

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

**Interview with Virginia Irene Lindsey
February 25, 2016**

Interviewer: Alexis Rixner

Interviewee: Virginia Lindsey

Date: Thursday, February 25, 2016

Location: Roanoke College Fintel Library, 221 College Ln, Salem, VA 24153

Total: 80:04

Transcription prepared by: Sabrina McIntyre

0:00 = Introductions

2:14 = growing up in Virginia and attending a private military school until age 18

5:45 = attending college in Tennessee

8:23 = family history, about her grandfather, father, and grandmother. The first time her grandmother put her in a dress (at age 6 or 7)

17:25 = her relationships with cisgender women

20:58 = thoughts on sexual orientation and gender identity

26:42 = remembering her first instance identifying as female

28:10 = deciding to come out as transgender (mid-1990s)

33:26 = the story of coming out to her friend, and her friend's mother, as transgender (2000s)

40:39 = nightlife in Roanoke

42:26 = more thoughts on sexual orientation, attraction; and violence against TGs

45:53 = involvement in the Blue Ridge Society, the first transgender organization in Roanoke (1990s)

51:16 = about Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge, how it was founded, and why she left the organization (mid-2000s)

57:39 = the story of attending a gay and lesbian dance as a transwoman

61:43 = the story of when her wife's in-laws challenged her gender identity

66:27 = on the reasons for transphobia within both gay and straight communities

68:10 = on defining transgender, versus other terms

70:20 = on switching between identities as a transwoman and a cis man

72:47 = looking at old photographs of her and her friends

Interview (1:20:04 total)

0:00 Alexis: It is 1:30 pm, Thursday, February 25, 2016. My name is Alexis Rixner, and I am a Roanoke College student, and I am here with Virginia Lindsey in the Fintel Library located in Salem, Virginia. I am conducting this interview of an oral history as a public record for the community. Our first question is “What pronoun do you use to identify yourself?”

0:26 Virginia: She.

0:31 Alexis: Why did you agree to participate in this project?

0:36 Virginia: [*pause*] To make people more aware that we exist. That we're no different from anyone else and we expect to be treated like anyone else would be. It's the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

1:01 Alexis: Mhm, definitely. What do you hope to gain out of this experience?

1:05 Virginia: Just the satisfactions that I may have helped someone else understand that there are differences in people.

1:16 Alexis: Mhm, ok. How long have you lived in Virginia?

1:26 Virginia: Ooh [*sighs*] Hm, that's interesting. [Another pause for thought] Let's just say, virtually all my life. Between Virginia and Tennessee.

1:41 Alexis: Virginia and Tennessee?

1:42 Virginia: It gets pretty complicated but it was something kinda out of my hands.

1:48 Alexis: Ok, so what areas of Virginia did you live, if you could just name them all. Was it in this area?

1:55 Virginia: Yeah, in the Roanoke area.

1:57 Alexis: Ok.

1:58 Virginia: I went to a private school called Fork Union [Military Academy].

2:03 Alexis: Fork Union?

2:05 Virginia: Yep, for quite a while.

2:07 Alexis: and would you say most of your adult life has been in this area?

2:10 Virginia: Yes.

2:14 Alexis: Ok, so what was it like growing up I guess predominately in Virginia? Like schooling, I guess financial status, etc.? What was it like for you? You can do a progression.

2:26 Virginia: Well it's, again, it's a complicated issue. I was raised by my grandparents. And I would assume that they interpreted the child that they were dealing with to have what is now called "HADD" or "HADA" or whatever [ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] and I was in private schools from, I was 4 ½ [years old] until I graduated.

2:56 Alexis: Wow, ok, and what about... [Virginia interrupts to clarify]

3:00 Virginia: These are military private, military schools.

3:02 Alexis: Military schools? Ok. Were your grandparents in the military or they just...?

3:06 Virginia: No. My mother and father were. But again, that's you're... [slightly chuckles], we could spend the rest of the afternoon discussing that little... "thing". Anyway, I was in private military schools when I was 4 ½ until I started in college at 18.

3:23 Alexis: And how was your experience in these private schools? What you said.

3:28 Virginia: How was it?

3:29 Alexis: Yea, how was your experience?

3:31 Virginia: It's all I knew. I mean you started a child off at 4 ½ in a very disciplined type of environment and that's all they know.

3:38 Alexis: Mhm.

3:39 Virginia: And that's all I did.

3:44 Alexis: Ok, so after high school, what were some of your favorite high school hang out places?

3:52 Virginia: In school, we didn't have any. We were on the campus 24/7. When I'd come home from vacations, or whatever, it was just... I had a few friends and we'd just do what most kids did back at that time.

4:09 Alexis: Which was?

4:11 Virginia: Just riding bikes, hiking, playing. We didn't have video games, hello!

4:19 Alexis: [*laughter*]

4:20 Virginia: [*joins Alexis in laughter*] That's all we had. Just bikes and friends and just doing whatever kids did back then.

4:26 Alexis: Ok and what were your hang out places as you grew up? Like after 18. What it the same: similar or different?

4:35 Virginia: You mean in college?

4:37 Alexis: Mhm.

4:39 Virginia: Well, I was on the football team, on the gymnastics team, I worked three jobs going through college. So I didn't hang out much, was pretty busy.

4:56 Alexis: So just tell me about some of your childhood friends.

5:03 Virginia: I had two that I specifically remember. One of them lived right down the street. He and I did everything kids did when I was home. Just riding bikes and playing and baseball and softball and whatever kids did. The other one lived kind of across the street from me and from what I understand they're both deceased now. But you know, after I graduated from high school, went to college, we kinda lost touch and I didn't have any real reason to go back.

5:45 Alexis: Ok, so do where did you go to college?

5:47 Virginia: Tennessee Technological University.

5:50 Alexis: That was a big difference from Virginia?

5:53 Virginia: [*laughter*] You take a kid from a disciplined military environment where you had obligations 24/7, to no obligations to do anything and it's a big change.

6:10 Alexis: How'd you adjust?

