

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

**Interview with Rodger Saunders
February 25, 2016**

Interviewer: Holly Thompson
Interviewee: Rodger Saunders
Date: February 25, 2016
Location: Roanoke Diversity Center

Total: 59:02

Transcribed by: Laura Groves and Craig Walker

Part 1

0:00 = on growing up in Roanoke, and moving to Richmond for four years (late 1970s / early 1980s)

2:43 = coming out to his parents in Roanoke in 1984

9:14 = Roanoke Police Department crackdowns on gay cruising

12:26 = describing the gay bar scene in Roanoke in the 1980s

14:51 = on the issue of employment discrimination against gays

20:35 = the gay cruising scene in Roanoke

26:58 = gay-friendly bars and restaurants in Roanoke

Part 2

0:00 = his first sexual experiences, at age 26 or 27 (early 1980s), in Richmond; and some frightening sexual encounters, as well

9:05 = on the concept of “looking gay”; gay fashion styles

11:45 = the increasing fluidity of gender identity and sexual orientation, more than just LGBT

Part 3

0:00 = gay pornography; gay bookstores and bathhouses

3:44 = the story of a sexual relationship with a woman

6:49 = the AIDS crisis

9:09 = his work with the Roanoke Diversity Center (2010s)

Part 1 (30:16)

0:01 HT: this is Holly Thompson sitting here with...

0:03 RS: Rodger Saunders

0:04 HT: From...

0:05 RS: The Roanoke Diversity Center.

0:06 HT: Okay. Can you start off by telling us where you're from?

0:09 RS: Well, I was born in Roanoke, and lived here most of my life. I moved to Richmond in 1980 and came back here in 1984, and have been here ever since.

0:20 HT: Okay, so how do you identify yourself within the Roanoke community?

0:24 RS: I am a gay male.

0:26 HT: Okay. How long have you lived in Roanoke?

0:31 RS: 54 Years, with four of those being in Richmond, I mean four additional ones being in Richmond. I'm 58.

0:39 HT: Okay, would you like to talk about growing up for a little bit, like you said you moved to Richmond, would you like describe that for a little bit?

0:50 RS: Sure, well, going back a little further, when I was about 5 or 6 I realized I was different from folks because I would watch Westerns and when a person got shot I would want them to take their shirt off so I could see them, and I didn't really know what "gay" was but I enjoyed the guys with their shirts off and I had a preference with the ones that weren't hairy, even at that age, and as I got older and found out that wasn't the way everyone was I hid that and it didn't even come out until 1984, kinda by accident, with a personal situation that I had after I moved back from Richmond.

1:36 HT: Okay, so do you want to tell us a little bit about Richmond?

1:40 RS: Sure, I transferred up there with Long John Silvers. I was Assistant Manager, and it was the first time I was away from home. I lived with my parents until then, and when I moved there I didn't immediately jump into the gay life because I was busy trying to work, and I went to a few clubs there and some gay cafe things, but I would sit outside and sit for an hour or so wondering if I wanted to go in because I didn't want anyone I may know ride by to see me going in a gay club. So, the hesitation was there but once I got in there I felt really relaxed and was amazed that there was so many people that A. I was attracted to, B. That were like me and some that weren't like me because there's so many different facets of diversity in life.

2:31 HT: Definitely, so, could tell us a little bit about how you came out. So you're talking about being in Richmond for a little bit. Did you come back to Roanoke and continue your life the way you'd been living?

2:43 RS: I did. Well, while I was there I met several folks and had several gay experiences and one of the people I met on my job was a security guard and he was fellow security guard but he

