we are selling the house here and gonna find a house down there and proceed with life at that point. The kids are no longer in Roanoke. They're in Denver now. So, I don't have that to deal with on a daily basis. I don't know. We'll see where life takes me at this point.

13:22

JF: Has the relationship changed with your children at all? With, you know, coming out? How has that changed?

13:32

WC: They held a lot of guilt. Well, Spencer, my oldest, did hold a lot of that. We were in a custody battle for about two years. And now that he's an adult and looking back on it, he would have rather done that a little differently, and not been so upset. But they're very welcoming. They love Terri to death. We're never going to [all] get along, but that's typical of family. You know, as a kid you don't know how to react to things, and it was just a reaction. And instead of sitting down at the table and talking about it, the dad just decided to take me to court and he won in the state of Virginia. That's kind of what happened.

14:26

JF: Could you tell me more about that? More about the court cases, like in what ways did you struggle?

14:34

WC: Well, that was really difficult. When we first went to court, basically it was in juvenile court and he [the judge?] just said "They're gone. They go to him." And we had been divorced for several years and we had joint legal custody, but I had the primary care, that means that the child lives with me primarily, and then goes to see the father, you know, whenever the set time was, and so the judge just ripped them out and said "No, now they're with the dad." And then, we had to have social services involved. The children were given a guardian ad litem, which is a lawyer that is designated by the court to handle them in all of this. So, yeah, it was difficult. It was really difficult to lose your kids just like that, just because of who you are. Or because you know, you want to live your life. And I was a little bit like, "you're not going to tell me how to live my life." But going back, I really would've given it a lot more thought and not been so prideful at the time, I probably would've changed my mind, because the judge did give me a chance. He said, "if you're willing to give up that relationship, you can have your kids." And I was like, "wait a minute, why can you tell me what I can and can't do with my life?" Like, nobody's getting hurt but, I made the decision and... Needless to say, we lost that. That was about a year's worth of battling back and forth. And once that was settled, and when

the social services—and this is what really was the kicker—when the lady from social services came in, she basically said, “this is *my* personal opinion,” and you’ll never be able to see the court case, because it’s a closed case, because its sealed, but this is what she said, “it is my personal opinion that people should not live together.” She didn’t say gay people, she said people. Now, my children had already seen Michael Chiglinsky, which was a child psychologist and he wrote up documentations saying there is no proof whatsoever that gay relationships harm children in any way, shape, or form. The guardian ad litem for the children could not find anything in my background or in our home visits or anything that would lead to any conclusion that the relationship was harming my children. It’s just, by the social worker saying that one statement, the judge said, “That’s it, they’re going to dad.” So then after that, we proceeded to circuit court. By that point, by the end of the circuit court, which was almost a year, the children had been in his primary care for over a year and circuit court said, “First of all, juvenile court judge did not do the right thing. He should’ve never ripped the kids away until after all the documentation, all the visits, were done, and everything...” But he said “at this point, the kids have already resettled, so I can’t fairly justify taking them away from their father at this point.” So, that was tough. Then, next chapter. Then, when the father finally realized that it takes quite a bit to take care of the kids, one by one, I got them back. So, that’s how that worked out.

18:33

JF: Can you tell me more about that, the process of getting your children back?

18:39

WC: Well, Spencer, by that point, was about fourteen. He’s the oldest. You know, doing the typical stuff: escaping out of the bedroom in the middle of the night to meet up with the friends, or not coming home when he’s supposed to, and the dad would say, “well what are you going to do about it?” and I would say, “well I can’t do anything about it, I don’t live there. I can’t control what happens at your house, I can only control what happens at my house. But I will stand by you with punishments and things of that nature.” But it was just repetitive issues: skipping school, just your typical stuff. He didn’t want to deal with it. He would keep asking me what I was going to do with them. And I told him, “I can’t do anything.” So he ended up signing rights back over to me for Spencer. Mason, on the other hand, which was the younger, stayed with him. And he ended up ripping Mason out of the schools that he had grown up in, and taking him to the county schools, and that was a complete disaster, so Mason started doing his now new normal teenager activities and it just finally came down to where Mason did not want to go back to his dad’s. And I had to say well, “I can’t allow you to stay here unless all of this is reverted back to me.” So it took a little prodding but yeah, his dad eventually signed him back over to me.

