

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

**Interview with Kim O'Donnell**

**February 25, 2016**

Interviewers: Caitlyn Allen and Madison Kunstman

Interviewee: Kim O'Donnell

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Transcription prepared by: Will Lucas

Total: 77:42

0:00 = childhood in Fort Lauderdale, Florida

1:40 = moving to Floyd, Virginia, and attending Floyd County High School (1970s?)

2:48 = attending Mary Baldwin College, an all women's college

4:48 = attending law school at the University of Richmond

6:05 = becoming the first openly gay judge in Virginia (at age 34)

12:00 = experiencing sexual assault by two female teachers at Floyd County High School

18:24 = being a teenage lesbian in Floyd, Virginia, versus in Florida

21:24 = reflecting on the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 marriage equality decision

23:08 = about Floyd PFLAG, the work of Jim Best, and what kind of community Floyd is

31:39 = on the importance of being one's authentic self

34:57 = advice for parents of LGBTQ children

37:37 = how things have gotten easier (but also harder) over time for gay people

43:33 = how to end bullying in Floyd County High School

45:50 = fearing discrimination in the judicial reappointment system in Virginia

49:04 = Old Floyd versus New Floyd, and differing levels of acceptance of homosexuality

52:29 = recounting her travels in Nepal in 2014

56:51 = gay tourism in the United States

59:39 = on the importance of travel for expanding one's worldview

1:02:44 = the story of a hermaphroditic friend, and their struggles for acceptance

1:06:45 = healing the wounds from childhood trauma

1:09:31 = relationship advice; and thoughts on why many same-sex couples struggle to have long-term relationships

0.02 KA- My name is Kaitlyn Allen and I am here interviewing Kim O'Donnell. So Kim can you tell us what it was like growing up in Fort Lauderdale, Florida?

0.12 KO- Very different from growing up in Floyd, for sure. Florida just geographically, it's very different, it's densely populated. So there are a lot of people, neighbors right next to you. The population density was one of the biggest differences between the two places. The town that I grew up in was a beach town, so pretty loosey-goosy in a lot of ways, a lot of drug use, kids just... really different. I hadn't even thought about Florida, I thought we were talking about Virginia. I had a very difficult high school experience in both places. I attended high schools in both places. Growing up in Florida as a younger child, you would be outside all the time. In those day parents were not as concerned about someone stealing you, so I was on my bike outside all the time and someone from our local rec, community rec [recreation] program would come to us and our neighborhood and we would play football, and have outdoor games. I was pretty much outside my whole childhood really.

1.40 KA- So then what was it like for you transiting to Floyd?

1.45 KO- It was wonderful because the Floyd community was much tighter and closer. When you're involved in athletics, you have a built-in community. So I started, actually, becoming a real athlete, in the sense of organized sports, in Floyd in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I loved that, I loved that sense of comradery. So I had some really good close relationship with people in Floyd. Academically it was really different, I have to say the academics at Floyd County High School were not great. The academics in the school I went to in Florida were better, it was a bigger school. They had advance placement classes. In the '70s Floyd didn't have any of that. So a stronger sense of community in Virginia in Floyd County, but the academics weren't as good.

2.41 KA- Great, so what was it like when you went to an all-girls college in Virginia? What was that like?

2.48 KO- Unbelievably fantastic! I hadn't intended to do that, actually my plan was to attend the University of Virginia on a basketball scholarship. I was actually a very good basketball player, and then had been recruited by them. I was still an out-of-state student. I moved back and forth from Virginia to Florida during my high school years for reasons we may talk about or we may not. So I ended up having a motorcycle accident the summer before my senior year of high school, and it completely derailed any athletic career I had. I had put all of my hopes in the University of Virginia, and would have gone there, had I not had my accident. But when that happened they were no longer interested of course. I was an out-of-state student, so I didn't have priority status as an athlete. I didn't get in. I was completely surprised because I had great grades, but I didn't standardize test well. So about the same time the University of Virginia said no to me, Mary Baldwin College, believe it or not, was in Florida recruiting and I went there sight unseen and I loved it! For me, because I felt sort of out of place anyway as a lesbian, I never considered a women's college, but it was a gift for me. Because when it's all women, the women are the ones who have to be leaders, they are the ones that have to take ownership of what's happening on campus, and there was no competition with guys. Which was really good for me, because I really needed that spark of encouragement. In terms of my own sexuality I think I would have felt very much like an outsider, if I had gone to a co-educational school at that time. Totally different for me now in my life but that time I just would have really felt like I didn't belong.

4.48 KA- Wow! So then you went to University of Richmond after Mary Baldwin for your law degree. So was that different from Mary Baldwin?

5.00 KO- Oh yea! Very different, I hated it. It wasn't because it was co-educational—besides from high school it was my first co-educational experience. That part of it was fine, it was just an extremely competitive atmosphere, and I didn't like it. I became a lawyer because I wanted to help people, or at least I went to law school with that idea that I wanted to help people. I didn't know how. And nothing about law school was about helping people. It was really about creating that litigious brain, of how you can argue both sides. It was just really, really challenging, humiliating actually in some respects. Because it was so competitive and I just didn't like it at all. I had a pretty significant crisis of identity, like "why did I do this? This is not what I had I mind at all." The school itself was lovely, and I made some great friends and really good people. But I didn't like the academic atmosphere at all.