had several side jobs. One, he was a stockbroker, and he was a local county cop, he wasn't a Richmond cop, but he was a nearby county cop, and I'm thinking why are you a security guard, which is kinda of a low man on the totem pole if you're a stockbroker and you're a cop and all this. So you tend not to believe folks like that. Well, one night he took me to his office, he had a nice office, desk, name on the desk, it was his name. Then one night I had to take his shift and my car had broken down and it was after the bus hours and I worked til midnight and he said I can pick you up, but I'm on my shift doing the police stuff, but I'll pick up in the squad car, we gotta hurry back cause I have to get to the other side of the city. So he picked me up there, he was in a fully uniformed cop car and everything. So everything he told me was true. Also along those lines, he told me that his favorite thing was to cut people, and he told me he killed people. And [he] had a farm in Montpelier where his parents lived, and I said okay, here's a guy that I didn't think was a stockbroker but was, didn't think he was a cop but he was, and so why should not believe the stories he's told me about hurting people and killing people and burying them in plots down [on] his mother's and dad's farm? Anyway, that caused a problem while I was there. I met a guy hitchhiking to Kings Dominion, I was doing a bank run from Richmond to Winchester and I saw the guy standing on the side of the road and he was hitchhiking he had no shirt on, and of course "Ding Ding!" [*imitating sound of a bell*] So I drove really quickly to the place, switched cars to get the company car, rode back. Luckily he was still there hitchhiking. I picked him up, we drove towards Kings Dominion and he said "Do you know of any gay places in town?" and I said "a few," and we got to talking. I gave him my number and the next week we wound up together... temporarily, but over the course of the next year or two, with my friendship with the cop/stockbroker/guard and this guy. Because I knew what this guy was he was a hustler he didn't just do things for the fun of it because he loved women, and so I said the things the stockbroker/cop guy wanted to do or did do with guys sexually this other guy didn't do because he was straight, so I told the stockbroker/cop guy that he would never have the other person, which was my favorite person at the time so that made the stockbroker/cop person making up his mind he was going to have the other guy just to make me mad and to prove he could do it.

So I went to Winchester and came back one day and came home. The backdoor had been kicked in. The guys were in the house, my guy was told by the cop it was okay to break it in, he was a cop, so he broke the door in, and then they did their thing. I came home and saw this and was upset on several levels. 1. there was a break in at the house; 2. a cop did it; 3. they had ya know sex and it was my guy, so there was jealousy there. So I just act like nothing happened, I changed my clothes and I left. I immediately went to a phone and called mom and dad told them there was some issues at the house and that I needed to come home. And the next day dad came up with the U-haul and we moved back to Roanoke. Again they didn't know why I was having these issues, or [why] that I'm willing to move back.

So once I got back, over a few months my dad passed away, and before that I had told him I was gay and I was glad that I did because I wanted him to know before he passed away. But prior to him passing away I got angry at this guy that I liked cause he came back to Roanoke to visit me and wouldn't have sex with me after I'd gone back to Richmond and picked him up. So when I came back the guy was at a storage building that I had, and I just locked the car, I mean I left him in the car, I took the key, and I walked home. As I got towards the house, it was 2 or 3 in the morning, I said "I don't really like what's going on. I don't like my life. I don't like that he's treating me like this." And so I just continued walking down Shenandoah Avenue, walked

downtown, walked over toward Tanglewood and I hitchhiked to North Carolina with seven dollars in my pocket in November. Had nothing with me except seven dollars and I was going to go as far away as I could, and I got to North Carolina, Greensboro, and I called back home to my sister, who did know that I was gay, and I said “tell mom and dad I'm gay and see if they love me, see if they want me to come home, see if they want me to go on.” She said “okay, call back at 3 o'clock”—this is way before cell phones. So I called back at 2 o'clock and she said “everything's fine, come on home, they're coming down to get you stay right where you are.” So I sat around, waited for them, they picked me up at the Krispy Kreme, everybody knows the Krispy Kreme in Greensboro. So they picked me up, and on the way home I slept, cause I hadn't slept in a day or so, and I get home and I walk in the door and I said “well, I'm going to bed, I'll see you guys later.” And dad said "sit down we need to talk" [*in low baritone voice*]. So I sat down, and I said “what do we need to talk about?” He said “why did you hitchhike to Greensboro?” My sister had not told them anything and ambushed me and I was sitting there having to just let it all out, so I told my dad that I—short story—I just said “if I see a guy and a girl walking down the beach I'm going to look at the guy.” He said “well, all you need to do is be with a girl and you'll be okay.” I said “that'll work no more than you being with a guy is going to change you.” Anyway, we were friendly, and they accepted me. And five or six months later he passed away and mom loved me. I think she was disappointed in the fact that I couldn't give them children on that side, cause I'm the only son, but that's when they found out and that was 1984.

9:14 HT: okay, well thank you for sharing that with us. So you did talk about the police, like your friend was a police officer, how in that time did the police affect people that were gay specifically? Did they target them? Did you have any experience with that?