6:13 Virginia: Well, I almost flunked out of my first, the end of my second quarter cause I just...there was nobody there to tell you what to do. You just kinda did you own thing. And just, somewhere along the way it just clicks: "You can't do this." And the football coach got me aside and said, "You know, you're gonna flunk out if you don't get your act together. And we're gonna give you a tutor." And I knew the stuff, I just, I didn't go to class, I didn't study, it was like the spring had been compressed all 18 years and all of a sudden, it was free! But I don't know about your college history but mine, I just... probably starting in the middle of my sophomore year, it clicked. I knew who to ask about which professors wanted what and how to get through. And my last two years I averaged about a 3.8/4.0 average because it started to make sense. Plus the fact that what I had wanted to do all my life was coming to fruition, which was be a naval aviator. And I talked to the recruiters and they kinda set me on a straight and narrow, too. "We're not gonna take idiots! We're not gonna put you in a multimillion dollar aircraft if you're stupid." [Laughter] You know? So that was part of the process.

7:49 Alexis: Ok so, did you stay in Tennessee in the summer?

7:56 Virginia: Oh yea, I was working three jobs. I worked in the athletic department, I was a lifeguard at the local pool for the students, so during the summers that's what I did. I took a few courses during the summer and worked. Cause I didn't have any money and that was the only source of income, what little bit of scholarships that I had, and the jobs that they gave me.

8:23 Alexis: Ok, describe what your grandparents thought about your childhood and into your adulthood? And were they supportive of your decisions? Like your grandparents, were they supportive of you going to school, college, and stuff?

8:43 Virginia: Well, no, not really, I don't...I've got a very complicated history. Just, like, my real grandfather was killed in World War One. [pause] If you have time, I'm gonna tell you a quick story.

9:02 Alexis: Definitely.

9:04 Virginia: To me it's interesting. Here was this 15 year old girl, she got pregnant. 15 years old. The guy that got her pregnant, my grandfather, he had a best friend. He goes to his best friend and says, "Let's sign up and join the war effort!" This is World War One. And he made a pact with his friend, he said, "If I don't come back," he said, "I want you to marry..." you know, my grandmother. Well, I said he was killed in World War One. His friend did come back and did marry her. So that became my step-grandfather. Raised me like his own, they never had any children other than raising myself. They footed the bill for my going to the private schools. I did work through Fork Union as a waiter. So that helped defray a lot of the costs. But I waited on tables there a lot of the time. It never dawned on me it was that's what I did, you know? I didn't know how much money it provided, who it helped, whatever. I just, that was what I had to do and

that's what I did. So, when he passed away, she kinda lost it. They'd been married fifty years, forty years, I don't know. Whatever. And as far as my processes after that, I don't think she really ever got involved. I was funding my own college and I would come home and see her and stayed in the house but other than that, it was no involvement. She didn't ask me about my grades or my friends or anything. She just... so anyway. Does that help? Confuse?

11:05 Alexis: No, not at all.

11:06 Virginia: Oh...well, I'm confused [*laughter*]

11:07 Alexis: haha!

11:08 Virginia: I'll go back a little bit. My father, I got on ancestry.com and I found, if I'm taking too much time, you can stop me...

11:16 Alexis: Oh no.

11:17 Virginia: I got on ancestry.com two, three years ago. And looked up my matriarchal side of the family and was able to find my father, and one my earliest remembrances of transgender, cross-dressing, was done by my grandmother. Now get this, I couldn't have been more than 6, 7 years old. She put me in a dress. I remember this just like it was yesterday, put me in a dress. And you may have never seen a picture. The old bonnets that women used to wear. She was half-Comanche. She lived in Texas in a house, swear to God I remember it like it was yesterday. She put me in that old, sack dress, a bonnet, gave me a handmade broom, and had me sweeping her floor. Honey, it was a dirt floor.

12:20 Alexis: [*laughter*]

12:22 Virginia: Seriously.

12:23 Alexis: Wow.

12:24 Virginia: And I could just picture myself back then, just like it was yesterday. I don't know why, she was just the sweetest thing. Anyway, I found out my father had... she had seven, eight children. I still can't find my grandfather on that site. His name is not listed in any of the records! It just lists her name and eight children and they were all considered laborers in Texas. Cowboys... [*sighs*] Having some fun now? Go ahead.

13:01 Alexis: Going back to, did you have any other experiences with your grandmother dressing you up?

13:06 Virginia: No.

13:07 Alexis: No?

13:08 Virginia: That's the only one I remember. That's the only time I ever saw her in my lifetime. Couldn't have been more than a couple of days cause I was staying with my father. And my grandparents had driven us to Texas and rumor has it that they were trying to put me off on him and he didn't want anything to do with me. So they ended up keeping me and drove back to Tennessee.

13:36 Alexis: What were some of the most difficult periods in your life and how did you deal with them?

13:50 Virginia: [*long pause*] Wow, I can't answer that. I mean you would need to be a lot more specific. I mean, are you talking about in military school, military high school, college, adulthood? Because I'm unique and I assume it's based on being in military school from the time I was 4 ½. I do my own thing. I didn't have anybody to support me. It was either me or them and I decided it was gonna be me. So any difficulties that came up, I handled it. I didn't have anybody to turn to, no shoulder to cry on. You just put on your big girl panties and do your thing.

14:40 Alexis: If I had to specify, college.

14:43 Virginia: College. [*pause*] The most difficult?

14:47 Alexis: Yes, sorry.

14:49 Virginia: Ah, yeah well it was when I almost flunked out and sitting down and talking to myself, explaining to myself that, "You got into this school. Why are you flunking out?" And it dawned on me, I don't go to class. You don't do your homework. You think it's a big party. It's not, this is real. And once I got over that, and started figuring it out and getting some support from the head football coach and the Navy guys that I talked to. That's what did it.

15:23 Alexis: Do you still have a close relationship with your head coach?