6.05 KA- So, what was it like to be the first openly gay judge in Virginia. What was that like for you?

6.15 KO- It was challenging, actually, in the beginning. I had been openly gay my whole career, and when I decided, when I was very young, I decided to try to become a judge. And I remember sitting in my office, kind of closing the door, and thinking "okay." I was open, but I just didn't talk about my life, I didn't hide it, but you know everyone is talking about what they did for the weekend, you just don't really participate. Because you're not really wanting to use gender. So people closest to me knew, it wasn't like it was a secret, I just didn't talk about it. When I decided I was going to try to become a judge I had the awareness that this could prevent me from doing what I wanted to do, and I didn't know whether it would be well known. I was scared, actually, and I went through the process the first time when I was only thirty [years old]. I wasn't selected to become a judge. It never came up, no one asked me, it wasn't mentioned, and after it was over I was relieved. A friend of mine who was working for a very prominent senator at the time, who I saw after the whole process, and I said "Joyce, I'm so relieved, it didn't come up." And she said, "it absolutely did come up!" I was like "okay, alright." "It was discussed, it was on the table with everybody who was considering your appointment, but it wasn't the obstacle

that kept you from becoming a judge.” So I felt really gratified by that. So it didn’t prevent me from becoming a judge. Sometimes you have to go through the process a number of times, before you are selected. I was selected at thirty-four [years old], and there were no openly gay judges.

I was at a judicial training. Shortly after I became a judge, believe it or not, all of the judges in Virginia at my level, which is the general district level, hundreds of us gathered together for a conference which is required every year. The Supreme Court who trains all the judges, wanted to focus on diversity education. It’s a hard thing to do. Most of the judges at that time were white men, so we were in this big huge room, with a group of grown-up people playing diversity BINGO. Do you know what that is? So you have a BINGO card, and in each of the squares it says I’ve been on public assistance, I’m gay or lesbian, I drive a red truck, all these different identifiers, and the goal is to walk around the room, and get BINGO. So one of the things was I’m gay. It was the first time I publicly said to someone “yea.” The opportunities weren’t there very often. I was a little nervous, nobody said anything. That’s the thing about being in the south. People don’t say much to your face. They are going to be polite and respectful, but afterwards a very dear friend of mine, who was a staff person and did all the training for judges, was telling her the story and really really unfortunately, her reaction was “Oh my god, you didn’t really do that?” Instead of “way to go, I’m so glad you took that step!” She was really afraid for me.

I took my partners with me to all the judicial conferences. I didn’t keep people at home and out of sight, but nobody really talked about it. Mostly it was just lonely, because my colleagues were terrific. I worked in Richmond, there were five of us on the bench, there’s four now. There were five of us on the bench so I had people that I worked with who were supportive, but it wasn’t something that... There wasn’t anybody else. There was not a single other openly gay judge in Virginia that I could even talk to. And the loneliness. Frankly people don’t think about this, it’s a really lonely job. Actually because so much of what you do is in isolation, by yourself, you make decisions alone. But worse than, the hardest most isolating piece was not just being a lesbian, having no other compatriots, but was really being a woman in man’s arena. It was completely a man’s arena then and it just didn’t resonate with me that way.

12.00 KA-So when you came into awareness of your sexuality, it was still considered a mental disease.

12.07 KO-It was.

12.08 KA-So did you tell your family and friends about this?

12.09 KO-No

12.10 KA-What was their reaction?

12.11 KO- It’s very interesting, I had a very unusual experience of coming out, I never did. I think there was only one person in my life, a male judge that was a colleague of mine, who had a crush on me and I knew I had to tell him. I just had to say, but other than that I do think I ever had that experience. My situation was really different and traumatic in different ways. So I didn’t even know that I was a lesbian or what the word meant. My first relationship, and it’s not even the right word, my first experience with a woman was actually with a teacher. It was really fucked up, that’s just the truth, it was really fucked up. This was in Floyd County, not my instigation at all, and so that happened in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade with a woman teacher. And my mother found out about it and removed me from Floyd County High School. And that’s when we went back to Florida.

My first even thought about it came when my mother intercepted some communication between me and this teacher, who was stupid enough to send mail to my home. And confronted me and said, "Are you a lesbian?" I was like "I have no idea, never even heard the word." Don't like it, to this day to tell you the truth, because of that experience, because I knew that I really wanted to say "no." It wasn't a "yes" that you wanted to give and I just couldn't even respond. So it was traumatic, really traumatic and my parents, my mother was freaked out. She had no idea what to do. So I was sent to a psychiatrist who was doing his job because it was a mental illness and I did not go very often, just not many times. It was not helpful for me. I'm very fortunate, I'm one of the few people that I know who for whatever reason, I personally didn't have guilt and shame about it. I knew the rest of the world was uncomfortable. I knew my parents were ashamed, but I never felt like something was wrong with me. I just know where I could talk about it and where I couldn't. Then I came back to Floyd County High School.... Still, forty years later, I don't have the word to accurately say what it was. They weren't relationships... I was molested, accosted, I don't know, by another teacher, another female teacher. So twice that happened to me and was immediately moved from Floyd County High School then.

So there was lot of really weird stuff around it and like I said I didn't come out, my mother told me and I know that it was true and it took me a lot of years. And probably being in a safe college environment. And women's schools probably don't have any more lesbians that anybody else. But we had some. I felt like I wasn't completely alone. But it was strange. Traumatic. Very difficult. Not many people know this story, for me there was much isolation because I couldn't tell anybody. Who do you tell about that? So the only hesitancy I had, I almost didn't put my name [for this oral history recording], but I've carried this secret for long enough. What if someone reads this and they know who these people were? In this day and age they would have done to jail. I don't need to protect them. I don't need to name the names, but I don't need to protect them either. So, yeah, different. But it saved me from having to have that "mom, dad, guess what?" Didn't have to do that.

17.02 KA-That's crazy.

17.03 KO- It *is* crazy, two teachers, what is in the water in Floyd County? I'm serious, like really? But at that age the thing that screws you up is—and this is the thing about power dynamics and relationships that are out of balance like that, especially at that age, your formative experiences with sexuality—but it really messes up your... and I didn't even realize how it messed me up because you had this sense that you're special, right? Your teacher likes you and there is the whole weird thing that happens and there is nothing about it that is normal or right. But part of my experience was that I had nobody to talk to. My parents were not sympathetic, they were not. My mother just didn't have the capacity emotionally to comfort me. So there was nobody who said "wow, this sucks, this is not your fault, this is not the way it is supposed to be, this is not the way everybody is." If I had had an intervention, a caring parent, maybe in a different time, who was able to support me. It might have been different. It might not have messed up my interpersonal relationships so much, but that's the way it was.