9:30 RS: I didn't have it in Richmond. There's a place there, it's a World War II memorial, called the Cariline or the Carilion and it's a huge monument that's rather phallic-looking,¹ but anyway that's where all the gay people went to meet, so I met several people there. When I came back to Roanoke, that's where I noticed some of the [police] stings and changes in the parks that tried to alleviate people being gay basically. We did have the bar The Park but only open 3 or 4 days a week. The only other place to meet folks were in parks, and they [the police] would do stings and set people up, and put undercover cops out there, and if you approached them you'd get arrested. At one point I think they arrested 23 people in one night. One sheriff took over several years ago and cleared all the brush up the side of Highland Park overlooking the railroad track by the dog park so that guys couldn't go over there in the bushes or if they did they'd be seen. So they were doing everything they could to eradicate gayness like they couldn't do that but they just wanted to get it out from in the open and off the streets so to speak.

There was also an area around, well it's across the street from Elmwood Park between the park and the interstate and there's a little L street in there and they called that the Butcher Block, and there would be boys there every night.² And you could go over, pick up the one you wanted, talk to them a little bit, take them somewhere and bring them back. But there, toward I guess 1983 or so, the cops cracked down on that and you couldn't find these guys anywhere.

¹ The Virginia War Memorial Carillon was built in 1932 as a World War I memorial. It is located in Byrd Park in Richmond.

² Corner of Bullitt Avenue and 3rd Street SE. Interstate-581 was constructed in stages in the mid- to late-1960s.

Also during, right after that time, the Internet started blowing up and that's where people started meeting folks and it got easier and also a little bit more dangerous to meet people. But the only thing I really remember are those stings. They had a big one in Wasena Park, the neighbors in Wasena Park thought that every gay person was out to molest their kids.³ So the police kinda cleared Wasena Park out, and recently over the last five years they put the greenway in. Which alleviated the possibility or ability to drive from one side of the park to the other and sit and talk, we used sit and talk with our friends for hours. And there was no sex at all, we just hung out there, and they took that road out and you can only walk through there and there was another reason, you know it was for the greenway they could've moved it another way or had it a different way, but I think that was another way to kinda crack down on gayness in the parks. That happened not long after the sheriff came in and had the guys tear up all the trees and bushes over next to the railroad track up the hill [at Highland Park], for people to hide.

12:26 HT: Okay, definitely, so what has your experience with nightlife in downtown Roanoke been since you've been back from Richmond?

12:38 RS: Okay, when I left I think The Park was there but I didn't know anything about it. I rode by it once and it said "private club," and I didn't really know what that was. I knew we had the Moose club and the Elks club and I said "what kinda club is this private club?"⁴ So I didn't go in for years. When I got back from Richmond, I had heard about Backstreet and back then Backstreet was a gay bar, right now it's a heavy metal bar or just a bar in itself. But back then being a gay bar, I did my Richmond thing, I pulled up and I watched to see who went in, to see if there was anyone I knew, because I didn't want anyone I knew to know me and get me out at work and get me fired. So I sat there for about an hour, again just getting up the nerve to go in.

One night I was there, funny not funny story, I heard about this person, very famous drag queen in town, and that person drove up I knew of them and they were followed by another person that I knew fairly well. And they argued in the street and the person that was the drag queen was going into the bar and the other person ran behind them, arguing with them, and hit them in the head with a hammer. Didn't hurt them very much, they got up and went on in the bar, but that night I decided not to go in. Years later I wound up dating the drag queen person for three or four months. But anyway, the other part of being, the nightlife part, when you went to The Park and it was real busy night, they had a line out the door and the door was on the right side of the building and the building was rather wide, so the line, if it was real busy, the line would stretch down almost half a city block, so you were lined up against the wall. I tried to plan it so I would get there early enough so I wouldn't have to stand in the line. Cause there were fears of people riding up and down the road that were already calling everybody "faggot this" or "faggot that." And you didn't know when somebody was gonna get a gun and just go *pow pow pow pow pow*. [*imitating the sound of a gun firing*] Because we were all lined up like ducks in a row, so that was a scary time because you just didn't know what would happen with the hatred that was everywhere.

³ In fall 1998, the police arrested 18 gay men in an undercover sting operation in Wasena Park.

⁴ The Park opened in late 1978.

14:51 HT: So you mentioned discrimination at work. Like you couldn't let people know that you were gay and you would get fired. Could you explain a little bit about that? Like did that happen just in your field or was it throughout the whole community?

