

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

**Interview with Daddy Sam
February 24, 2016**

Interviewer: Marlee Wertz

Interviewee: Daddy Sam

Date: February 24, 2016

Location: The narrator's private residence, Roanoke, Virginia

Duration: 60:07 total

Transcribed by: Micheala McDonald, Rachel Barton, and Brittany Peterson

0:00 = childhood in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

2:17 = serving in the U.S. Air Force after high school

2:51 = on moving to Roanoke in 1981

3:26 = Cross-dressing prostitutes on Salem Avenue in the 1980s / *The Centurions*, a leather community in Roanoke in the 1980s / *Shout*, a gay newspaper in Roanoke in the 1980s

6:32 = description of *The Centurions*, and changes in the leather community from the 1980s to today

13:41 = on the history and practices of leather clubs, and on becoming "Daddy Sam"

20:28 = Backstreet Café shooting (2000); and meeting his husband online in a chatroom (mid-2000s) and getting married in 2015

31:16 = describing his wedding in 2015

32:28 = the gay bar scene in Roanoke

33:42 = more reflections on the Backstreet Café shooting (2000)

42:31 = relationship with his husband's parents

46:07 = reflections on discrimination against gay people and the importance of marriage equality

50:55 = coming out to his mom and siblings (late 1970s?)

59:09 = final reflections on his journey since moving to Roanoke in 1981

0:00

[checking sound levels ~ 10 sec.]

0:10

MW: Okay, so we are at Sam Winkler's house. My name is Marlee Wertz. It is Wednesday, February 24th 2016 and the time is 3:00 pm. And Sam would you state your name please?

0:26

SW: Sam Winkler.

0:27

MW: Alright, thank you. So, Sam, where are you originally from?

0:32

SW: I'm originally from Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

0:35

MW: And what brought you to Roanoke?

0:38

SW: My job.

0:39

MW: Your job, okay. How was life growing up in Winston-Salem?

0:44

SW: Well actually I was born in Winston, but I moved around a lot. So I lived in Winston, I lived in the mountainous area of North Carolina, so I was here, there, and everywhere. I really didn't settle down completely until I moved to Roanoke. I moved to Roanoke in 1981.

1:01

MW: Okay, so what would you describe your childhood like with moving around and...?

1:07

SW: Haphazard at best, because I came from a broken family. My mom and dad divorced when I was three and so I just moved from, kind of, toward the post. So I lived with my sister for a while, I lived with my brother for a while, I lived with my other sister for a while. I moved out on my own when I was a senior in high school. Worked on second shift, maintained an A/B average and got a scholarship and went to college.

1:43

MW: That's remarkable. Wow, that's really great. So you, I would say, would you say that your childhood made you work really hard to...?

1:55

SW: I think so. I think coming up that way you kind of go that extra mile to try to go above and beyond what is expected of you.

2:07

MW: Absolutely. So when you weren't in school and when you weren't working second shift what were you doing? What were your interests when you were in high school?

2:17

SW: Basically in high school I didn't really have a lot of time for a lot of outside interests because, like I said, I was working [and] trying to support myself. I went into the Air Force after high school. I was an MP at the Air Force for a while.

2:37

MW: And what's an MP?

2:38

SW: Hmm?

2:38

MW: What's an MP?

2:39

SW: Oh, I'm sorry. It's military police.

2:40

MW: Oh, gotcha. So where were you stationed or where were you living when you went into the air force?

2:49

SW: I was living in Winston-Salem.

2:51

MW: You were living in Winston-Salem. Okay, so you said your career brought you to Roanoke, or your job brought you to Roanoke. So what job was that?

3:01

SW: I started out as a color designer for furniture and then from that I went into health safety and environmental work and I did that for probably 25 years.

3:12

MW: Wow, so are you now retired?

3:14

SW: I just retired a year ago.

3:16

MW: Congratulations, that's wonderful. So when you came to Roanoke in the 1980s what would you describe it like?

3:26

SW: I moved here in 1981 and Roanoke was a very interesting city at that time. For one thing, I had not ever lived anywhere where you had female impersonators on the street corners soliciting business and this went on in Roanoke at that time. As a matter of fact down around where Billy's Ritz is used to be called "the block." And as they started to clean up that area they pushed them farther and farther out. But it was, I can remember being at work and one of the girls at the office said "Be careful if you go downtown to pick up a female" and I'm like "why?" and they said "Because it might not be a female." *[laughing]* And I'm like "okay, I understand!"