15:27 Virginia: Oh, he's been deceased a long time. Honey you're talking to an old broad, here. Most of the...I went back to Tech. Oh it's been, I don't know fifteen years ago, and all of the coaches and all of the people that would have had any influence on me had either retired and moved to Arizona or deceased, so...

15:55 Alexis: What about in adulthood? Most difficult period as an adult?

16:08 Virginia: [*pause*] I don't consider it difficult. I just consider it a challenge, overcome it and move on.

16:15 Alexis: So, if you could think of one memorable challenge that just sticks within your mind, what would it be?

16:25 Virginia: It was very short lived. My second wife, who is now deceased, was at UVA and they had drilled three holes in her head and... [*pause*] I was coming back, I won't forget, I was coming up Afton Mountain, know where that is? Between Charlottesville on [Interstate] 81 and it was like 3 o'clock in the morning and that was probably the most difficult. I was trying to figure out what I was gonna do. What was going on, how was I gonna be able to handle all of this? That was probably the most difficult, just, for that instance.

17:25 Alexis: So talk about your second wife. Can you tell me about your earliest relationship you would remember?

17:33 Virginia: Relationship?

17:34 Alexis: I guess your early relationships like dating wise and stuff.

17:40 Virginia: Ah! I decided... I would have to regress to the fact of my grandparents not being involved, my father, or my step-grandfather, was a civil engineer. And he recommended that I take some additional math courses while I was home for the summer. So Bristol High School, Bristol, Tennessee, had summer school and they checked it out and found some math courses that they thought I would be... it was advanced geometry and something else. Anyway, you know I thought "what the heck, I'll do it." So I went in and I'm sitting in the class, with probably 15 or 20 other kids, and I was sitting by the window. It was an "L" shaped building, and over in the other building I see this gorgeous girl. I mean her hair was down to her waist, and she waved back. And that was probably my first real relationship. I found out she just lived across the street from the high school and her family and her brother was a big basketball player and got a full scholarship to... is it Carson-Newman [University]? Anyway, that was, we were together for a while. Her parents were just the sweetest people. It was interesting, she ended up marrying another naval officer. [*Laughs at the memory*]

19:32 Alexis: Are you currently in a relationship?

19:34 Virginia: Yes.

19:36 Alexis: If you're comfortable, tell me about this relationship.

19:42 Virginia: I met her, and she is—I don't know what term you all would like to use—I call them "GGs," genetic girl [a cisgender woman]. I met her through a support group on the internet and we just hit it off. And she's fond of telling anybody that asks, she and I are on the same page. We are on a need to know basis. But her saying is, she's

got the best of both worlds. And well, she's scary like a lot of GGs are. She knows what I'm going to say before I even say it. If I think about doing something, she's already thought about doing it and it's a skill that GGs evidently have. I haven't quite evolved to that yet. But, we're just like that.

20:58 Alexis: Regarding your sexuality, what is your sexuality preference of partners?

21:11 Virginia: Interesting question too, you know where that red phone is out there... [*laughter*]? One of your, and I call it a blessing to have what I was evidently born with... most... let me say that if you're gay, and most people see the word "gay" they assume male. They like other males, "lesbian" is female and they like other females, pretty cut and dry. But when you toss in the term... the terms transgender, cross-dresser, queer, searching, I just... the list just goes on. We live, we, myself, in an entirely different universe, that gays don't quite understand it, lesbians don't understand it, I don't know that they really care. Straights definitely don't understand it or a lot of them, they may not understand, they accept it. "That's just the way that person is..." Whatever.

My philosophy or my theory of this whole thing is, that if you're in my universe, be it whatever you are, transgender, cross-dressing, I... that is the biggest problem that my universe has. "What are we?" And I guess this kinda gets to be a educational thing. I see it as a continual, okay? Just arch, and pardon my description but this kinda of just brings it down to what it is. On the front end you have the person and I'm going to address males. The male that puts on a pair of panties once a year, that's it. Why he does it? for the relief? Whatever. Then you have the person who puts them on twice a year, and then the person that dresses full and the one who dresses and puts on make-up. And you got this whole continuum, nobody's static on it, they all, you can transfer from one part to another. At the far end of the spectrum is the person that lives as female, twenty four-seven, but has had no surgeries, maybe they've had facial surgery, maybe they've had breast augmentation, they have not had SRS [sex reassignment surgery] because when they reach that point where they've reached SRS they've been on hormones, they've taken everything else. They are no longer to me considered male. They're female. So somewhere on that continuum each of us—and unbeknownst to probably 90% of them—you're trying to find a balance in your life to live with this... I call it a gift, I wouldn't change who I am for anybody, it's a gift.

Now again you all are not to the point where you can psychoanalyze me. You can have your own opinions, but you're not. I am one of the fortunate few that has a balance, okay? You can call it split personality, you can call it some whatever medical psychological condition you want. When Virginia's Virginia she's Virginia. When her alter ego is out that's who he is and fortunately with the balance aspect, there is no conflict and that's the beauty of how I exist. One supports the other. If Virginia wants to get dressed and go to a movie or go out to eat, that's fine. If the alter ego—which I could give you some things which just might boggle your mind—but whatever he wants to do she supports it 110%. And that's where a lot of these people, and you read about it all the time, the suicides and

everything that happens, they don't have that balance and it's sad, it's unfortunate but that's just the way it is. And if something like this can help those people find that balance and I've talked to a lot of [transgender] girls if you will in my position, you got to find that... "I'm trying, I'm trying, I can't find it, I just... I don't want this, I want..." Sorry. I'm not a psychiatrist I can't help you. I can only tell you what should work and if that doesn't work for you... seek professional help. Does that help, I mean I just [*chuckles*]... I don't want to bore you...

26:35 Alexis: So how did you find this balance?

26:37 Virginia: I don't know, it's just comes with the territory.

26:42 Alexis: I guess my question is at what age is your first memory of when you started to identify as she or have some internal thinking, or something in the back of your head...?