15:06 RS: Well, you heard stories back then of people being disowned by their families, beaten, right around the time it was Matthew Shepard being killed,⁵ and probably others killed that you didn't hear about, but I didn't feel that at my work once I was comfortable going to the bars, because my boss's brother was gay and I saw him at The Park and I felt a little better about that. So I knew at least my boss accepted me, and then over the years that I worked there, which it was an insurance company, it was Anthem Blue Cross / Blue Shield, they accepted partners on your insurance, all you had to do was prove they lived with you and they would cover them on your insurance even though you weren't married and marriage was not legal then. So I felt better at work over the years but then it was just that initial thing. More so I guess people knowing me, seeing me, going in, riding by and being my friends and hating me. More so than me being fired because right off the bat I knew the boss's son was gay and I didn't think I'd have a problem with that. It was just the fact that friends, you'd lose friends just by telling them that you were gay. Whether you were attracted to them or not because at that time a lot of folks were anti-gay.

16:33 HT: so how did being discriminated against and stigmatized affect your relationships with other people, in this time?

16:42 RS: I didn't have any friends that knew I was gay. At work they may have thought I was gay, but unless I was really really close with them and knew that I could tell them really anything, and it was a handful, I didn't tell everyone, I didn't have gay banners on my desk. I didn't say "Hey, I went to The Park Friday night" or anything like that. One day I was across the street from the office, the office was on the fourth floor, and I was in the parking garage and I had a significant other with me and they kissed me on the cheek as they left, and somebody I heard later on said "who was that guy that I saw you kissing?" It kinda got around that I was gay but I had to work extra hard in my job so that I would be more or less in my brain indispensable, so that if they found I was gay they would go "he's gay but he does such a great job." In fact I had a guy that was a good friend of mine, I don't know if he was antigay or not, but he found out from another friend that I was gay and he said "Rodger? I didn't know he was gay," and then after he found out I was gay it didn't change our relationship because again my work ethic and the way I acted and carried myself at work made me look and seem no different from anyone else. So he was shocked that I was. Some folks don't have that luxury, you can tell they're gay when they walk in the room. They're flamboyant sometimes on purpose, sometimes they can't help it and sometimes it's just them being themselves, and now luckily it's more accepted everywhere.

18:26 HT: So did you have to sneak around your friends with this? Like did you keep a secret for as long as you could? Is that where you're going?

18:34 RS: Yes, I would meet my friends for lunch. I would talk about my friends but I would take about them like a football buddy, even though I didn't like sports and they knew I didn't like sports, but it was just, I didn't say "hey, I went out with Joe last night and we had a great

⁵ Matthew Shepard was a gay college student brutally killed in Laramie, Wyoming, in October 1998.

time in the bed.” I just said “so and so is my good friend,” and sometimes they would see me with that person in the hall or whatever. And so I think that's how I kinda got outed out of myself with my friends showing up at my work and seeing us together. And I didn't have a girlfriend, didn't have a wife, didn't have all the things that other folks that are straight have, so that was the only thing that I can think that would matter.

19:18 HT: So did you ever, you were saying that eventually they just figured it out, did you ever have a specific instance of coming out to your friends or coworkers or anything like that?

19:29 RS: Not really. The ones that gave me the impression they knew either told me they knew and then I could share more with them and we got closer and better friends. I just felt like the ones that kept it hidden that knew, if they didn't change their relationship with me that was fine. As I got older it got to be easier to tell people who I was and what I was because I really didn't care what they thought. I had a friend that was rather religious that moved to Kentucky and it was several months after Facebook started up that I friended her because I said she's gonna see all this gay stuff, well then I finally friended her because somebody said she lives that far away she's not seeing you she's not gonna do anything to out you because you're already out here in town, so friend her, so I did friend her, and she'll comment on a couple things that I say but I don't know that she really likes or shares any gay things that I do. It's not that she doesn't accept me as me but she's maybe not for the cause so to speak.

20:35 HT: definitely. Alright, we're gonna change themes a little bit, can you tell us about the concept of cruising, and what kind of cruising has gone on or went on in Roanoke?