But, I got involved actually in the Leather community almost as soon as I came into Roanoke. There was a leather club called the Centurions which I was a member of and I was a member of that for quite some time. I was president for a while, I was Road Captain for a while, and I learned a lot about the leather lifestyle. It's interesting because a lot of people automatically assume that the leather lifestyle was S&M and that couldn't be farther from the truth. I mean, just like any other aspect of life there's a group of people, but for the most part that was not at all what the leather community was about. And I guess probably the best way that I can describe it... *[SW goes to get a newspaper]* This is, I used to write for this paper. This was called *Shout* which was a gay newspaper in Roanoke. And basically a statement that I made many, many years ago is *[SW reading from the newspaper]* "Leather is a state of mind. It's a feel, a smell, a taste, and a fashion statement of the person wearing it. Leather is new, it's different, it's erotic, and it's adventurous. Leather has no age, race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical and appearance boundaries. People in every lifestyle and profession, gay and straight, store clerks to lawyers are interested and involved in the leather lifestyle." And just to show you how much I've changed over the years, that was me when I used to write for them *[SW referring to a picture of himself in the newspaper]*.

6:07

MW: Wow.

6:07

SW: *[laughing]*

6:08

MW: I like it. So you were the president, is that what that says?

6:11

SW: Yes.

6:11

MW: Wow. That's really, that's interesting. And so how old were you when that was happening?

6:17

SW: I was 28/29.

6:21

MW: 28/29?

6:22

SW: And I was part of the leather community up until about nine years ago, ten years ago.

6:29

MW: Wow.

6:30

SW: Yeah.

6:32

MW: What kind of things does the leather club do?

6:35

SW: Okay, basically it's a group of people who like to get together and party together. We have what we called "runs" and you could have an outside run which was more like a camping trip, if you can imagine a hundred guys at a camping trip. Or, sometimes they were held in hotels. We've had them before at Patrick Henry, we've had them at the Sheraton, and the different clubs have cocktail parties so it's basically one big party from Friday afternoon until about noon on Sunday. So a lot of fun, a lot of getting to meet new people and things. I will tell you that probably the leather community over the years changed. When I first became involved in the leather community there was a lot of respect for the elder people that were in the leather community. They were kind of like you were to respect your grandfather or your father. They taught you the true ways of the leather community. For example, if you had a master's cap which is what that is called [*SW points to his master's cap*], you didn't just go out and buy that, you earned it. When someone felt it was time that you had proven yourself in the community, that was presented to you. Today it's more of a "Hey, let's go out and get us a cap." Also, people back then were very particular about their master's cap. If you came up and said "Hey, I want to wear your master's cap" it would have been an automatic "No, you're not." You didn't earn it, you're not wearing it. As a matter of fact, I probably would not have even let most

people try mine on. Just because of the respect that I had and the work that goes into earning it.

8:44

MW: Absolutely.

8:45

SW: But it is changed. And a lot of the leather clubs now are dwindling away and a lot of the reason for that is because of the internet. People don't really need leather clubs to meet people of like persuasion because they're online and you can find anybody you want online just real quick. So because of that a lot of your younger people are no longer interested in the leather clubs and it was really a shame to see them kind of dwindle because they were a lot of fun. They were a lot of fun. Did a lot of traveling. I'll just give you an example. *[SW goes to get leather vest]* That's my leather vest and each one of these represents either a club, another leather club, or a leather run that I went to. I was also one time the president of the Southeast conference of clubs which was 32 leather clubs.

10:01

MW: Wow.

10:02

SW: That's just one vest and then there's another one *[laughing]*. But some leather guys road bikes. That's what I used to ride. *[SW shows pictures of him from the past]* Just to give you an idea, that was dress uniform. And, like I said, you had cocktail parties. And you did crazy things. We had a leather run at Patrick Henry and for our cocktail party, our opening cocktail party, we did a take off on *Gone with the Wind* where everybody that was in the club, for the most part, dressed as somebody from *Gone with the Wind*. Just to give you an example *[SW shows more pictures]* that was me as Belle Watling, madam of the whore house *[SW and MW laughing]*. So, like I said, it was just a lot of fun. Just some more examples of the banquet that we always had *[SW shows more pictures]*. You would have anywhere from 10 to 15 cocktail parties. They'd start on Friday afternoon and they'd go until 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning. Then they'd start at breakfast the next morning with eye openers. A lot of fun.

11:56

MW: Yeah.