20:13

JF: Great.

20:15

WC: Life lesson: be careful what you ask for! *[laughter]*

20:33

JF: What are some things that you wish you were told growing up about LGBT issues?

20:42

WC: I don't know that I knew what gay people were when I was growing up. I mean, I knew what they were, but it wasn't something that was discussed, or I never was around anybody that knew they were gay. I don't really...to think about it, I don't think I ever was around anybody that was gay. Or if they were gay, I didn't know about it as a kid. So, yeah.

21:16

JF: When and where did you realize that the heterosexual lifestyle wasn't your forte?

21:26

WC: Probably when I met Leslie. That was the first relationship. Or I guess, yeah, I guess I knew who she was in high school, but we finally met at work. But it answered a lot of questions, I think. Probably from how I was feeling about things growing up in high school... more so high school. As a young kid, I wouldn't have known the difference. I was a tomboy. I played with boys. But I still had a baby doll. I still played with baby dolls. My sister played with Barbie's, I rode her little scooter down the driveway all the time, ruining half of her Barbie's toys. Yeah, I was a tomboy. But it does answer a lot of questions. Not that being a tomboy makes you gay or anything, 'cause it doesn't. But it did kind of bring to light some things that stood out maybe.

22:26

JF: What are some of these things that stood out for you?

22:31

WC: Well, now I know why I like my best friend so much. *[laughter]* Probably that type of thing, and why I always felt an attraction for women. I think women feel attractions for each other anyway, whether they're gay or straight, but mine was fairly strong. And I didn't know if that was normal or... I didn't really question it. You just know. You grow up, you get married, you have 2.5 kids and the white picket fence, that's the way—well I don't know if you guys are, you guys are a different genre of people—but for females that's pretty much what it was. That's what it was portrayed on TV and everywhere else that you were. That's what you did, and that's what I did. Down in the south, you didn't hear a lot of gay stuff. It just wasn't around.

23:30

JF: Do you feel as if the society's viewpoints suppressed your self-expressing ways?

23:40

WC: Well, I mean in high school we had a couple of gay boys. I didn't know any females that were. There were always the rumors, but we had a couple that actually went to prom. I don't recall anything ever being scrutinized over it, or anybody ever being... I didn't



really hang out with them just because they weren't in my clique. But no, I don't recall anything ugly being said or done or, not like some of the things that happen today. Just not something I went about my day thinking about.

24:33

JF: What has been one challenge that you've had to overcome in life, and how did you do so?

24:41

WC: One challenge... I don't know, there're so many challenges. And I'm not real sure that I've gotten over any of them to be honest. I'd probably say one of the biggest...are you talking gay stuff or just anything?

25:10

JF: Anything.

25:16

WC: I'd probably say my relationship with my mother. Just, I would say in the last several years, we've actually had a relationship. She didn't grow up in the best family. Granddaddy beat the tar out of all of his kids. I don't mean just whipping them, I mean beating them. So, she's not always the easiest person to get close to. Very moody. So probably that's been one of the biggest challenges, and I still have challenges with that relationship today.

25:58

JF: Okay. And what would be one of the biggest challenges identifying as LGBT?

26:09

WC: I would probably say the biggest challenge is the fear of community acceptance, especially in employment. In a town, even though Roanoke seems to be kind of large, its not. 'Cause everyone knows everybody, 'cause a lot of us have grown up here and you know, you don't want to walk down the street and kiss your girlfriend, or your boyfriend if you're male, and then go on a job interview and be remembered, and then that person saying, "No, I'm not going to hire that person because they're gay." Even though there are laws out there that state [that employment discrimination is illegal]... it still happens. It's a small town. And it's an ass backwards town.