26:55 Virginia: Again, it was like when my grandmother dressed me up, that was about [age] 6. Age 4 1/2 at that military school they put on a little play and I couldn't have been much... maybe 5 [years old] at the most. They put on a play and I will never forget the teacher's name, and she's been dead for God who knows how long, Ms. Maxine, you don't have to bleep that out because she's [dead] [*chuckles*]. She took a couple of us back in the kindergarten room. Lipstick, make-up, a dress, some funny looking little shoes. I was to be a Gypsy girl. And again it was like it was yesterday... I can remember twirling and dancing across the stage in my part of the play. That was my first indoctrination into it.

28:02 Alexis: And how did you feel, do you remember the emotions?

28:06 Virginia: It felt like that's who I was.

28:10 Alexis: And you felt this way, well of course you felt this way, but when did you start the transition into out in the open presenting yourself as a she.

28:26 Virginia: [*pause*] That's a... to go out in public, probably the mid-1990s. I mean it was always there. What brought it to fruition was this support group I was in, and a couple of the girls said "you know, we enjoy talking to you, but you need to clear your mind and go back in your history and look at what you've done that you're denying having done, intentionally or unintentionally." That's a good idea. And I took a day and just turn off all radios all the noise and everything, and I got to thinking about it. And I'd go back and I thought of different things that had happened to me in that from 4 1/2 [years old] to that point in time. And again, that's what gets a lot of these girls, if you will, into problems because they suppress it, they repress it, they deny it, they ignore it, it's there. Not everybody, but a lot of guys have that... I see these, pardon my terminology, rednecks driving around in their pickup trucks with the big beard, the plaid shirts, the

blue jeans. You know the gun rack in the back and I'm like what are they hiding, is it [*chuckles*] maybe they're a female and they're just at that point where they're trying to repress it, deny it, ignore it... Fine. That's what you do. I mean it's just... again I can't speak for anyone else other than what I've seen, but for me it's always been there and partly because of that little aspect.

And I'll tell you exactly what happened and again y'all can think I'm psycho. I don't really care because you don't sign my paycheck, but it's one of my philosophies. You don't sign my paycheck I don't owe you nothing. Not a good attitude, but it works for me. I don't share this with too many people, but I'll do it. Like I say it was about 3 o'clock on, 3 o'clock in the morning I left her and they got tubes running out of her head and arms and whatever, and I'm trying to decide how I'm going to handle this... and just as sure as I'm driving up that mountain and I can almost picture exactly what happened, it was like this ghost, I don't know, sitting there next to it, said "honey, you have a problem... I got the solution." I swear it was my mother, my grandmother, somebody. It's where I got my name. My mother's name was Virginia, my grandmother's name was Irene. I go by Virginia Irene, because again, they're buried in Flintwood Cemetery in Bristol, Tennessee. And the second time I visited them, Virginia visited them, [I] was not using that name, I had chosen a different name. And I was dressed [as a woman], walked up to the headstones, and it was like something just washed over me that I thought "they're proud of their daughter and their granddaughter." And to honor them, again it was like, I don't know how you describe it, but I see their names down there "Virginia," "Irene"... why not?... That's where I chose the name from. Am I getting too weird for you, I'm just ... I mean you want know, I'm gonna tell you, I got nothing to hide in that aspect. So, that was later when coming up Afton Mountain and it was like just this entity, whatever, said "we're gonna work this thing together." And since then, it's been awhile formulating it, but women, GGs [cisgender women], so much stronger than men. You just, you have no idea. Maybe not physically, but emotionally, mentally, there's just no comparison. I'm not getting weird? Okay. Is that helping, I'm not...

33:26 Alexis: Yes, of course. So tell me about, I guess, how your relationships have changed when you made that final transition to be she out in public in the 1990s. Like how that changed your relationships with coworkers or with friends that you knew during that time?

33:45 Virginia: Well, I didn't have that many friends. Like I say, I got that balance and if Virginia's alter ego is out among his friends, that's who he is. They haven't got a clue cause I work on a need to know basis. If I know someone who needs to know about Virginia, then I don't mind telling them, or vice versa. I mean... y'all got to understand you know deep down I'm not, I've had nothing done. I've never taken hormones, I've had no surgery. I've been told I pass, whatever that means, in most instances. In other words a guy would say he sees a woman, and that doesn't bother me... that's not what I'm trying to do. I'm just who I am, and any genetic benefits I get from that I trace back to my mother

and my grandmother. They were just drop-dead gorgeous, both of them. So, I mean, like I say I got that balance and if I come in a situation...

I got a very good friend, that's a lesbian, and she and I trained together. I'll tell you this story because I am so proud of what happened. She and I trained together in an athletic event for many years. And her mother developed a disease which was similar to Alzheimer's, but it's not the same thing. And one day we were over at her garage which was set up as a training facility. And we were training. She knew, she knew that Virginia existed. She'd never seen her, but she knew. Because we talked about it, because she was a lesbian and she started dating a guy, then she went back, she was trying to find herself. We would go to athletic events and sleep in the same room, never touched each other, we were just the best of friends. And, she asked me one day, she said "we cannot accept the lady that's taking care of my mother. She's not doing the job we want done." ... she said "why don't you do it?" I said "excuse me?" She says "you can do it." And I said "don't you think that she would rather have a woman taking care of her?" Brings tears to my eyes... [pause] She looked me straight in the face and she says "well you're a woman, aren't you?" Dead serious... the greatest compliment I have ever received. And I did start taking care of her mother for four years. I was holding her hand the day she died [Tears] I'll tell you this quick story if you got time. Her husband, my training partner's father, was a—I hate to use the term—[whispers] asshole. He didn't care one way... As long he knew she was being taken care of, one way or another, he didn't care.