20:47 RS: Well, as I mentioned earlier there was that area called the Butcher Block and they had one in Richmond too but that didn't do well for me because I went by there and I couldn't tell the folks that were cruising and the ones that were people coming out of the library. Here in Roanoke, the area [the Butcher Block], the guys were younger, they were attractive, and usually stood singly in the block as opposed to congregating in a group because a person's more apt to stop and talk to one person than a group. It was a very exciting time, but you picked up someone and you didn't know if they were gonna hurt you, if they were gonna blackmail you, you didn't know if they were I don't know whatever, or if it would be a fun time. Of course it always cost money, they weren't out there doing it for free and I'd rather pay someone that I'm attracted to, than have sex with someone that I'm not attracted to who's gonna give it up for free. Because the whole idea of sex is enjoying yourself and if you're not enjoying the body that you're with why have it? Now with relationships it's a little different. I've had relationships where I was initially attracted to them and then if they got chubby, lost weight, or if they changed I was still in love with them because I knew them back when I was attracted to them and I got to love their inside as well as their outside.

The other part of cruising is people hear the term “gaydar” and it is a real thing, it's kind of like a woman's intuition, it's something that some gay people have. I've noticed being with the [Roanoke] Diversity Center that a lot of folks don't have that and don't know what it is, but you'll look around a room and you'll see someone and if they're interested and looking back they'll look at you at just a little different way. It's kind of like, I kind of look at it or equate it to the cartoons where the cat's looking at the mouse and you see the cat's eyes and it turns the mouse

into a little dinner. You can just tell that person is attracted to you, and so you act on that. Because back before recent times you would see people in a bar, a straight bar or a gay bar, if you went up to them you wouldn't know if they were gay or straight, whether they would beat you up or whatever for approaching them because a lot of them have anger issues and think if they're approached by a gay person that you're thinking they're gay and they don't want that to intrude on their manhood and it just causes problems. The Park on the other hand has become more straight clientele than gay so you really have to watch and just a little side note about that while I'm yakking, you go in there sometimes and there's a guy and a girl and they're in a gay bar dancing because it's great music and great fun but the guy's got his shirt off. Is he trying to attract the girl or is he showing off for the gay guys? I always thought that was weird. And it looks like, if you're a gay guy and you see two gay guys dancing and they're not together as a relationship you might walk by the guy and touch him somewhere where his shirt's off and it seems like the girl would want her guy to keep his shirt on so that it wouldn't cause issues, but I just thought that was odd and thought I'd throw that in.

24:00 HT: *[laughing]* That's totally fine. Was there cruising without money without having to pay for it? Because it was hard to find other people around?

24:10 RS: There were other places, the parks were one of them. Highland Park was one of the biggest; Wasena park was the other one. Just about any park in any state becomes kind of a cruising area. You go in after dark, you just walk around. People would be behind trees, they'll be looking, they'll be standing, and it's different from just people in the park who would be laying out on a blanket or whatever. You could tell that they are available or they'd be looking for things. And again it's that scary thing where you don't know if it's somebody that's gonna hurt you or it's an undercover cop or whatever. I used to always go through and if I saw the same person repeatedly, then that's who I might take a chance with, but most of those things were free more or less. There were some hustler people who'd hang out in the parks, and didn't hang out on the block. That kinda went away because the cops cracked down on that. They were arresting these guys in the park because a lot of them were homeless or on drugs or whatever and when they couldn't provide ID or have a car there then the police would take them in and that kinda cleared up the parks. So that the cruising thing in itself unless you go to places like The Park or other gay friendly restaurants, you can't find gay people cruising in public hanging out and wanting sex. You can't find those as much as you could twenty years ago.

25:41 HT: definitely. Do you have anything else to add about cruising that you could think of, any stories?

25:57 RS: Um, only one. I've always cared about people and I picked up this one person one night and drove from downtown Roanoke to Salem where I lived, and my mom and dad were off at the Moose Lodge or somewhere so I had the house to myself. So we went in and the guy laid down on the bed and he had this strange look on his face and I said "have you ever done this before?" and he said "no, this is my first time," and I said "why're you doing it now?" He said "I need the money," I said "are you gay?" He said "no, I just need the money," I said "get up, let's go." I got back in the car with him, actually he put his clothes on cause we had gotten that far, and we got in the car, I drove him back downtown where I let him off, I gave him the money I was gonna give him anyway, and I told him good luck and not to do things he wasn't comfortable

with, because I wouldn't make anybody do things that were gonna make them comfortable because I know if they're uncomfortable I'm not going to have a good time either.

26:58 HT: Definitely. Are there any nonspecific gay community hangout spots now in Roanoke, that you would..?

27:07 RS: Like gay friendly places?

27:08 HT: Yes.