27:00

JF: From what you remember, what was Roanoke like in regards to different sexualities and preferences? What were their attitudes, supportiveness, means of that?

27:12

WC: As far as the community is concerned, I couldn't say. Honestly, I guess the only experience that I can say is, I've never had to endure any struggles in that, personally. To this date, anybody that I've ever worked with, hasn't had a problem with it. But I know eventually, in the south, you will run into somebody that has that problem. That's the

fear. I would probably gander to say that the majority of people probably my age group, which is probably around the fifty-year age mark, that grew up in the '80s and the '90s, even the late '70s, probably are pretty liberal about it, unless they just grew up in that really hardcore conservative family. I think that they're pretty much well, "Whatever, do whatever you want as long as you don't do anything illegal, I don't care." So you know, I never really run into too much of it. Now, when you go to a bar and a gentleman might find out that you're gay, and the whole well, "Try me out and then you won't be gay anymore." That kind of stuff happens all the time. It is what it is. You just emasculate the hell out of them. Move on with your thing.

29:00

JF: Can you tell us more about a time when that has happened?

29:04

WC: Oh there's been plenty of times that that's happened. Oh yeah. I just play along with it like, "Oh yeah, sure. How big is it?" or "how small?" You do all those funny things just to emasculate them. And then you go well, "Thank you very much for your time but no thank you I'm happy where I'm at." Or you just get up. It just depends on the mood. But there's been so many times that over the course of almost twenty years now that I don't complain to them after a while. It's just the same old thing. And those are in straight bars, not gay bars.

29:46

JF: So what has been the greatest changes that you've seen or experienced within this area?

29:56

WC: Repeat the question.

30:00

JF: What have been the greatest changes that you've seen or experienced within the Roanoke area?

30:09

WC: As far as the gay thing or just any?

30:10

JF: Both.

30:13

WC: Geez these are hard questions. I would probably say as far as the gay thing, Roanoke has a very high populous, a very high gay populous and yeah I think for the most part they're fairly welcome. I don't know of any... We did run into somebody recently—and I totally forgot about this—[a] transgender [woman], she, I guess you could say, was jumped two nights before and you could tell that he had a cut on his nose or she had a cut on her nose. It's sad that that happens, now whether that's isolated, I

don't know because I'm not out so I don't know, but I would probably say that for the most part that Roanoke is fairly accepting. I don't think that we as a gay community have to stay in one little corner. I see gay people out at straight bars and I see straight people at gay bars. I don't really think that we have to sit in a pocket somewhere, which is nice. We're not San Francisco, but we're getting there.

31:58

JF: Now how was the LGBT community in Roanoke different when you said that you lived in Pittsburgh?

32:06

WC: Well that was in back in the '80s. I couldn't tell you about any gay stuff up there. First of all I wasn't legal, so I wasn't able to go out to bars. I was only 18. So as far as that, I can't really answer that question.

32:28

JF: Okay, what is something or somethings that you wish that you could tell your younger self going through the transition of openly LGBT?

32:42

WC: Just do it. Don't worry. Get rid of the fear. Deal with the fear.

32:53

JF: What are some of these fears that you've experienced?

32:56

WC: Well again the fear of, you know if I go to apply for a job, is that going to affect my chances of being hired. Am I going to get jumped? There's still fears no matter what that you may... When we were in Dr. [Gregory] Rosenthal's class last semester and we went to downtown Roanoke and he was doing the gay walk.<sup>1</sup> He wasn't walking gay, but he was pointing out all the gay places in Roanoke and there were rednecks that drove by in a truck and in the back of my mind, are they going to get out of the truck? It wouldn't surprise me if they did, but that fear still lingers and it always will until this world becomes 100% accepting of everybody and anybody, it's always going to be there. I would probably say do what you need to do. Live your life, just live your life.