11:57

SW: I think probably one of the most fun times I've ever had, I went to a run in Washington D.C. and we had it at the... I can't remember the name of the hotel, but it was right downtown Washington and they decided their cocktail party that they were going to do Ethel Merman Bathing Beauties so if you can imagine a bunch of guys in one-piece bathing suits. It's kind of almost like college fraternity type stuff, same thing is true with the leather clubs.

12:31

MW: How did you find out about the leather club?

12:34

SW: I was involved with someone before I moved to Roanoke that was into the leather clubs. And they basically brought me into the leather clubs. Then when I moved to Roanoke I found out there was a club here and so I joined the club here. That club eventually disbanded and then there was another club called the Rogues which is where the patch on my vest is from. And you could be associate members of clubs from other states, like Code 12 was a club in Jacksonville, Florida that I was an associate member of. So I traveled quite a bit. I'd ride my bike. It wasn't anything unusual for me to ride to New York on my motorcycle and Ohio and just wherever. And pack everything you'd want for a whole weekend on the back of my motorcycle and take off for the weekend. So it was a lot of fun.

13:41

MW: And you said that that hat that you had to earn... What types of things did you [have to] do like you said...

13:47

SW: Well, for one thing you had to learn about the history of the leather clubs and there is a very deep history of the leather clubs. As a matter of fact, there's a leather archives in Chicago that has a lot of the first clubs' information and things like that.¹ And I think for me the big thing was learning that you do not automatically assume that just because somebody is, quote, in the leather club that they're into, that I want to tie you up and beat you and all of this because it couldn't be more from the truth. Granted, like I said, there's people out there like that. But there's people out there like that in every aspect of life that that's their thing. I tend to try to stay away from that kind of people because that's not me at all. I'm more into sharing and having a good time and just enjoying as opposed to the... And I did a lot of demonstrations. Now, I say that I wasn't into pain, and I really wasn't, but I have a paddle that... it used to be if I went to the bar somewhere everybody wanted to take one hit from Daddy Sam with the paddle. [SW goes to get paddle] That is my paddle. And all of those are names of people that had at one time or another taken at least one whack from the paddle. Once again, a whole lot like a fraternity in college where you have somebody that's your frat master or whatever, and they're going to be in charge of the paddle. I really don't know when I started being called Daddy Sam, but that kind of came up and as you can see the paddle was engraved "Daddy Sam." I used to do some demonstrations with fire. I knew that would get you! Fire play is one of the oldest tricks in the world. It's an old circus trick. And I was taught to do it and people used to love having me set them on fire. It does something for me and it does something for them, too. Number one, for you to trust me enough to set you on fire

¹ Leather Archives & Museum, 6418 N Greenview Ave, Chicago, IL 60626,
<http://www.leatherarchives.org>.

and not let you burn. It kind of strokes my ego a little bit because that says you really trust me. But on the other hand that person, too, has to put complete trust in you. Because basically what you would do is... and it was really awesome in a bar because you would clear the pool table, usually is where I did it a lot of times. We would put something over top of the pool table and the person would take their shirt off and I would light their back on fire and then I'd take my hand and cup it like that and put it out.

17:20

MW: That's amazing.

17:21

SW: Haven't done it in a lot of years. Don't know that I would even attempt to do it again because it has been that long. But the secret to it, and the way I was taught, there was a lady that taught me how to do it. I was at a leather run and I saw her setting somebody on fire and I thought that is so cool, yet that whole person's back is just flaming and they weren't burned at all. And I was like "I want to try that!" So she laid me down and she sprayed my back and set me on fire. It got a little warm and I started to raise up and she pushed me back down and she said "Don't worry" because she started talking to somebody. She said, "Whether I put it out or not it's gonna go out before it burns you." And the reason for that is it's done with a very low percent grade of alcohol so it flashes real quick. But for people in the room that had never seen it, they don't know that. They just know that I've set somebody on fire. And I put it in my hand and lit my hand and did this number and waved it around the room and everything, but it doesn't burn. Now you have to be careful and this is one thing that I believed in that anytime I did a demonstration is I would always tell people "Do not go home and try this because if you don't know what you're doing you're going to hurt somebody." If you just go to the grocery store and buy any grade of alcohol and think "Oh Sam did this I can do this," [and] spray somebody's back and light a match to it, you're going to hurt them. So I would always say "Don't do it." Number one, don't even attempt to do it unless you've had it done to you. Because you have to be able to know the sensation that the person is going to feel before you can respect their limits. It was kind of like, it wasn't even like you would get really warm because I think it was like a 2 or 3 percent alcohol, so very low grade alcohol. And you told the person, too. You made sure they laid perfectly flat and made sure it didn't puddle on their back. And what I'd use is like a mist bottle like you'd mist plants with, mist the back so there's just little beads of alcohol and then when you'd light it it's going to go up in blue flames just like that. And then, like I said, I'd immediately just take my hand and cup it, hold it out and put it out like that. It was kind of neat.