18.24 KA-So you said that you went between Floyd and Florida, did you notice a difference? Was there a dichotomy between the two places?

18.33 KO- In what ways? In terms of sexuality or the acceptance or the...?

18.41 KA-I would say sort of a little bit of both the acceptance and sexuality, would you say that there was a difference between the two or was it really just... ?

19.48 KO-Not so much. It was just a different time. Nobody talked about homosexuality. I didn't even know really what it was and how did you find people that were like you? At that time, I think a lot of girls were certainly very boyish and tomboyish. It was so confusing that maybe you felt more comfortable dressing in a certain way, so you identified people by their... girls that were more masculine, you said "Oh maybe she's likes me." But there really wasn't much acceptance for it at all. Because my mother was aware and had sort of an antenna on and every friendship that I had was really scrutinized. One of my best friends in high school in Florida, who is also a lesbian, didn't have a relationship with her, we were just really friends. When my mother found out that we were friends, we were forbidden to have any contact at our high school. Our teachers would watch. That didn't happen in Floyd. But there I was accosted by two teachers. It wasn't something anybody discussed or talked about. It was very underground. When I was in high school, in fact, it was older people that we kind of connected with. So the teachers in Floyd were the same way. In Florida you just kind of found each other and there were older people who would tell you where to go and there were gay bars that never checked IDs where you could go. They were seedy, shady, dark places, but at least you weren't alone. So both places there wasn't the same kind of culture here [in Floyd]. You know, in Florida, there were a number of gay bars, mostly the nicer ones were always for men. So you had access to more things outside the mainstream than you did in Floyd. They still don't talk about it [in Floyd]. Jim's making them talk about it, but it's not something they are comfortable with even today.<sup>1</sup>

21.24 KA-So I know that you are getting married soon, congratulations. So in 2015 the marriage equality decision was reached by the Supreme Court, a huge win for gay rights. So what was your reaction to this?

21.37 KO- Shock! Shock. Never expected it to happen in my lifetime, and that it was interesting. You know I was so used to not thinking of it as a possibility, that it wasn't even in my radar screen. I assumed because we couldn't do it, that there were a lot of benefits to it. When it became possible for us to get married—my partner Anita and I have been together for ten years—I thought it would be an automatic like "of course we will do this. There's no question about us being committed." Then it turned into this really different kind of conversation of "Okay, what are the pros and cons?" Just because we can doesn't mean we should, and I realized that you know there are some negatives to it. Then it turned into more of a financial conversation. Which I really hated. I did. I was like this is not a financial decision. It was wonderful, everyone should have the right to do it, but it doesn't mean that everyone should or will want to. I mean marriage, all people are getting married less I think. I've also seen how different it is. It is a different kind of commitment. It feels really different to me. I'm thrilled that people have that choice, and really excited.

23.08 KA-Great. So now you're currently living in Floyd and we are working with another partner of yours [there in Floyd], Jim Best. He is working to bring the conversation out in Floyd about LGBTQ+ relationships. So what do you think of the whole movement in Floyd?

23.32 KO-Yea, I think it's amazing. Jim is carrying on work that other people started. When I came to Floyd, I had some fear about coming back. I came back to care for my mother. In 2007, I quit my job and came home to care for her. Most of my people in Richmond were like "what the... ? what are you doing, are you kidding?" I had a vibrant group of friends, and gay and lesbian people, in Richmond. Most of my

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<sup>1</sup> See oral history interview with Jim Best in the LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

friends, my close friends were women. They thought I was insane, to go to this place where typically you would think there's not much acceptance. I had fear of coming back and who I would see. It was a lot of healing for me to do. You know the things I had dealt with as a kid. Very shortly after coming back, maybe within a year, there was a group of my friends—not Jim—who wanted to start a PFLAG chapter. So we started the PFLAG chapter. It was really a woman at the high school named Dianne Jackson who started the first Diversity Club at Floyd County High School. She was really one of the main people that started the PFLAG group. It was astounding to me to think that this was happening in Floyd. To be honest with you, because my life has changed so much sense then, I went from sort of cautiously being open, to being wide open by the time I left Richmond. For a number of years I had a partner that was very open and had a child. That was in the '90s for me. When I entered into that relationship, it was my first experience with having a child in my family, and it changed everything for me. She was very proud and happy. Very open, telling everybody including her mom that she was in a relationship with me. And there was no way she was going to see anything but 100 percent. That's great. Fantastic. It changed my life. That's when everything became completely open for me. I began to see how critical it was that there be people willing to do that. So we would have neighbors into our house for monthly potlucks. These were older women who did not think they ever knew a gay person. We were very open and I think it really changed how they viewed things.

When I came to Floyd, I have to say, the movement has not been my passion. Being open and demonstrating the way I live my life, this is what a gay person looks like, take it or leave it! When that PFLAG group started, there wasn't anybody in that initial group that felt a calling like Jim does. A calling to be visible and vocal. I've been there, done that. I was very open when I came to Floyd. You know, every place I went, "this is who I am, this is my partner." I just didn't feel moved to be an advocate in that way. So PFLAG was about to fold in Floyd until Jim came along. He's really taken it to another level. I mean, he's fearless. He's just the right messenger. He's got the right package. He grew up as a Mormon, he's graceful, he's attractive, he's articulate, he's intelligent. He's a great conversationalist. He's just been the right person to carry the message. I'm really grateful to him because it's courageous of him. He's a part of the Quaker meeting that I attend. Quakers do things in a very beautiful way. Jim was feeling like he had a leading. This is a spiritual thing for him. A leading to be working first with religious communities in Floyd, because of wanting to educate them. Open their minds because of his real deep concern for kids. Our meeting is supporting that leading. So we have a support group for Jim, and I'm a part of that. One of the things we commit to is offering companionship. Being with him as he does his mission. I went with him to a Seventh-Day Adventist church in Floyd. I was just blown away at how he's able to present himself, and connect, and finding commonality and common ground. He's really changing the world there.