34:16

JF: Do you feel Roanoke to be a safe place for LGBT students and adults?

34:24

JF: Relatively safe, I mean other than you can always be mugged. Even the transgender [person], he was young, I call him a kid. He was jumped, but I don't know if that's really what that was. Was it because that he or she was transgender or was it because they were

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<sup>1</sup> This was an October 2015 test-run of the Downtown Roanoke LGBTQ History Walking Tour, a project of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project that is scheduled to launch to the public in September 2016.

in the wrong place at the wrong time? What's the best thing to do but to jump? My kid got jumped not too long ago, about a month ago. I don't know. I don't think they're any less safe than anybody else. I have no problem with this, don't get me wrong on this, but when you look the part, that can open up issues. It can, it's sad that it does, but it does. If a female walks out and she looks like a man, you get some redneck in a truck that doesn't like that, then you know what can happen. The same thing if you have a very feminine gay man or a transgender [woman] that dresses up in dresses. It's unfortunate, but it can lead to some altercations, but it's the world we live in.

36:04

JF: Have you personally witnessed any of these kinds of altercations?

36:09

WC: No, I haven't personally. My nephew came out as transgender about a year ago. He's 17 years old and already in transition to take the hormones and things and it's kind of like what I had to say to my sister. They live in Seattle and I said "Keep him out in Seattle, don't bring him here because I can guarantee you that he will get hassled in some form." Not beat up or anything, but they will hassle him because I don't think that transgenders are as accepted here as if you're a lesbian or just a gay man. It's probably more of the rhetoric that's going on in our political scene right now that is causing war. I've been around transgenders, they don't bother me any. Like I said live your life, do what you want to do. As long as you're not doing anything illegal or hurting anybody then I don't care. Yes, to answer your question, I think Roanoke is relatively safe, but yet you're going to have pockets of issues. It just is what it is.

37:29

JF: So have you ever experienced any negative reactions when you have identified as a lesbian openly?

37:38

WC: No, other than in a bar. Some guy thinking that he can switch you because you're not what he apparently wants you to be. Other than that, no. I mean that's negative enough, but not blatant harassment.

38:01

JF: So, what is some of the best news that you've gotten and what made it so important?

38:28

WC: I don't know, that both my children had both ten toes and ten fingers and were healthy. I guess that's probably the best thing to know. I don't know, being accepted here in Roanoke was pretty awesome. No, I would say my kids were probably the best news.

38:59

JF: So how has the LGBT community in Roanoke changed since you came out or how has it stayed the same?

39:08

WC: In Roanoke itself, Roanoke city or Roanoke County? This may just be getting older, the fact that, you know what, I don't care anymore what people think. If Terri and I are in the car and she's a very kissy person, so she'll lean over and I don't care if anybody sees that, I just don't care. Now I'm respectful, I'm not going to walk into a room full of old ladies and have it out or get down or anything like that. I do want to show respect, but at the same time, in my own space, I'm going to do what I want to do, as well as everybody should, but in a tasteful, respectful way... Still a little traditional there.

40:26

JF: You mention your nephew being transgender. is there a relationship between the two of you?

40:31

WC: Not really, gosh I haven't been out to Seattle in a long time. In 2005 I think, so it's been awhile. I haven't seen him, I mean I get pictures of him and everything, but I haven't seen him in a while. Great kid. Beautiful kid. He has changed his name to a female name. When my sister called me and told me, it was kind of like "oh wow." I think it's easier if it's not your family. I didn't have a problem with it whatsoever, but what I fear for her is what she's going to face. That's the fear for her, but if she's happy, I'm happy. They're all in therapy to work through the processes. Also another thing, the only other reservation I had about it if it were my child is, she was so young. Seventeen is very young to make a life-altering decision. I would have rather her wait several years, especially with the hormones. Once you start the hormones you can't go back. But other than that, even my kids, you know it's my cousin. Knowing what the transgender... I don't think the gay and lesbian scene has anything on the transgenders in what they have to go through. I guess our passes already happen, we've already, I haven't, but so many people, the Harvey Milks and all that, paved the way for us. I don't even think a whole lot of our friends even had to go through a lot of it. Some did. One of our friends got shot, down at Backstreet Cafe. Yeah, Backstreet. Down on Salem Avenue when the gentleman went in there and shot everything up.<sup>2</sup> The transgender, I don't... I feel bad for that community. I really do, because of what they have to go through

43:13

JF: Do you feel as if Roanoke is not very supportive towards the transgender community?