20:25

MW: Kind of? It sounds incredible!

20:28

SW: *[laughter]* And that's really when people started calling me Daddy Sam then. Probably another thing that really came about that started me being called Daddy Sam was the murder that happened in Roanoke.² I can't remember the year, but it was a situation where somebody from out of town walked into Corned Beef and Company and got directions to The Park. They gave him directions just like anyone would, and as they walked out the door the guy made a comment "I'm going to go kill a bunch of faggots." Well, they immediately called the police, and the police went to The Park thinking "that's where this guy's going" because that's where he got directions to. But he did not go to The Park, he went to the little bar on Salem Avenue called Backstreet, walked in, sat down and had a beer with several people, stood up and just fired point blank and shot seven people and killed one. And then right after that, there was a candlelit vigil, and there was probably close to six or seven hundred people that met in Elmwood Park, and they had called me and asked me, as the leader of the leather community, if I would lead the parade. Well, I was kind of young and foolish, but I'm like "Sure! I will!" And I went down that night dressed in full leather, and I had my leather pride flag and everything, and I'm thinking "This isn't smart. You are right out in front of this whole crowd, there's just been a murder in Roanoke, and you'd be an easy shot for anybody." Nothing happened that night. The police were fantastic, they blocked it off from Salem Avenue... we came out of Elmwood Park, onto Salem Avenue, and the march went from there up Salem Avenue, to where Backstreet Bar is, and that's where the candlelit vigil was held. That's also when I started having a whole lot more to do with a lot of the other aspects of the gay community, because a couple of the female impersonators were there, and at that point everyone was a little standoffish from Daddy Sam, because that can be intimidating. If you see me and I've got a whip on my side and all that... but once you got to know me it was like "No, he's just like anyone else. He just has a good time, he's not going to—without you wanting him to—and even if somebody wanted me to tie them up and beat them I don't think that I could have ever done it. I'm just not that kind of person. I would hit them with a paddle, of course. *[laughing]* But that's probably when I started being called Daddy Sam, and it got to the point where I could even go into the bar and somebody would shout "Daddy Sam's here!" Especially at Backstreet, cause it was a small community type bar. That's where I did a lot of demos [demonstrations] and everything.

But then I kind of got out of it. I met my partner, and he really wasn't into the leather world that much. I think it's just like anything else, you go down so many paths in your life, and you go down one path for a while and then your life would take another turn, and you go down a different path. And I think that was true with me. We met and wanted to build a life together, and I felt that anytime you're going to be involved in a relationship you probably should not be spending a lot of time in a bar. Be it a gay relationship, a straight relationship, or any other kind of relationship, bars tend to breed trouble because there's always that other person that's going to try to make the person you're with jealous. They might not really want you themselves, but they're going to do something to prove "Well, I can get them." And

² The following story refers to the Backstreet Café shooting of September 22, 2000.

so we pretty much got to the point that we did not go to the bars, don't go to the bars, haven't been to the bar [since]... well, we've been together nine years and I think we've been to the bar maybe three times since we've been together. But, looking back at the last nine years, I would not give up those nine years for all the years I spent going to the bar. He is, without a doubt... if ever I had a soulmate... he is my soulmate. We met online. There was a thing called Bear 411 [bear411.com] and it's just kind of like a chatroom. We started chatting, and we talked for a year before we ever met each other. We got to the point where we talked everyday, either on the computer or by phone. He was from West Virginia and he was living in North Carolina. He was going up to his family reunion, and he said "I'll just stop for the weekend," so we could finally meet because we hadn't in a year. I'm like "okay, that's cool." So he came up and we had a great weekend. It was like you weren't meeting a stranger, because you'd talked for a year, so you really knew a lot about each other... what your likes were, your dislikes, and everything. It was funny because I was coming in from work and he was coming across the Walnut Street Bridge, and he called me and said "I think I'm lost." I said "okay, what are you driving," and he said "a blue van." I said "if you see that red truck that just pulled out in front of you, that would be me, so just follow me home," and he did. He spent Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday morning he got up and got ready to go to his family reunion, and just on a whim I said "if you don't mind, I'll go with you." And he's like, "I did tell you this is a West Virginia family reunion." "Yes," I said, but I went with him to his family reunion and so I met his whole family in one day, and it was funny because his mom and dad did not know probably for three or four years that that was the first weekend we'd ever seen each other. They assumed that we'd been dating. We got to talking one night and we're like "No! That was the first weekend we had seen each other also." And then five years ago we had a commitment service in North Carolina, and then as soon as Virginia made it legal, I was out of town on business and I called him and I said "Let's get married." So, we got married January the 10th, 2015. And we just celebrated our one-year official anniversary, and as far as I'm concerned we'll be together forever.