It's not my passion and mission. My partner was married to a man for many many years, being with a woman was new for her. She really wanted lesbian friends, like, I do not care anymore. Most of my friends now are heterosexuals, just because that is who's there and who I connect with. Fortunately for me, the world has changed so much that I don't segment it in that way anymore. It's just I can be myself with anybody and that's all that matters to me. I guess my closest long-term friends are gay women. I stepped away from PFLAG. I support completely what he [Jim] is doing, I admire and respect him so much, but I really think that each of us should do what really moves us and speaks to us, not that we don't support a lot of things and that's been Jim's calling and its phenomenal what he's doing. I wish that there had been someone like Jim for me. That I could have seen some example of somebody

present for me. I'd be happy to be in that role in some high school, I've offered to talk to the Diversity Club or be there for the kids to see there are all kinds of ways of living in the world and you can have a great life.

30.17 KA- Do you think that Floyd is an anomaly in the Southwest Virginia area?

30.23 KO- Yes, I do. I don't know that much about other communities in Southwest Virginia, like I do Floyd, but when I came back and was working as a retired judge, I did sit in other places and it is unique. For whatever reasons Floyd has attracted since the '70s an alternative community that historically embraces everything. I mean, live and let live, whatever turns you on, as long as you're not hurting somebody. So there is strong component of that in Floyd. A lot of people have come into the county because it's got that energy. So there are more new people in Floyd, who are liberal and accepting, welcoming, and I think that is an advantage for us. It's not say that there still isn't old Floyd and that everybody in the county is supportive of PFLAG because they're not, but it's much more welcoming than I would have ever imagined.

31.39 KA-What would you say was the most defining moment for you, like if you could look back on your whole life and find one moment to pull and explain to somebody struggling with sexuality, what would you take away from that defining moment?

32.03 KO-Yea, in terms of the totality of my acceptance of myself and really stepping out into the world completely free, that didn't happen for me until my 40s and when I made that transition from quietly being who I was to really openly being who I was, my whole life changed. You don't recognize how much you are holding back, how much you are hiding, until you are just willing to fully be yourself. My gratitude to the people who have the courage to do that. There are public figures in our life, who have really changed the world, Ellen DeGeneres has changed the world, by being courageous enough, putting her entire career on the line, by being able to say "this is who I am." That changed for me because I saw how much different I felt in the world. I didn't hold back anything. I didn't screen or filter, "that's probably not the right place to talk about my partner here." Even though I didn't have the shame about myself. I know there are plenty of people who do. They have religious messages in their head that they're not worthy, that they're sinners, condemned, there are all of the messages that come from different families and from different religions, is that the sooner, whatever work it takes to be okay with yourself and have the courage and willingness, no matter where you have to do it, go somewhere, move somewhere where you can feel free enough to authentically be yourself. Do it. Because it really did change my life and it took me a long time. The world's different now. It's easier in some ways and still very difficult for individuals, the world is a lot better, but that doesn't change the fact that individual families can be very punishing and dismissive. For too many people of the world, it's still a lot that they have to lose by just being who they are, but the sooner you can get to that point, the more happiness that you're going to have individually, I think.

34.35 KA-You obviously flip-flopped between Floyd and Florida...

34.41 KO-Used to.

34.42 KA-Used to, and now you're situated in Floyd. When you first came into your sexuality, you said that your mother, she knew, but she was kind of...

34.56 KO-She wasn't accepting in anyway.



34.57 KA-Yes, so how would you say for parents now, especially living in Southwestern Virginia, which is sort of a more conservative area, what advice would you give them to deal with their children's sexuality?

35.16 KO-My parents grew to be very accepting and they educated themselves and they had a lot of obstacles against them at that time because all the literature, much of the literature was very scary for them. I'm grateful that my parents eventually did their homework and came to accept and love me for who I was. As a parent, it's difficult for me—I haven't given birth to any children, but I have step children—it's difficult for me to understand why a parent would reject their kid. Most typically—I know this was true for my mother before knew—when I was a kid, I was boyish, I was most comfortable that way, and I think she was embarrassed. It was about her, it wasn't about me. It was her own discomfort with having a kid that didn't conform to the norm or didn't turn out the way that she wanted me to. So, for parents dealing with any kind of kid who's just not the mainstream, not doing what everybody else does. You have to have the courage to look at your own self and look at what's really going here and have the willingness to do that work yourself and love your kid. The world is scary enough when your family supports and loves you, you have so much more of a solid foundation to stand on when you go out into the world. The world can be difficult for anybody who is different. And get help. There is plenty of really great resources out there. If you can't do it on your own, talk to someone else, find an organization where you can talk to parents who are going through the same thing and support yourself, it's lonely for parents, too.