My current... my partner, she and I came up with this thing to take this woman to Richmond. She was wheel chair bound, she could not communicate. Now this woman had an IQ in excess of 160. She had taught advanced engineering at the University of West Virginia to engineering students. I mean this woman was brilliant. The disease she had was like a light switch, it was off, everything worked, but nothing would come out. She couldn't talk, she couldn't hardly move, anyway we [voice breaks] put her in her wheel chair, put her in the car. Asked her husband, of course, if we could take her to Richmond. He said I don't care [voice breaks and tears]. We took her to Richmond. There was a private club in Richmond called Feldman's, which no longer exists, which was gay and lesbian.¹ But on Fridays once a month they would allow transgendered [persons] in. So, they were having their Ms. Feldman's Contest. Betty had never seen Virginia. I think she understood, who knows? But I got dressed up in the motel room and came out and she looked at me. I could just see the look in her eye, "what the...?" But, hey, it's too late now. I put her in her wheel chair and took her to dinner and I tried to feed her and of course she was like... like this [indistinct body language]... and I talked to her for a while and she could hear and I know she knew what was going on, she just could not respond, poor thing. She'd have probably smacked my teeth out [chuckles]. I finally got her to eat, then she grew a little more accepting and finally she just... I was just another girl with her. So the three of us go to Feldman's and I pushed her wheel chair right to the front row. We sat in the front row and all these entertainers came out, did

¹ A reference to Godfrey's? Or was there an establishment called Feldman's?

their thing, and she was just smiling, just having a great... of course they come down and tease with her and everything, they didn't know who she was. I don't think they knew who I was. It was just a fantastic experience. Now, Virginia's alter ego is who took care of her, because the husband would have freaked out. I mean, he would have just totally lost it, but that time [at Feldman's] was cool.

40:18 Alexis: What time period was that, like in the year?

40:22 Virginia: 2003, probably from 2003 to 2007, because I took care of her for about four years, about 6 days a week.

40:39 Alexis: So going within Roanoke do you have any particular hangout spots or any affiliated support programs or groups that you....?

40:50 Virginia: I use to go to The Park, but god that music is just so loud. I'm good for maybe ten minutes, but that's it. I know several of the girls that go there that are TG [transgender]... I'll talk to them on Facebook once in a while, but if I want to go out, I'll go out. We go ...but the one concert I remember specifically was The Celtic Women, they came to town and had a concert. And my partner and I went to that. And, I got a nice compliment there too but I won't go into that. [*chuckles*]

41:30 Alexis: What happened?

41:33 Virginia: Well...oh...[*laughter*] It sounds like I'm bragging, but hey, I mean it happened. We were sitting four rows, four seats in, and these two couples came in, and it was strange the two guys sat together and the two girls [sat together], and during the concert I just had to go to the bathroom, I just had to go. So I got up, you know, and you ease yourself out and I just [*laughter*] right in front of that little girl just before I stepped out the guys holler out, I swear, one those guys turned to me and he says "nice ass! yeah!" [*laughter*] I did have on a pretty tight skirt. Anyway [*laughter*]. No, I just do... you know, I go to movies, anything I want to do. Go shopping, dining out, whatever.

42:26 Alexis: So back to when—we kind of moved on—but what is your preference on your partners? The sexual orientation of your partners? Males? Females?

42:41 Virginia: In all honesty, I guess you can say I am bisexual. Not that I have.

42:51 Alexis: Have what?

42:52 Virginia: Thought about it. I mean having a relationship with a male or a relationship with a female or another TG [transgender person]. Sex is sex, if you're treated the way that you present, like you want to be treated. Just back to the first thing... do unto other as... If they're nice and you're nice and everybody gets along and there's

no complications per se. Sex is sex, you both enjoy it, have at it. What are you grinning about? *[laughter]*

43:34 Alexis: Would you say you're more attracted to the personality or the appearance?

43:40 Virginia: The personality. Appearance is gonna be the first thing you see, but once you get past that, you get to know somebody. Then if you're comfortable with them and you know you want to go to bed with them and they want to go to bed with you. Always, tell them on the front end, "you realize I'm transgender?" "Oh man, that's such a turn on..." Okay, as long as you understand on the front end. Cause that's what gets a lot of these girls into trouble, and I don't remember how many were killed last year. There's already been five or six killed this year, and I'll guarantee ya that 99% of them never told them *[their sexual partners]*. They get in the room or wherever they're meeting up and the guy just goes berserk and that's it. You got to tell them on the front end. I just feel so sorry for them. Does that answer the question a little bit?

44:40 Alexis: Yes. What important message would you wish to leave to others regarding sexuality?

44:50 Virginia: *(Speaks slowly)* Sexuality?

44:52 Alexis: How you interpret it?

44:58 Virginia: *[pause]* In the physical aspect it's just like I say if you have somebody that you're comfortable with and they're comfortable with you, it makes no difference, male/female. Keep it in the human species please. *[whispers]* That was a joke *[laughter]*.

45:17 Alexis: What would you like to see changed in the South Virginia/Western area in dealing with sexual orientation? What changes would you like to see?

45:35 Virginia: *[pause]* I'm a tell you a story. And I'm not casting dispersion...well I am casting dispersions on them. Have you got more questions about history?

45:50 Alexis: No.

45:53 Virginia: I was one of the original members, back in the early '90s, of a group called the Blue Ridge Society. I'm sorry it escapes me exactly how I met the young lady that started it. She lived in Lynchburg, but we had several meetings here in Roanoke where she would rent a suite at this nice hotel, I won't say which one, and there would be six or eight of us who would show up and we just do what girls do. We just sit around and talk. A few of them had problems and stuff. That was, to the best of my knowledge, the first transgendered organization.

We went to a Christmas party at one person's house that had this gorgeous home out on the lake. Had to be in '95, Christmas of '95. And their wives were there and there were... it was just a conglomerate, but it was mostly for the Blue Ridge Society members. Probably six or eight of us would show up. The young lady that started it left the area. The company she was working for sold to another company and her skill level was such [that] they wanted to keep her, but wanted her transferred to another place, which she did. In the process the organization as it existed was turned over to *moi*. Again, somewhere along the line the name was changed to the Blue, what do you call it, the Blue Ridge Transgendered... whatever. And we would have meetings at my home and again, we'll get eight or ten people to show up. We had a girl coming from Richmond, another one from West Virginia, another one from down in Charlotte. Again this was the internet, in its early stages, and we would communicate that way.