29:09

MW: Congratulations!

29:11

SW: Thank you, thank you.

29:14

MW: That's really exciting, I was actually going to ask if you were married. I was going to ask if you were. That's wonderful!

29:20

SW: Yes. And we both share a lot of the same likes. We both like gardening as you can probably tell by looking at the yard out here in the front and everything. We go to the lake quite a bit. We jokingly tell people the majority of our friends are not really gay. They're straight people, because we don't really think of our lifestyle as

“quote, quote...” I know some people say “well, there’s a gay lifestyle and a straight lifestyle.” Our lifestyle is our lifestyle, you know? We have Christmas parties and it’s a mix of people. Like I said, I’m into gardening, I’m a master gardener. I do therapeutic gardening with nursing homes and all that. He’s into Christmas lights so he does a whole shopping center in North Carolina by himself, and just to give you an idea when I say we’re kind of into Christmas, we had fifteen Christmas trees throughout the house. Like I said, you go down a different path. I don’t miss the leather clubs. I don’t regret being in the leather clubs, I thoroughly enjoyed it and I made a lot of great friends there. But, I think as you get older, there’s this thing when you become an adult, you put away childish things. Well, I think I finally became an adult and put away my childish things and settled down to be a real adult and contributing person to the community.

31:08

MW: So, do you still keep in touch with some friends that you made in the leather community?

31:16

SW: Oh yes, absolutely. As a matter of fact, some were at our wedding. And it was funny because when we started sending out invitations for the wedding, I told Mark “Don’t worry about how many you send, because only fifty percent is going to show up.” Ninety-five percent showed up, and we had it here. We left all the Christmas decorations up, we took all the furniture out of the living room and all the furniture out of the dining room. We rented chairs, had it set up like a chapel. We ended up with three ministers just because the couple that had done our commitment in North Carolina wanted to be a part of it, but their license was not recognized in Virginia because they’re from North Carolina. We had to get a minister in Virginia to do the officiating and actually pronounce husband and husband, but they could still be a part of it too, so we ended up with three ministers. *[laughter]* If we’re not married now, we’re never going to be...

32:28

MW: Wow! So you mentioned Backstreet Café, was that one of your favorite bars to go to...?

32:37

SW: Actually, that was just a little small neighborhood type bar and, yes, that’s probably the one I went to a lot. There used to be another one called The Last Straw that was right at the corner of Salem and Jefferson when I first moved to Roanoke, and it eventually closed. I’m not real big into the large dance bars. I like small, community-type bars where you can sit and carry on a conversation. And you get to know people, you don’t feel like you’re screaming to talk to each other all the time. And I always felt that way when I went to The Park, because it was loud dance music and BARARARARAR *[laughter]* And you really couldn’t connect with people I didn’t think. You go and you dance and have a good time, and then you go home. But in the smaller bars, there was always that opportunity to just sit one-on-one, kind of like

what we're doing right now. Just sit and talk, you know, about anything and everything.

33:42

MW: So, again you mentioned that gentleman went into Corned Beef and the police found out that he was going to do that heinous act, so what was the relationship like with the police back in the '80s?

34:02

SW: Actually, very good. That was evident to me in the night that we had the candlelight vigil. They blocked all the side streets, they were very respectful to everyone, and everyone was very respectful to them. I was amazed.

34:30

MW: That's wonderful.

34:31

SW: Because you're talking back... jeez, this had to have been twenty years ago maybe or longer that this happened. And they got the guy. They got him within two or three blocks of Backstreet. But actually, what the police did when they found out the he was going to The Park, they went to The Park and would not allow anyone in The Park to leave because they didn't know where he was. And so they basically locked it down, and it was good because those people were safe inside because the police were pretty much all around that place.

35:18

MW: So, did they ever figure out his motive behind...?

35:23

SW: Supposedly his motive was that his last name was Gay, and that he had been harassed all his life because of his last name. Do I buy that story? Not at all, not at all. I'm sorry, but that's just not a reason to go in and kill somebody in cold blood. I mean, he didn't even know these people, had never seen these people. It wasn't like there had been any kind of confrontation with them or anything. He just, like I said, went in, sat at the table with them, had a beer, and got up and they assumed he was going to leave, but he got up and just... point blank.