37.34 MK-It sounds like an exhausting process to be gay in general

37.37 KO-You know, not anymore. I don't even think about it anymore. That's what I was trying to say earlier about. I know we tend to stick together in gathering, so you could be comfortable and be yourself and touch your partner because there are other people who are gay or lesbian in the room. And I really don't even think about it anymore. You know I have such a good community here in Floyd. And you chose your friends right? You're not going to hang out with people that aren't going to welcome you. I just don't think about as much anymore. It's not—so, this is a really silly thing—but it's not completely gone. I don't think gay, lesbian people should just do what heterosexuals have been doing forever because heterosexuals have been doing it forever. Marriage is one of those things. There are things that happen, and when you married you typically, or sometimes, there's an announcement in the paper and your picture is there. And everybody's like "oh that's so nice" and I was thinking about that recently. We're older which makes that a little different but I'm probably not going to do that in the Floyd County paper. You know, have some listing of things there. There are little remnants of things where, "yeah, I'm probably not going to do that in Floyd County." I don't know if I'd do it in Richmond, really, but it's just not so much an issue for me anymore. And I think it's so refreshing that it's not the focus. My life doesn't revolve around finding places where I can go where my partner and I can be safe. All the websites that talk about places where gay and lesbian people can travel. I traveled all over the world and there's just not a lot of that to worry about anymore. We go wherever we want to go and not because it is gay friendly, and that was the focus when we would travel, or when my friends and I would travel in the '80s. We would look for gay friendly places to go, "oh lets go to Key West and stay at a gay B&B." It's just not so much of an issue anymore. I think that'll become less and less the case because of your generation and kids coming after you. My step-daughter is 33 [years old] and it just wasn't an issue for her and her friends. The whole gender conversation is beyond me now, we talk about, I have a cousin who is a lesbian who is ten years younger than me and there's all this gender language I don't

understand. I'm open to it, the whole transgender movement, there's some transgender people in Floyd and I'm learning. It's kinda the next terrain for me. How do you respectfully have a conversation without using pronouns and what are people's preferences? It's uncomfortable just because I don't want to offend anyone. It certainly throughout my life has been a source of sadness mostly because you're just not included, because of my age and the partners that I had. I had a partner for ten years, in my 30s who [was a] wonderful woman, very scared of telling her family and so she never did. The entire time we were together and you know, they are taking family pictures at weddings and we'd been together for eight years and no one said "Kim should have been in the picture" and that kind of subtle exclusion is really hard, really really hard. And that doesn't happen anymore. Many of us have the pain of that. It's just a part of your life. It's what you experienced and you're grateful that it's not that way anymore. You learn to make choices that keep that from happening and I could not be in a relationship with someone who wasn't 100% willing to be open, I'm not willing to do that anymore. Not to say I don't have respect and understand when other people make those very hard choices. And I'm fortunate in this sense in my life now. My mother was a very forbidding figure in my life, very critical, very harsh. I spent most of my life worried about whether what I was doing was going to be okay for her, and she's dead, and I don't mean to sound insensitive when I say that but there is nobody in the world anymore that I care about what their feelings are in the way that it would influence me negatively. I am who I am. I'm sensitive and kind to other people. But that voice of "uh oh, what's she gonna say if I do this" [is] gone. It's completely gone. It's very liberating. Not everybody has that experience and so I'm grateful to say. It's not that the work is over by any stretch. You know, especially in Southwest Virginia, in pockets that are not Floyd County, kids are suffering. There is so much meanness in the world. You know really look at what kids do to each other. It feels to me like it's really different from when I was in high school. It was certainly very different, but I didn't get bullied, called names, and things like that, in the same way that I think a lot of kids do [today].

43.33 MK-Do you think because there is more awareness now, that they're being bullied, or because when you were in high school and elementary school there wasn't much going on?

43.45 KO-Maybe, because things are more open, and there is more awareness of "this in the name I can call you." We didn't even know then, right? So that might be the case. And more kids, you know, are having the courage to kind of be who they are. And you can have a supportive home environment. I know kids in Floyd who have supportive families and the school environments is just harsh. And a number of them have had to homeschool their kids. Like "I'm just not doing it. I'm not putting my kid through this," and I really blame the institution for that. For me, as an adult, around any issue, it would be incomprehensible to me to allow an environment like that to exist. Where the adults are not in charge and saying "this is really not okay," and creating the safe space and that's not happening. It's because of people's own biases and prejudices that are still there. You know, that's how they feel. That's how the adults feel. They're not reigning in the kids. Someone like Jim has the right sort of intolerance for that kind of stuff and the right way of approaching it to call attention to that kind of stuff, you hope will change things, because you really have to have somebody who is true in every area. Someone who is willing to say "nope, that's not okay," to hold people accountable, to be willing to speak up, not be afraid of the consequences, to have the courage to just say "this is not right. You can't hurt me. Nothing you can do to harm me. Go after me all you want." Hopefully that will change the culture in Floyd. Its gonna take time.

45.37 MK-Did you see any figures like that who would be intolerant of that behavior when you were going through law school?

45.50 KO-No. Well, you know, what I can honestly say, in spite of the challenges, the isolation, the loneliness. I'm someone who can really honestly say that being gay didn't keep me from doing anything I wanted to do. Towards the end of my career, I became a judge, despite the fact that I was gay. Everybody knew I was gay. Towards the end of my career, there was one time when I received a phone call from someone at the general assembly. Judges at my level of court have to be reappointed every six years. So every six years you go through a process that you're either a judge or you're not. Customarily you continue to be a judge unless you make a big mistake. Just before my last reappointment there was a black woman in Virginia Beach, lesbian, who was at a higher level than mine and she was not reappointed to the bench. And it was historic, it was really unusual for that to happen. They said it was because of sexual harassment between her and one of her employees. I don't know what the facts really were. But I was scared when that happened. My reappointment was coming up. I actually got a phone call from someone at the general assembly. A friend who said "I'm just giving you a heads up. There is someone who is wanting to target you when your reappointment comes up, because you're a lesbian." It was a man who was a delegate in the Richmond area. He was very anti-gay. He was in a very staunch Republican conservative district. He was openly and publicly targeting gay people. And what he did in his campaign, whoever was running against him received a large donation from a very successful gay businessman in Richmond. He then attacked him for doing this, as if it were a terrible thing. At the same time a good friend of mine was running for governor, so I was really focused on Tim's election and it never occurred to me that this man would lose his election. The elections were in November and my reappointment process was going to start in January, and he lost reelection. So that was it for me, whatever he intended to do to me publicly in my appointment, it never happened. But what do you do? But it was a turning point for me professionally, too, and for Richmond, it was like "wow, someone lost reelection because of an antigay platform. How great is that?"