A girl came from West Virginia, a very authoritarian type, nice girl, but you could tell she wanted to be more and more and more involved, and I finally just turned it over to her. I said "why don't you take it over, because my job is such [that] I can't be here for all these meetings we need to have." She took it over, kept the name, began setting up meetings at local hotels and stuff instead of... in their ballrooms and stuff. [Laughter] One of the coolest things: we had a meeting on a Halloween evening at the Holiday Inn down there in Tanglewood.... Now I want you to picture this. You got a bunch of cross-dressers, transgendered, whatever, dressed up. We had a nice meal. There were probably ten, fifteen of us. So the meals over and we talked business or whatever we were talking about. This had to be in 2000/2001, anyway. Let's go to the bar and get a drink. Well three or four of them, "I got to get home," and so the party breaks up and there were like eight of us left. So we go to the Holiday Inn, what's it called, the Elephant Walk, I think is the name of that bar down there. Now remember this is Halloween evening on a Friday in October. You probably don't keep up with this, but what happens on Halloween in October just south of here? Can you say NASCAR? Can you say Martinsville? [laughter] Here are these 6, 7, 8 of us, we just go charging into the bar, it was wall to wall... what's the word... REDNECKS [laughter]. I mean, we had no problem at all, I mean there were some of us dancing with some of them [chuckles]. They were offering to buy us drinks [laughter]. Oh God, it was such a trip. But we had no problems it was just, here we are us just charging into this bar, with just wall to wall rednecks that were here for the NASCAR, Martinsville race [laughter] Good Times! I lost my train of thought, what were we talking about?

51:09 Alexis: What would you like to see changed...

51:12 Virginia: Oh yes.

51:14 Alexis: ...regarding sexual orientation?

51:16 Virginia: Well the, within this area? Okay, the girl that took it over, after a couple of years was transferred to Texas. She tried to run it, the local organization, in Texas, but

that didn't work out. So, she eventually turned it over to the current administration, which runs the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgendered Society.² And again, if you want to bleep this out that's fine, I understand. Their website says that they have 311 members. Roanoke, Virginia. Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgendered has 311 members. I asked Dr. Rosenthal at a meeting [of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project], I said "Trish and I are the only two here." I said "They got 311 members and neither of us are members, why don't they have a representative here? You would think out of 311 members they could come up with somebody that would show up?"

There was a meeting at the UU [Unitarian Universalist] Church trying to get this group reorganized after the lady had moved to Texas and it was... [*sighs*] there was some difference of opinion and I won't get into the gory details. But Trish is married, I'm in a relationship, the other couple that was there was in a relationship, both... this girl is amazing. She's 72 – 73 years old, goes on a cruise, a 7-day cruise by herself as her alter ego. What kind of girl do that? But that's where she's coming from. Her wife is very accepting. She claims they are in an open relationship, whatever that [means]. The six of us, the only couples that were there, were ex-communicated, I don't know any other word to use. We were thrown out, or asked to leave, because we were saying "here is what we need to do. This this this and this." Trish had been involved in setting up an organization in Charlotte.³ Big organization, "we need to do this this this and this." Transgendered association. "We're not doing it that way, we don't want to hear anymore from you, why don't y'all just leave?" Basically what happens. "Screw you. We're out of here." So Trish and her wife and me and my partner get together quite often. We have dinners, go out to eat, go whatever. And we are just not involved with them anymore. Now, do you think there are 311 members in this area? All she's done is taken her friends from Facebook and claim that they are members of this organization. I would venture to say you can count on three fingers the number of active members that she has. Her and two others. I can name them, but I'm not going to. And I... hey, do your thing, girl. Just don't call us.

I was having meetings at my home up in Bedford and we'd have 12, 15 girls show up. We'd have cook-outs up there, just had a great old time. And, that's before she took it over. She does her own thing. I mean it's all about her. You can bleep it out. It's fact. At one of the Pride in the Park [events], they awarded her the most progressive member of the board type of thing. She gets up makes a ten-minute speech and never once mentioned anybody, it was all about her. "Well, I did this and I did that." Trish and I were there and our mouths fell [open]. She offered nothing. "This person helped me do this, this person helped me do that. I'm so glad my group is up here, or we got a tent," or nothing. It was all about her. "I did this, I did that, I helped so and so collect this, and I appreciate this award, and I'm so proud to have earned it. Just... thank you, on the up side she has done some good things. She's done them on her own and taken full credit for

² Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge – Transgender Alliance.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LBRTA/>

³ See oral history interview conducted with Trish Valentine, part of this same oral history project, in LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

every bit of it as her own. Which is fine, that's her. Except Trish and I do our own thing... whatever [pause]

56:15 Alexis: Would you say...

56:17 Virginia: You want to bleep all that out, it's fine. But it's what's happened. Rumor has it that she has claimed credit for setting up the organization. No, I can trace this back to the early '90s. The Blue Ridge Society is where it started, not with her in the mid-[2000s]... 2005, 2006.

56:41 Alexis: So would you say that the difference, the falling out, was her personality or the goals that she had for the organization? Or what was the main factor?

56:52 Virginia: Personality. I mean it's just all about her. The world revolves around her. The last I heard she is in the process of transitioning. She's got two small children, they're not small anymore. I don't know what the status of it is because I don't ask, I don't want to know, I don't care. I do my thing, I've got that balance.

57:20 Alexis: Okay, so this is basically a wild card. This is a chance to speak freely which you kinda already have, which is great, about your experiences and contribute to the LGBTQ community of history. So anything you would like to talk about. That you think is...?