43:27

WC: That I haven't had a whole lot of experience in, but I would probably have to say that it's going to take them awhile, a long while. I'm not so sure that they would be physically aggressive towards a transgender [person], but I'm not sure that they'll be overly mentally accepting, which can stand in the way physically of a transgender [person]. Using bathrooms and things of that nature. I don't care. I use men's bathrooms all the time because you can't get into the women's. It doesn't really matter to me. Yeah, it's going to be awhile. Although I did like to see Charlotte passing the bathroom—I

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<sup>2</sup> She refers to the Backstreet Café shooting of September 22, 2000. One person was killed, and six were wounded.

don't know if it was an ordinance or a bill or whatever—but the city of Charlotte, they just passed that transgenders can pick whatever bathroom that they identify with, gender wise, so I thought that was good.<sup>3</sup> Now, there's going to be a fight on it, just because it's the Bible belt. If Charlotte can do it, the rest of us can get there. The rest of us can get there.

44:41

JF: Do you have a particular message to share with today's youth or future generations of LGBT...?

44:58

WC: I guess I could say that you're going to have to constantly fight. You just are, it's going to be what it is. That can be whether you're female, not gay or anything. We females fight for equality. It's just going to be a constant fight for equality. The sad fact of it is, if you look the part, it's going to be an even bigger fight. That's going to be the sad part, however don't give the fight up. Don't change who you are. Keep the fight up, because there are allies out there that are right with you irregardless. So just know that.

45:51

JF: What has provided you the greatest satisfaction in life?

46:12

WC: It's a double edged sword, but I would probably say my kids

46:17

JF: Can you tell me more?

46:21

WC: I never wanted kids. I really didn't, it just happened and I think once you do have kids, it's a hard process. It's hard. It's a struggle. Every day is almost a struggle, but you look at them and they're gorgeous. You constantly have this hope for them, even when they screw up. My kids have screwed up. They're those type of kids that have to learn the hard way. They have their problems, but with kids there's always a hope. You know, and they're going to make the world better. So you guys have a lot of work ahead of you, a lot of work ahead of you, because we keep screwing it up... but yeah, I would probably say my kids. They're my greatest heartache and joy. That's the best way to put it there, heartache and joy at the same time.

47:28

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<sup>3</sup> On February 22, 2016—four days before this interview was conducted—the Charlotte City Council approved legislation prohibiting discrimination in public facilities (including bathrooms) based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This legislation gave transgender persons the right to use whichever bathroom conforms to their gender identity. On March 23, 2016, the North Carolina state legislature passed the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, or HB2, which overturned Charlotte's law and prohibits any other municipality from passing similar legislation.

JF: Do you feel more comfortable that you are now able to self-express and self-identify as lesbian. Do you feel like there has been a burden removed or...?

47:45

WC: No I never felt that way, and I think it's because I didn't have these struggles to come out. I think it would have just happened anyway, but I didn't have my family discard me or turn their backs on me. I didn't have friends turn their backs on me. Everybody just accepted it. Everybody still loved me for who I was, and I had good friends. I didn't have that hardship, so I can't speak to that hardship. So there is no real burden, I don't think. The only thing I could maybe place as a burden is that I don't live a straight life anymore. Do I think about it sometimes, could I ever go back? Probably not. If I absolutely had to for some reason could I ever go back? No, I couldn't because it's just not... I still find men attractive. I just don't want to be with one. To me, I could if I had to, I mean if I was absolutely forced to then I could do it, and this is the weird thing about it is... if anybody looked at me they would probably say "Yes, it was a choice." In some degree it was a choice. Do I believe that people are born being gay? Yeah, I just happen to be able to do both and did both, but I'm comfortable with where I'm at right now, and this is where I'm going to be. I don't know what my future holds. Maybe a man would walk right in my life tomorrow and sweep me off my feet. I don't know, I don't know, but for right now this is who I am, and this is who I am going to be.