49.04 MK-Would you say that Southwest Virginia and Floyd has changed a lot on the stance of sexuality?

49.26 KO-I wouldn't. It's not old Floyd that's really changing. It's new people coming to Floyd that are bringing a different perspective. There are some old timers, you know, some people that have been there for a long time who—I don't want to create this sort of stereotype for anybody, that everybody in Southwest Virginia is this conservative...—but it is a bible belt. There are a lot of conservative Christian dominations there. And I think slowly by, this is why I think, for me, my individual choice is to be as open as I can be anywhere I can be it, because there are people who just think they don't know anyone. They have their own stereotypes of gay people and I don't fit it. So as there's more openness, I think there's greater, one of my least favorite words, but I think there's greater tolerance. I don't know how accepting, I don't know how accepting people are of me and many of the circles I go in, but they're tolerating it, they're not pushing back. I have no idea what they say behind closed doors and I don't really care. My hairdresser is a woman who has been in Floyd County her whole life, generations, you know, she's amazing and progressive and the most creative. You wouldn't know it from my hair—I'm getting a haircut tomorrow—I shaved my head. My head was shaved because I was in Nepal last year so I'm just letting it go crazy. And I talk to Krissy. I'll tell Krissy tomorrow I'm getting married and she'll be great and she'll be "ah, I'm so excited for you Kim." Now I don't have the slightest idea what she really thinks, you know. Does she really think "Wow, that's you know, I don't know," but I don't care. So that's part of it, I just don't care, I don't care if people accept me. I don't care, you know, I really don't want to

be targeted. I don't wanna be humiliated. I don't wanna be harassed. But people in Floyd are polite, if they don't like you, they will just stay away from you. They're not going to say to your face that you're going to hell. Some of them might, if you give them a chance. I just had a conversation about theology around homosexuality and Jim never does that, he never tries to have the theology conversation, he could. It's just it's neighbors, I'm your neighbor, my neighbor happens to be a lesbian. And it's like everybody, do you really talk to your heterosexual neighbors and friends about their heterosexuality? You don't. I mean you do your business together, you do what you need to do. Maybe Floyd's changing a little bit because there are more visible gay people there. They're tolerant. The new people are accepting.

52.29 MK-So you mention you went to Nepal last year, can you tell us a little about it?

52.33 KO-I went with a clinic. It was transformative, it's actually, it's been a little more than a year, it was the fall of 2014. I was in India for a couple of weeks ahead of time, and then in Nepal for more than a month, in the most remote region in Nepal walking with a group of doctors. I was obviously not a doctor. I was volunteering at the clinics to [help with] patient control and things like that. It was incredible. Unbelievably beautiful. And difficult, and we're blessed, even our housing projects are better than anything that people have in third world countries.

53.22 MK-Did you give you some perspective on the whole world entirely?

53.25 KO-Yea, one of the most powerful pieces of it really was around technology for me, and the way we're out of balance with it. I didn't have access to anything. I mean there's no cellphones, there's no electricity still in parts of Nepal. The most remote regions. There's a way that people are able to present to each other that doesn't have the distraction. Of course there's you know, it's a luxury and it makes life easier. They would love to have all the technology that we have for ease and I didn't miss it for one minute. Movement, you know people there walk everywhere and in the entire time I was in the Northwest portion of Nepal, there's not a single motorized vehicle, not one. There are no motorized vehicles. And so it's ancient, it was really like stepping back in time hundreds of years. Before cars and you know people are walking. We were on an ancient trade route to Tibet which is in China, it's hard for me to call it China now, and they're doing it the same way, donkeys, sacks of flower and rice, and going up, walking up to China, to Tibet, to trade for salt and things. So there's a simplicity. And it's easy to romanticize that when you have the conveniences [of first world life], but it was really hard for me to get in a car when I got back. There are places that I can walk, not many, but there are places I can walk. I walked to meetings like five miles from my house, it's nothing. We walked twice that much every day. We're spoiled and there's a disconnection from the planet that happens when you do that. So I'd go back in a minute. And highly recommend it to anyone, travel. Travel, go places, and see things while you can.

55.41 KA-So you said you had done some traveling before Nepal, would you say that that gave you perspective as a whole?

55.46 KO-Absolutely. India, Nepal. I've done a lot of traveling and it educates you in a different kind of way. As I say to you, there's a commonness. You realize that there's really not a lot of differences among us. I don't care where you go, I was in one of the poorest places on Earth, next to Africa, in terms of food and the winter months it's hard for them to survive. Their humanity, their humor, maybe local customs that are different, certainly they are, but things we want and need and desire in terms of connection, it's

all the same. That's been surprising to me, actually, no matter where you go. There is a McDonald's everywhere. In the bigger cities.

56.45 MK-So you traveled domestically, too, earlier on in the '70s or '80s?

56.51 KO-I did a lot of traveling. I did more traveling in the '90s all over the US.

56.55 MK-You said your friends would seek out gay safe places, can you describe to me what that would be like to try to find one of those?

57.04 KO-Okay I actually wouldn't go online then, but travel books, word of mouth. I mean there were hot spots. San Francisco, Key West were two of the primary ones. Fort Lauderdale has [a scene], for men actually it was more male, but Key West and San Francisco were the two big places. New York, but not so much actually. You know New York is more of cosmopolitan city, but not really known for being welcoming in that way, so yea you just talked to each other. "Where did you have a good experience?" There are magazines. *The Advocate* has been around for a long time.<sup>2</sup> And there are all kinds of underground publications for a long time that you just know because you go to a gay bar and they're there. Local stuff where you could find travel ads and there were people, even then, you know trying to court the population.