27:09 RS: Well one is what they call the gay Macado's. It's downtown on Church Avenue, especially the bar area, they accept you as you are, you can sit with your friend, you can hold their hand, you might be able to give them a kiss here and there but they don't kick you out and it's actually no under 18 you rarely see families in there so it's kind of... I'm not saying it's an okay place to be gay and do obscenity things but you don't have kids in there and [you won't] be offending the families or whatever, if you hold somebody's hand and they're not aware of it. That's one of them, lots others are that way. Back in 1988, I went to Billy's Ritz, it's now the bar called Billy's, and I sat at the bar with my brand new significant other I had just met that night and we held hands hiding under the bar and it wasn't winter time so we had no coats to cover our hands up. So we sat there at a straight bar holding hands, and that was kinda neat but you're always looking over your shoulder to see if anyone was gonna see and make it a bad night for you. But a lot of bars now are gay friendly simply because they know there are so many of us. They know that a lot of us have a lot of money, and they don't want that money to go to some other bar.

28:38 HT: Definitely. Well, what would happen in previous times, like not now, if you were caught holding hands with another man or out in public?

29:04 RS: I don't know that it ever happened to me. I had a guy that I was in love with, that his boyfriend, they broke up, and his boyfriend was hanging around me at a thing we have here in Roanoke called First Friday's. And we went to first Friday's, I think they allow you five beers, we drank the five beers, we went to Subway we had dinner, and up Salem Avenue on the way to Backstreet he held my hand, and I said "Chuck," I said, "you can hold anything I have at any time but not my hand going up Salem Avenue because I didn't want any trouble from folks driving by." I would walk on some occasions from my house over near Wasena to downtown or to another park over near Vinton and on the way people would yell out "faggot this" and "faggot that" but they never stopped and it was mostly the way I was dressed because it was summer and I had clothes on that maybe didn't fit my age because my age was a little older than the clothes I wore and that's just kinda me. But yeah, those are the only things I run into, it's not really...

[Recording stopped because someone entered the room.]

Part 2 (14:50)

0:00 HT: So why don't you tell us about your first romantic experience, first physical experience, first experiences?

0:08 RS: Okay, the first one that happened was when I went to Richmond. I'd gone to Richmond from Roanoke visiting, and I went to Richmond a different way. I used to go up [Interstate] 81 and 64 and I went up [Routes] 360, 460, one of those, I think 460 turns into 360 once you get to Richmond. Anyway, it popped me out over next to that Carilion, Caroline monument, that World War II monument [the Virginia War Memorial Carillon]. And I pulled up and I walked the length of this field toward the monument and when I got there this guy on a bicycle rode by me and immediately did a full circle and came back and parked his bike. And I went up the steps around the back of the monument, and he went around the back of the monument and we got into this little area and things happened. And I was so shocked, that night I was supposed to go to work at 11 and this happened around 9:30 or so and I went home and I fell down on the bed and I just said, "what happened?" and I wasn't ashamed of it. I was shocked and happy but I wound up being a half hour late to work. The very next week I went back to this park, and this monument area, and met this guy and we just started talking. And I get nervous and I wanted some water so he said there's a fountain right over there but there's a trick to it, so he takes me over to the fountain, pushes the thing with his foot and the water came up like a little trickle and he put his finger under it a certain way and it shot up about a foot and I was able to drink. And I thought that was kind of romantic that he let me have some water and did that for me. I wound up going home with him and we did some things I had never done and he didn't know it was my first time and he turned NPR radio on and at night they do this space music thing. And I just laid there all night again, kind of in awe, "what is going on? what am I doing?" and not so much in I shouldn't be doing it but that I was 26 or 27 years old and these are things I had been missing out on in my life. Because I was shy. I didn't approach people they didn't approach me because I don't look gay most of the time, and the guy went on to sleep. I stayed awake all night listening to music and then he got up and went to work and then I left. The only odd thing about that was, I wore a necklace that had my senior key on it, I guess our logo or whatever on it for our school, and I had to go back to his house a week later and ask him where my necklace was, cause I left it on his dresser.