49:43

JF: How is your life changed because you've experienced both the heterosexual and homosexual lifestyle? How are they different other than the clear...?

49:54

WC: Men are simple. Women are complex. *[laughter]* Again, men are simple and women are complex. Women are difficult, very difficult to live with. Men, you know, just give them a remote and a sports program and they're good to go. Women analyze everything. We do, we just analyze everything and then that time of the month. My god, it's like putting you know... a scorpion and a tarantula in the same room and who's going to win. You know, or even two scorpions in the same room. Which one is going to come out alive? That's what two women are like, unless they just have that kind of really laid back personality. Terri and I don't have laid back personalities. *[laughter]* But at the same time, the great thing about it is that we know what we're going through. We know that we're going to be upset. We know why for the most part we're going to be upset. We know what our bodies are doing. Men are like "What are you doing? Why are you bitchy today?" Well you know what, if you knew what I was going through! It comes with its ups and downs, but I think I like being with a woman because a woman I can identify. I don't identify with men. Does that answer that question?

51:52

JF: Do you feel as if living with a female, which that's what you're in the transition of doing again, how does that make you feel? Are you ready to experience that or are you nervous?

52:06

WC: Oh, we still have a home together. Her job is just in Raleigh, so she comes home on her days off, but for the last three years we've been doing that. There have been a couple of weeks where she hasn't been able to come home and we're not together, and it's always a transition when she comes back. We've talked about that, to actually 100% be again in the same household. It's going to be a huge transition. There's going to be some fireworks I'm sure. There always are. Always fireworks. She's a wonderful person, but again we're very high spirited people and we're leaders. Putting two leaders in the same household sometimes makes for good fireworks, let's put it that way.

53:14

JF: Do you feel as you would be able living in Charlotte, leaving the Roanoke community—[living in] Raleigh, I'm sorry—able to openly express your sexuality?

53:32

WC: You know, I have a friend. We were talking about this recently. She was in the Navy and she did live in Raleigh for a while. This was back in the late '90s and she says, "You know, now don't forget that when you go to Raleigh that you're in the heart of the Bible belt." I was like "oh, so are we here in Roanoke, so what's your point?" I think it's changed. Raleigh is kind of like Atlanta. You know, I lived in Atlanta. My oldest son was born in Atlanta. It's so transient, a lot of imported people, if that makes any sense. Just the industry, it brings people from the north, from the west. You have this melting pot of a city and I don't honestly think that it's going to be that rough. Honestly, in the city. Now, when you get out to the small suburbs... maybe, maybe probably more conservative, but in the heart of Raleigh, I don't really fear that I'm going to have to deal with too much of that. I hope.

54:42

JF: Have you left anything unsaid today? Is there anything else you'd like to share?

54:55

WC: I don't think so. I don't have an explicit story. I wish I did. It's kind of like the scary stories about having babies. All these nightmares about birthing babies, I don't have one of those either. Mine were quick and easy. No medication, no nothing. *Au natural*, so I don't have the horror stories. So it's kind of like that, I don't have a horror story. Which I feel very fortunate of.

55:20

JF: Great, so overall, would you say overall that your transition of coming out and identifying as lesbian has been a positive for you?

55:29

WC: Yeah, for me. I can't say or speak to too many negatives about it. It's all good.

55:44

JF: Well thank you for your time.



55:46

JF: Thank you very much.