58.05 KA-So would you say that these places sort of linked together the nation in sexuality, if that makes sense?

58.12 KO-They were safe spaces.

58.16 KA-That brought people together?

58.17 KO-Yea, absolutely. Washington D.C., even DuPont Circle, as an example, gay bookstores where you could find a lot of information. You know people go where there are people like them or at least where they feel safe being who they are, and I don't do that anymore. They certainly, well now that you don't have to think about where to get married, it was a little bit difficult for me like "oh gosh, I would really love to be legally married in Virginia," but what difference does it make? We're going to be legally married. Part of me wanted to be that first person, because I'm sure nobody's done it. Who walked into the Floyd County Circuit Court and said "I'd like a marriage license."

59.12 KA- That's exciting!

59.14 KO- Yea, and on the other hand I don't care about it. I mean it doesn't really matter, you know we can all do it and that's the important thing. You know, now we don't have to worry about insurance, and the stuff that other people take for granted, that they been able to do forever. Estate planning is simpler, and we can worry about other things.

59.39 KA- So would you say—I know that we keep talking about traveling, but it sort of plays an important role in shaping you as a person. Would you say that you may have been a different person, if you didn't travel so much, in terms of acceptance of people? Because when you travel to new places you're meeting new people, so would you say that that's helped you become more accepting of not only yourself but others?

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<sup>2</sup> *The Advocate* began publication in 1967. It is consider the longest-running LGBTQ publication in U.S. history.

1.00.11 KO- Yea, I would! I mean I think if I had been born and raised in Floyd County, and never been out of the county, there's still plenty of people who do that. And I didn't see that "oh, wow, there are gay bookstores...?" In the Castro district in San Francisco, there's a movie theater that shows gay films. If I didn't know that there were places beyond my small world, I think it would have been really harder for me to see that there's a broader world out here that's not narrow. It's bigger than where I am. That's part of recognizing that it is not everywhere. It's not this way everywhere. Even in India, I was so surprised to see, routinely, men walking down the street holding hands. Being very affectionate and close, they weren't homosexual. They just accepted this closeness among men, and it was fine. You learn from seeing that there are things that are done differently in different places. Even though humanity is the same, and it's expansive. It gives you a sense of hope, and it's like going to a museum in some ways. You know where you're exposed to different ways of doing things. It helps you come out of yourself, I think. Just seeing that the world is bigger than my small little pocket. Especially for people who have had a limited worldview experience. There is a tendency we have to either think that our experience is unique or that there's nobody else who has felt this way. It's the power of story, and especially when people are willing to tell difficult stories. Someone else can read that, or listen to that, and understand that "I thought I was alone. I didn't think anybody in world could possibly feel this way." Because they hadn't been exposed, or people hadn't been willing to tell the truth about their hard things.

1.02.29 KA- So now, what would you say to people of the world, who can't get out of their little pocket? How would you recommend that they reach out to the world outside their pocket?

1.02.44 KO- Well there's lots of ways to do that because of technology. There's a virtual world of company online. I think that's one of the great things about it. You know, Jim's communicating with Quakers in Uganda, and connecting and talking. There are a lot of ways to connect with people who share a perspective. You just have to have the willingness.

I had this really interesting experience hiking. Anita and I were hiking at the Cascades, it's spectacularly beautiful! It's about a year and a half ago. We encountered a man on the trail, who was very effeminate, but he was a man. He just befriended us. He was lonely, you could tell that. He was talking to us. I thought he was a gay man, because he was so effeminate. He was talking about how it was hard to meet women, and I am thinking "honey, you don't have to pretend with me. You don't have to talk that you're trying to meet women. We're gay! We're lesbians, we're together. No need to put up this charade for us." We got to the top of the Cascades, he finally made it, he sat down. He told us his story, and he's actually a hermaphrodite. Really difficult, for me it was mind blowing, because I thought "How could anyone discriminate against someone who has an extra chromosome?" There's pros and cons to that whole thing, is there something genetic in me that makes me a lesbian? This human actually had an extra chromosome and had qualities of male/ female and has had a miserable existence, really identifies as a female, that's where Danny's gender association is, but wants to be with women. He just doesn't fall into the category of anything that makes sense, right? She is like completely isolated and lonely, we've tried to connect with her on any number of occasions, we've invited her to PFLAG events. We've got Jim and Anita and I have taken her to the movies once, she's very attractive, very smart, and won't step outside of the box. We invited her to a meeting, she said she was going to come to where there was other transgender people in Floyd. There's, because of her own history, she has a mindset that she's not going to find anyone who is okay with her, and she's wrong. She's wrong. But that fear and whatever that's happened to kinda hold her down her whole life, is keeping her from connecting with

the world that is there, how do you... I mean, you can't force someone to do that. So you have to be willing if you really want to make the connections, you have to have the courage to say "I'm gonna try this." You know, she's had a lot of bad experiences where people have made fun of her and her own sense of herself is so damaged. You have to believe in yourself enough to know "I'm worthy, I'm worth having friends, and I'm worth having good friends." And you can find that in this world. If you're willing to do it, put forth the effort. There's no reason why someone should be alone, there's really not. You just have someone say that you maybe or somewhere see that that's the case. It's not easy for some folks.

1.06.45 MK- Can you point to a moment in your life that you felt that way, that you came to that realization that you are worthy of not being alone?