36:17

MW: So, after that happened were people afraid to go out to... was there a lull in the nightlife?

36:26

SW: Actually, no. There wasn't. Because they caught him that night. It wasn't like it was days or anything. They got him probably within four blocks of Backstreet. They had a good description of him and everything so they were right on top of it. But no, I think, if anything, it was just the opposite. Pretty much it's the same as I feel today,

that you can't let... in our day and time today, you can't lock yourself in the house because you're afraid there might be a terrorist on a street corner. I mean, you guys especially, because I was telling someone the other day, it's sad that our kids today can't go to college and get a college education without worrying about some idiot that might come in and start shooting for no reason at all, because it's happened and for no reason. So I think today is worse than it was then. Because I think we kind of said "we're not going to stay home, we're not going to lock our doors and not go out and everything." So we went back out.

The one nice thing that I will say that happened was, and I can't remember the minister's name, but there was a minister about the same time that was going all over the United States and was causing a lot of problems, like if there was a gay situation or something, and he was saying people were basically getting what they deserved. I can't remember his name, but to protect this guy's family, when they had the funeral, there was a row of people that stood with white sheets and held them up so that the media nor this minister, because this minister said he was coming to town the day of the funeral.³ We had all gone through some training about what not to do. Do not touch him, because that's what he wanted. Because he would have had everyone right where he wanted them then, if, say, you had been him and I had as much as put my hand on you, you would have cried foul "They're attacking me." So we went through a night of training, of do not touch them, ignore them, don't get into any kind of verbal confrontation with them or anything. Just try to block it out of your mind. And fortunately he did not come to town, but he had said he was going to. And I can't remember his name. It was a minister, it was about... I can't remember, because it was way after the Ryan White situation, but I can't remember his name. He was causing problems all over the United States, and trying to say that the gay population were the ones causing the problem. What else?

40:01

MW: Are there any experiences that did make you just want to—someone similar to that minister—any experiences that you faced where you just had to speak up, do something about it where someone was just discriminating against you because of who you were or who you are?

40:22

SW: It's funny you ask that. Like I said I was in the parade or in that candlelight vigil march that night and as I walked the street I thought this isn't smart because you're going to be on the news and everybody at work is going to be watching the news so... I watched the news and I wasn't on the news and thought "phew, good," you know. And then the next morning I got a newspaper on the way to work and opened the newspaper and there I was! Full leather carrying a leather pride flag and I'm like "no no no..." and I thought how do I handle this? And I kept looking at the paper thinking, don't look like me, didn't look like me and then I'd look again and be like

³ The narrator is likely referring to the Westboro Baptist Church. He is speaking of the funeral held for Danny Overstreet, the sole victim of the Backstreet Café shooting.

“yeah it does, yeah it does,” there’s no doubt who that is. But I went out to work and I thought about it and I just decided that if I was confronted I was just going to basically say what I do in my private life is my business, it has no bearing on my job yet I still do the same job that I always do, and it was strange cause nobody said a word. And I worried about it all day, but nobody said a word all day long. About two weeks later one of the guys walked up to me and he said “[I] saw your picture in the paper” and I said “man...” He said “What you do in your life is your business, nobody else’s.” But that’s the only time that I’ve really worried about that.

42:31

SW: I’m a very fortunate person and my partner is a very fortunate person because both families know, both families are very accepting. When we got married his mom—his dad has passed away—but his mom was here and my sister was here and we basically did a Western-type wedding and when he came down the steps he turned and handed his cowboy hat to his mom and then she took his arm and walked across the living room and stood beside of him and when I came down I handed mine to my sister and did the same. And so it’s... and even before his dad passed away, his dad was always very accepting. His dad always called me “son in law” and it was funny because he had to go to the hospital for open heart surgery and Mark had not been here that long and he called me and he said “how do I get to Charlottesville?” And I’m like “why are you going to Charlottesville?” He said “they’re rushing my dad in an ambulance to UVA [the University of Virginia]” and I said “well you’re not driving, I’ll be home in ten minutes.” And so I put him in my car and we took off to Charlottesville. It was strange because I didn’t know if you believe in premonition or anything like that but we stopped at a rest area and went and used the bathroom and when I came out I saw an ambulance go by and I said “there goes your dad... in that ambulance.” And I said, “I’m catching it.” He said “you’ll get a ticket,” and I said “not unless they follow me to Charlottesville I won’t because I’m not stopping.” And we pulled in right behind the ambulance and it was his dad. And so, they got his dad out of the ambulance and Mark went in with him and everything. I went and parked and came back and went to the room and the nurse said “well you must be his other son.” And I said “no, I’m his son in law,” and Mark’s dad looked and grinned and said “yeah, he’s my son in law” and he called me son in law from then on.