57:39 Virginia: I've had some interesting experiences. Roanoke Pride put on a dance at what used to be the Sheraton, it's changed names six times in the past few years [chuckles]. And a girl that I knew who I helped transition, that was probably one of the greatest events in my life. I was with her from the time she decided she was gonna transition. I was with her at the doctor for ten days. At the clinic when she had the operation. My name is the first person she asked for when she woke up after the operation. It was incredible. And that's why... people just don't understand. You want to choke them. We are who we are. Humans are so complex it's just amazing. She was born to be a woman, she was a woman. She just had a piece of equipment that just didn't work out and had it removed. But she and I are good friends and we went to this, I went to the meeting to find out. I stood up and asked them, I said "will you allow transgendered people there?" The vote was 6 to 4, 6 for and 4 against allowing transgendered [people] to come to this dance! So I say... "girl, you and Jack, we're going," so we showed up, but before that we got to talking we said, "what will you do if someone asked you to dance?" Now think about it, you go to a dance, a guy walks up and says you want to dance, you got two choices: yes or no. Ok, this was gays and lesbians! You've heard of gaydar, a date, I don't care how good I look or how good Trish... they read you. Basically, "that's a guy in a dress! I don't care how good she looks. That's a guy in a dress!" Lesbians don't want anything to do with you. We both look good. We're sittin there, I remember the guy's name, [he] walked up and he said "Virginia, would you dance with me?" I came out of that chair like there was a spring under me [chuckles]. Now, let me tell you,

those gay guys can charm your panties off. I mean he was a perfect gentleman, led me to the dance floor, danced and hold me, you know, just like a gentleman should. Dance was over, back to my chair, he pulled the chair out for me, you know, sat down. And it was just a totally unique experience. Just, and that's one of the things that just reinforces it, for me, my balance. Virginia's Virginia. She's a woman. I could have said no, and I chose to dance with him. So that's just the way that I am. Unfortunately most TGs [transgender persons] aren't that way. They're still struggling with who they are and how they have these feelings, everything. That would be the thing that I would want to leave is "try and find that balance, because if you don't there are just too many horror stories out there." And the guys that get caught, the wife comes home earlier, then catches them in a dress. The first word out of their mouth is, what do you think the first thing the wife asks when she catches him in makeup or whatever?

61:28 Alexis: Sorry?

61:33 Virginia: If you were married and you came home and your husband was wearing some of your clothes. What will be the first question you think you'd ask him?

61:41 Alexis: What are you doing?

61:43 Virginia: Well, you can see what he's doing. The very first [question]...are you gay? That's the very first thing. [laughter] And in 99% of the cases the first thing [the wife] either thinks or says is "Are you gay?" And then if they are willing to discuss it, and they don't run screaming into the night, "are you going to transition?" So, you try and help people. Find that. I got a friend right now the wife caught him, dressed. And they're still trying to work through it. It's just, it's something that girls just can't get their mind around. I've got a daughter that knows. She's never met Virginia, she doesn't want to meet Virginia, she just, she accepts it to the point that she just can't get her mind around it. And it's like, it just doesn't exist. My son, same thing. He's never met Virginia, but as a doctor he told me, he said "if that's your thing, have at it." That's the only thing that has ever been said. Now are we...

I'll tell you one other story. My second wife, when she found out, I told her "I don't want you to tell anybody until I work through this." And, it got screwed... anyway, she said "I want you to go talk to a psychiatrist, a psychologist." I said "fine." I walk in the guy's office, I'm not dressed. He says—he came in, he got on a shirt and tie and coat—he says "well, what can we do for you today?" I just look at him and I say, "I'm transgendered, do you have a problem with that?" I said "I don't know what you're wearing under that shirt, you may have on a negligee." So, we spent an hour together. I go back to my in-law's house and he's a minister, okay? And they start in. They start quoting bible scriptures and how this is affecting this, and how that is affecting that. This goes on for 45 minutes. I didn't say a word, just listened. Virginia wasn't there, it was her alter ego. And they finished they said [laughter]—my mother in law was kind of the matriarch, she ran everything. She actually looked at me and said "you got anything to say?" I said

“yeah,” “Well?” I said, “I need to ask you just one question.” I said “I’ve been married to your daughter for 26 years... “Yeah, so what?” I said “every Halloween, from day one, every Halloween,” and I pointed at my father-in-law, I said “what is he dressed up as?” Her eyes just like came right out of her head. He dresses up as a woman, full makeup, lipstick, purse, the dresses, the heels, everything. Goes to church like that, okay? for Halloween parties. And she says—and he’s just [*laughter*] sitting in his chair as she says, she’s pounding the table—“but that’s only once a year.” I looked her straight in the eyes and said “how many times does it take?” Never heard another word about it from them from then on.

65:52 Alexis: Did you ever have a discussion with them about....

65:56 Virginia: No...he died shortly thereafter of cancer. [*pause*] And I talked to her, my deceased wife, a couple of times about it. She didn’t want to talk about it. How many times does it take?

66:27 Alexis: I have another question. What do you think the prejudice or discrimination from cisgender [people], or lesbians, or gay people have against [the] transgender community? Where do you think it comes from?

66:40 Virginia: I think it’s no different than the straight community. They don’t understand it, they just don’t understand. I mean, I try... what in the few times it’s come up in discussion... Walk around this library, you see any two people that look alike? the same height, the same weight, same color hair? That’s outward. Why can’t those same differences be inward? We’re all different. We come from different backgrounds. Biology, right? What does the embryo start out as?

67:23 Alexis: Female.

67:24 Virginia: Female. So who’s to say that during those nine months that something doesn’t happen in there. Why do you got an IQ of 140 and I got an IQ of 80, and she’s got an IQ of 170. We’re all different. And our ability to react to things and see things, but yet a guy in a dress, “no, I can’t accept that, we got to go beat that person up or kill them” or whatever. It’s just sad.

68:00 Alexis: What would you say is your overall experience, like have you been affected by discrimination in this area?