1.06.54 KO- You know that was never my issue. And I don't know whether it was because I was an athlete. So at the same time that I was an outsider, I was always an insider. Because I had a team and I was good at it. I always had something that gave me a sense of belonging. I'm very fortunate. That is one of the hardest struggles that people have, is thinking "I'm okay. I don't care what the world [thinks of me]." That's just not the struggle that I had. Mine was more of... because of my formative experiences with relationships or whatever you want to call them. That screwed me up so much, that what I didn't understand was how to make a commitment in a relationship. What is long term fidelity and loyalty? Not to say that I was a bad person but I just didn't understand. That was really my work, learning to be in a long term relationship. But I am wired for that, I just didn't know how to do it. Those are the things I had to deal with. Fears of abandonment, somebody was gonna leave in a minute because relationships were just taken from me. Any relationship I had, if my mother found out about it, it was over. No closure, no conversation, and they were fucked-up relationships to begin with. Then when they weren't—with people my own age or whatever—there was no way to have that happen. You just couldn't have a long term relationship without a tremendous amount of secrecy, struggle, and I just didn't know how to do it. That's been my work, not worthiness individually, but how to heal my own internal wounds. We all have them, how to do my own healings so that I didn't get in own way, sabotage things without really knowing it.

1.09.23 KA-So would you say that that's something that might be contingent with your generation?

1.09.31 KO-Maybe, and I think it's an issue, it strikes me being worth saying this, too. And this is not just for being gay, it's harder when you're different, but I think that what happened for me because of the formative experiences that I had, you know those tender years of experimentation, what happened for me is that I didn't, even though I felt that was okay, I didn't really have a solid sense of myself as an individual separate from anything else. Just me. "I'm fine all by myself, I don't need a relationship." I really did. I needed relationships and didn't know it, but things got torn away from me and relationship became the most important thing for me, because of those formative experiences. I think that happens a lot, you know. It's hard enough as an adolescent, but when you're a gay or lesbian person that tendency to be defined by or feel like you have to have someone anchor you. "My better half, my other half." There ain't no other or better half for me. I've done my work. I'm a solid person, in myself. Whatever wounds that I had that were there, whatever hurts and pains and traumas that I had, and there were plenty, I've taken care of my own business. And I can stand completely alone, in fact I love being alone. I have a lot of interests. I went to Nepal without my partner. It's icing on the cake, and a lot of folks don't see that. That a relationship is really not to compliment or fix. When you're lonely, of course you're looking for that. You think "if only I had, if only I met the right person." Danny the

hermaphrodite, “if only I met...” It’s not about meeting the right person. It’s about meeting yourself first then being completely whole and solid and then the person you meet is gonna, its gonna be a whole different kind of relationship. It’s not going to be this co-dependent fearful needy kind of thing. It’s “hey, we’re two great people, I’m perfectly fine by myself but this is even better to have someone to share life with.” I think there is the risk of that when you’re marginalized, when you live in that way and you just... I craved community. I’m a pack animal by nature, anyway, but I want, I just craved community, you know people like-minded, people where I could, you know, be myself and share life with. So yea, I think just generally speaking it’s a challenge for a lot of people to be okay all by themselves. To have a life that is separate from a love interest or distraction in that way. I’m sure when there’s that much loss and you want... This is the thing my step-daughter has said this, “I just want someone, I just want to be the most important thing to someone.” I mean we can all identify with that, right? You have to be the most important thing to yourself. You really can’t expect the relationship, of course, you want your partner to think you’re fantastic and wonderful, why would you be with someone who doesn’t think that? But if you are looking for someone to give you that primary sense of belonging, you’re missing something. That’s where the openness and the support that so many gay and lesbian people have now, it really helps to have healthy relationships. Yea, it’s been interesting to me. I’ve wondered, “why?” I’ve had three significant long-term relationships in my life. This is my third. There’s a lot of movement in, if I look in the community in Richmond. You know people have kind of, there are very few relationships, two of my best friends have been together for almost thirty years. That’s very unusual, and why is that? Is it any more or less than heterosexuals? I don’t know what the research shows, seems to me likes it’s more and why? Is it... I don’t know the answer to that. I think part of it is the marriage is really a communal event. Historically, I wouldn’t go there because it’s really about property. You know when you think of the support that heterosexual couples have, there’s a social network that really doesn’t want them to get divorce, that wants them to stay together. There’s services, there’s friends, and there’s marriage. There’s marriage, it’s not a small thing to get married. It’s a hard thing to get divorced. A lot of contracts, it’s a promise, it’s an agreement. And we didn’t have that, did that matter? Has that created less stability in the relationship? I don’t know.

1.15.01KA-Valuable, valuable lesson to be learned. Do you think, this is sort of my final question. Do you think, its seems like you came into yourself before you came into sort of the relationship realm, Do you think that has shaped the way that you handle your relationships now, by coming into yourself first?

1.15.19 Absolutely. It took me too many years and I hope it doesn’t take either one of you that long. But I had a lot of trauma, a lot of trauma in my childhood, some of which you haven’t heard about. Yea, absolutely. Make sure that you know yourself first and that you’re solid alone and you have interest in things that thrill you, that you love to do. Alone, with your friends. Any relationship that you have that comes from that place is going to be better than that comes from “I feel so much better about myself when I’m with him, or I feel so much better about myself when I’m with her. What happens if I lose him or her?” Whatever, you’ll be fine if you have that core sense of yourself, not to say there’s not heartbreak. But fundamental to any good relationship I think or any healthy living is a strong sense of worthiness and value alone. You’re home is in yourself, my home was not in my self, until my fifties, late forties maybe but fifties, but there’s nothing that can rock you, when your happiness doesn’t depend on anything outside of you there’s nothing that can rock you. Not to the core. Obviously there are things that happen that are difficult and challenging but not in that way of, you can’t be okay without it.



1.16.51 MK-So as we are wrapping up do you have anything else that you want to have memorialized in the story that you just wanna express for us to keep on record?

1.17.03 KO- Just my happiness and gratitude to all of those people who have laid the foundation for the world being better for me, who have had the courage to be open and vocal and even radically so which might not be comfortable for me. They've made the world okay for me, and how happy I am for most of the younger generation that it's been easier, and to understand where you've come from, understand who your ancestors are, it's part of what you're doing.

1.17.38 CA and MK-Thank you so much.