44:56

SW: So we’re very fortunate there’s a lot of people even today and it’s sad. There’s a lot of people today that can’t come out to their families. Or if they do come out to their families they don’t really want to have anything to do with them anymore and we don’t have that problem. My whole family knows. His whole family knows. I go to family reunions, he goes to my family’s and everything. And I think that’s the way it should be, you know. It’s not a matter of straight and straight or gay and gay or whatever it’s a matter of this is the person that I love, this is the person I want to share my life with. Don’t make me choose between the person I love and my family because if you do you’re going to lose. If you make me choose, I guarantee you

you're going to lose. Because I'm not going to give up the man I love, the man I spent nine years of my life with for anybody. [*Long pause*] And that's just the way I feel.

46:07

MW: Absolutely. So would you say that discrimination towards the gay community is worse now than it was when you were...?

46:16

SW: No, no. I do not think you have the discrimination today that you would have had twenty years ago even. And, and I'll be honest with you, I think somebody that really helped that is Ellen DeGeneres. I mean I can remember when she first was outed, she was ostracized. I mean they pulled her off of T.V. They did all these things you know, nobody wanted anything to do with her. And look at her today. And look at a lot of your actors and things, they're no longer afraid to say "I'm gay" or "I've gotten married" or whatever. You can pick up any magazine and start looking like, and it'll say "so and so got married" and I'm like "ah, we've come a long way." We've come a long way. A lot farther really than I would have ever thought would happen in my life. And I think it was time. I worry now because of who's running for president [*laughing*]. And I won't mention any names, but I don't think anyone could turn the wheels back, I don't think America would stand for it. And you know, we went through this whole thing of the evangelical groups saying that if you allow gays to get married it's going to hurt the straight lifestyle. No it's not. Why? How? To us the way we looked at it and we used to talk about this a lot. We did not care if you called it marriage or if you called it commitment, whatever you wanted to call it that was fine. What we wanted was equal rights. You know, if I went into a hospital I wanted to know that Mark as my husband had a right to say this is what you do. And until they decided this [the Supreme Court case legalizing same-sex marriage] he really didn't. I had to have a power of attorney for that, and that's not right. I mean, just like if either of you, for example, were in a relationship with someone and you were in that relationship for twenty years [*pause*], that person should be able to have a say in your health. Whether you have a little piece of paper that says you're married or not married. I always said a piece of paper doesn't make a marriage, it doesn't break a marriage and it doesn't make a marriage. And so that's what I really always pushed for was I don't care what you call it, I mean even today. I will tell you this, I have called him "husband" more with you two than I have called him in a year because I have a hard time with that stuff. I call him my partner usually. But I have a hard time calling him my husband. But basically if you look on our marriage certificate that's exactly what it says. Husband. But to me, I don't—and that's probably just me—I don't know that America's ready for husband-husband, wife-wife, although they seem to be I mean they don't really seem to be having a lot of problems with it. You hear Patrick Harris for example calls his other person in his life "husband," Ellen calls the person in her life "wife," but I just have a hard time with it. It's easier for me to say "partner" than "This is my husband." I guess because that's the way I was brought up.

50:43

MW: So I want to go back just a little bit, you mentioned your family and how fortunate you are to have them know. When did they know?

50:55

SW: *[Laughing]* It hasn't always been an easy road. When I came home from the Air Force, I came out to my sister, who *[then]* told my mom, and my dad had already passed away at that time and my mom called and she said *[pause]* ... well, my sister told me she had told my mom, let me go back, and so mom called and I said "Well, I guess you called to talk about what sis told you" and she said "What?" And I said "that I'm gay" and she said "she didn't tell me nothing like that," so mother was kind of funny with it for a long, long time and she wanted to know who was the man and who was the woman and I said "no, no, no it don't work that way. You don't have to have a man and a woman. We're equal partners." And she said "well, I just don't understand." And I said "I know, I don't really expect you to understand." And my mom lived in California and it was so funny because I remember a statement that she said, "I don't understand but I know there's a lot of them that live out here." *[Laughing]* And I said "yes, there is."