68:10 Virginia: No, I haven’t. Because when Virginia goes out, that’s who people see. They see a woman doing what women do. Shopping, eating out, going to concerts, movies, just... The mind sees what it wants to see, I mean you if you’re standing on the corner and you look down the street and you see a good looking guy, you see a guy. It’s the same thing if a person’s standing on the corner and sees a woman, me, he sees a woman. Now, needless to say there are those—again, you get back into my universe

where there is a problem with definitions. And I've got my own opinions. They aren't carved in stone because this whole thing is so fluid. To me there is a difference between a cross dresser and somebody that's transgender. Transgender is emotional, internal. Cross dressers, it's some type of sexual release that they put this stuff on and they have their thing and they're done. And they might not do it again for another week, month, year, you're the only who knows. And then you get, like you said, cisgender, transsexual. The terminology just goes on and on. It's not like "you're gay or you're a lesbian," it's just a totally different universe. Me, as I told you upfront, mine's a need to know. Okay, my doctor doesn't know I'm transgender. Why should I tell him? What difference does it make? Trish on the other hand, she's told her doctor she's transgender. The doctor said it's great, they don't care. I don't want to drag this out...

70:14 Alexis: Oh no, not at all.

70:20 Virginia: [*showing photograph?*] That's my alter ego. He was the first person in the United States to bench-press over 400 lbs in his age and weight category. He's won seven world powerlifting titles. Not Virginia, not in the United States, world. And that's where the balance comes in. Virginia supports him 110%, but it's him doing it not Virginia. When Virginia is in this room that's Virginia. He is kind of her protector. That's where I'm coming from.

71:21 Alexis: So, how often, let's just say, within a given week are you either Virginia or your alter ego?

71:32 Virginia: There's no... the balance is there. I mean, Virginia might be three or four times a week. Go out to eat, just get dressed and walk around the house, you know whatever she wants to do. Right now, he's training for a meet March 12th down in Gatlinburg [Tennessee]. That's four days a week, but that's only like three hours a day. The rest of the time it just took early retirement because I could take early retirement and I just do whatever I want to do.

72:03 Alexis: So you see there is enough fluid transition between...

72:06 Virginia: Oh yeah. They totally support each other. That's what everybody in my universe should seek. And that's where, like I said, most of them never find it and that's why you run into the problems. Suicides, and murders, and everything else, it's just sad.

72:31 Alexis: Do you believe that transgender people, like you were saying before, how they have their... how they believe that they're she, but then they are trying to suppress their alter egos. Is that what you're saying? I'm just trying to understand.

72:47 Virginia: They don't understand it. They wake up one day and say "oh, I've just got to put on a dress. I just, I got to do it. I got to put on my wig and stuff." They look in the mirror and they see who they see. I call it Virginia's challenge and I've told several of

them to do it. And, you got to get dressed, fully dressed, makeup, everything. Then totally quiet, nothing around, no noise. No background music, nothing. You've got to stand in front of a full-length mirror and if you're not ready to do this, don't do it. Because it'll screw you up if don't. You stand in front of that mirror and you look at that person in the mirror and you do not, you do not, look at how pretty she is. Her make-up, her lipstick, if it matches her dress or nail polish. I say, you look at her eyes. You look into her soul. What do you see? Then you have to ask yourself, what are you willing to give up or do for that person. I say don't do it if you're not ready. Because if you're ready you'll find the answer. Are you willing to do this and go to your spouse and say, "I'm transgendered, deal with it." Or are you going to continue to hide and hope you don't get caught. Sneak around in the shadows, so to speak. [*showing a photograph*] Let me show you real quick. This is us, this is us in Las Vegas. We had a commitment ceremony. That was so cool. We got a dress like that, the limousine pulls up in front of the hotel, we go out and get in the limousine, go to this chapel. That was our wedding party.

75:06 Alexis: Wow.

75:10 Virginia: It's all real. [*laughter*] Again, I'll tell you straight, I'm going to do my thing. And, that's who I am. I'm sorry that Trish and I could make some big end roads in this area, but there is only the one organization and I am not going to corrupt it from what it is. If we are asked or if the current administration decides to leave and they want us to come back and join. More than happy to. But, at this juncture, no. And I haven't looked at these things in a while. There was a picture. You all can tell me, if I can find it. [*Flipping through pages*] It was a picture taken at Roanoke Pride [the Pride in the Park festival] one summer. That party was... it sounds like I'm bragging I don't want to tell you.

76:34 Alexis: What?

76:36 Virginia: Here it is. These two wives came up to me. She says "you know, we've been talking about you." "Oh really?" She says "yes," these are her exact words, "we've decided that its bitches like you that make us have to work so hard to look good." [*looking at another photograph*] There's my friend that had the transition. That's her, that's me, at the dinner/dance. Alright, I don't know if that's a picture that they would want.⁴ But you know who that is. That's Trish. This girl is in a mental institution in California. Her girlfriend is right here, they used to come to a lot of our meetings, she's deceased. Her parents won't say what she died from, but they were both teachers, instructors at Virginia Tech. This one just, she left her job and moved to California, and she was what do you call it...couch hopping. Where you just call somebody up and say "I don't have a place to stay, can I sleep on your couch?" And she'd stay as long as they'd let her and then she would move on to the next one. And last we heard she's in a mental institution. I don't know if you met her [*pointing to someone else*], you know her?

⁴ She is referring to the LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

Okay good, this one needs to be in a mental institution, some people say, but we won't [*laughter*]. Now, as far as signing a release from that, would you...? I mean, she's no problem, Trish is no problem, I'm no problem. The other two, one's deceased and the other is in a mental institution, so you're not going to get their signatures. But, this was the picture from Pride in the Park and the Ladies of the Blue Ridge organization. Do you think they want that picture? [Alexis: Yes, of course] That was me at that Christmas Party..... "bitches like you make us have to work hard to look good..." [*chuckles*] That girl is deceased. Here, y'all do what you want.

79:25 Alexis: Do you have any lasting words before we end this interview session?

79:31 Virginia: I just hope I didn't waste your time and I hope I didn't take up too much of it. And I wish you girls the best in your future endeavors and I appreciate you having the intestinal fortitude to do this.

79:49 Alexis: Thank you so much for taking your time out to let us interview you.

79:53 Virginia: I enjoyed and I hope I didn't bore you [Alexis: Not at all] or scare you. There are other things about me that probably would.

END.