And so at that time my partner and I went to visit and she was going to give me my old bedroom and him the guest room *[pause]*. And I sat her down, and I said "Mother, we need to have a talk. We share a house together. We share a bed together at home. If you and my stepdad came to my house I would not put you in one room and him in another room," and she said "well, no" and I said "well then why are you doing it to me?" And she sat there for a minute and said "you're right, it doesn't make any sense does it? If you do this together at home..." And I'm one of those people, I'm very respectful of people's feelings. I mean you will never see us out in public, me with my arm around him even. I don't do that. I don't like to see heterosexual[s] overly affectionate in public. I think there's a time and a place for everything and I don't think public is, you know... I want to go up sometimes and say "you need to get a room." *[Laughing]* And I feel the same with couples that are gay. I think too many times people want to try to push it down somebody's throat, you know? You have to accept us. Well maybe if you'd ease up a little bit they'll accept y'all a little better? But yeah it was kind of rough for a little while with my family. *[I]* had a brother that was, it was really rough with. His first thought was that he was going to kidnap me and beat me straight. And *[laughter]* I don't think so. I said "it just doesn't work that way, you know? I am who I am. I'm still the same." If you met me today and didn't know, I'd still be me. What I do, and I tell people this, what I do behind that door is my business. What I do on the other side of that door is part of your business because that's public, you know. And that's just kind of the way I look at it. Doesn't matter what you do behind closed doors. That's each individual's personal *[business]*.

55:19

MW: So you went to visit your mom in California, how old were you when...

55:24

SW: When I told her?

55:25

MW: Yes.

55:26

SW: Twenty four, twenty five something like that

55:32

MW: Well that's wonderful that she's so accepting. Is your mother still... ?

55:36

SW: No she's passed away.

55:38

MW: Sorry to hear that.

55:40

SW: But, my sister, and all my nieces and nephews call Mark uncle. As a matter of a fact my niece probably talks to him more than she does me and [its] just a very good relationship all the way around. His family's the same way. We had a little problem with one member of his family. He had an uncle that would call and invite Mark to Christmas socials, wouldn't say "you and Sam come" would just say "you come," and Mark finally told his daughter "until he says you and Sam, I'm not coming." So, we're going this coming weekend because we got a call the other day and he said "we want Sam and you to come for a social at the house." So... mark another one off.

[*Laughing*] And I think that's the way, I think that's the way the world is moving. I think as people get more educated they're more accepting. I had somebody tell me, and there's a lot of truth to this, people who tend to not leave more than 25 miles from home tend to have a very narrow perspective. Especially if you happen to be from this area, you know, and you've never traveled or anything and you've always lived here in the "Bible belt," you got those blinders. You know, there's no gray area, it's all gotta be black and white, but if you talk to people that have gone to school, that are educated and things, that opens up a whole new world I think to everybody.

57:39

MW: Absolutely [*pause*] So, coming to Roanoke and being in the Leather club and that having a huge influence on you and then after you met your partner, so you decided to stay in Roanoke because of work or just because you liked Roanoke still as a community?

58:00

SW: Well I've, like I've said, I didn't retire until last year but I do like Roanoke. Of everywhere I've ever lived, I like Roanoke the best. I had never lived around the mountains until I moved to Roanoke. I don't know if I like living around the mountains or not, and my mom used to always say "well you need to move to

California” and I went “no, no. Too many people.” And I joke with Mark every now and then I’m like “we ought to sell the house and move to Florida since I’ve retired” and he said “really?” and I said “no, not really.” [*Laughing*] I don’t really want to do that. I love Roanoke. I love the people in Roanoke. We have a lot of friends here, we have a lot of friends that are in the Winston-Salem area where Mark was living, a lot of artist friends down there, and it’s a couple of hours and we’re down there or a couple of hours and they can be up here. So I can’t see us living anywhere else.

59:09

MW: So my last question, how would you, since you were in Roanoke from ‘81, how would you in just a short summary describe living in Roanoke from ‘81 until now? It doesn’t have to be short.

59:27

SW: A life full of adventures. From the day I moved here up through this morning when I told Mark “good morning.” A life full of adventure. Nothing that I would really want to change. I’ve enjoyed it and I just look forward to spending the rest of my life here.

59:53

MW: That’s wonderful. Well, thank you...

59:55

SW: You’re welcome.

59:57

MW: ...so much for your time, Sam..We cannot thank you enough, and just thank you for letting us hear all about your experiences here.

60:03

SW: You’re welcome.

60:05

MW: Really, really appreciate it.

60:06

SW: Quite welcome.