Anyway, I got that and we were friends for awhile and the cop that I mentioned, the cop / security guard I met, I talked to him [the new Richmond boyfriend] about it because I said "what can I do about this?" and I wound up going to a phone that wasn't at my house it was at Toys R Us and called the Richmond police, and I said my friend is a cop for another county and he said he kills people and I'm worried that he's going to kill my friend and they said "we'll come by and see you and drop off some things so that you can record some phone calls," because he called me all the time and would talk about the stuff and "we'll get some tapes on him." So they brought the tapes, and I think I'm getting off the question for a second but this is a part of the deal here, so it involved the significant other and the cop and the same people where he broke the door into my house that I spoke about earlier. So the cops came. We had a phone, a huge phone with a receiver, that you pick up and it had a round part for the ear and a round part for your mouth and they put this round ring on the mouthpiece and a wire going to a tape recorder, a cassette recorder, and when he called I cut it on and we talked, sometimes for an hour, and he would tell me all the things he had done. At one point he had worked at Kings Dominion off duty—well kind of an overtime police position—and a cute guy had come into the office and

wanted some hot chocolate, well he supposedly put some kind of powder in the hot chocolate, Drain-o or whatever, and then he sat down with the guy while he drank the hot chocolate and enjoyed it when the guy's nose started bleeding and stuff, and they had to call the ambulance for the guy, because he was just a sadistic cretan freak. So that's why I went and had the Richmond police look into him. They brought me the items to record him. I recorded about 10 or 15 hours of tape, and then nothing. They didn't follow up with me.

They didn't do anything, and so I told my, the guy I was [seeing], I guess I was in love with him. I told my guy about the crazy cop, and don't be alone with him, he wants to kill you, he puts people in plots at his mom's farm. I said do not go anywhere unless it's a restaurant. The guy promised the guy, the cop promised guy powder or whatever, and he went out with him. I came home from my job—[as a] courier from Richmond to Winchester—one night and both of them were sitting on my step outside. And he said, my friend said, "Hey, Rodger, I told him you were playing 'Starsky and Hutch' with him, I told him about the cops," and so I almost went through the floor because I said this could kill me. He said "we need to talk. You betrayed me and we need to go somewhere and talk," and I said "you stay out here and let me go change and we'll go to a restaurant." I said "I don't trust you in private." So I changed my clothes and we went to the mall to a restaurant and talked and he said "why did you turn me in to the police," and I said "because you were going to kill my friend and anybody that hurts someone that I love or care about aren't going to get away with it." So he said "I want all the tapes and I want the machine and I want everything you have that they gave you." So I gave it to them and the police, I called them for more tapes at one point. They never did come back and bring me more tapes prior to that I never heard from them to say, "why, where's the equipment? we came to get the equipment," it's almost like he took it back to them. He was almost beyond reproach, I guess, because of who he knew and the fact that he was a cop because the detectives never came back and asked me anything about it.

Over the years I moved back to Roanoke because of him breaking into the door that day, and I moved back to Roanoke, my friend came to visit a couple of times and I touched base with him. A couple of years ago he was going from Connecticut down to see his father I believe in Florida and he passed through and I met him at the bus station just to say hi and he was still alive so if anything else maybe I brought so much attention to the fact that this supposedly nobody who was a hustler would've been noticed if he was killed and that may have saved his life, hopefully. So that was just one other thing.

Going towards your original question about my sexual experiences, the scariest one I was with besides this crazy cop guy, I met him on Craigslist and he worked at a school and he was a janitor or whatever and I met him around 7 or 8 o'clock at night. We went into the boiler room and the room was completely empty. There was a shelf on the side, and the only thing on the shelf was a screwdriver. And then he said "can I tie this little frilly thing around your eyes and kind of blindfold you and tie your hands behind your back?" He said "I kinda enjoy that." I said "okay." Well when he tied my hands I could get loose, it wasn't really really tight, and then he put the thing around my eyes, and then we he put the thing around my eyes the last thing I saw was that screwdriver on the table with no other tools, nothing else really in the room, so I'm sitting there and he's making noises and movement and everything but he's not touching me and I'm thinking "is he gonna take this screwdriver and ram it somewhere?" and so after like 5 or 10

minutes of my brain going crazy I lifted up the little cloth he had around my eyes and he did not have the screwdriver thank goodness but he was wearing a teddy. So I think he was embarrassed that he was in women's clothing and that's how he wanted the whole thing to go about, but I was afraid of the screwdriver and I got freaked out. And I said "I'm sorry I can't do this, but it hasn't nothing to do with you being in a teddy." Anyway that was the weirdest thing, I guess. There's several weird things, but that another one of them.

8:50 HT: Could you explain what a teddy is?

8:52 RS: it's an almost frilly, see-through, lacy thing that women wear to entice their husbands sexually I guess. Being gay I don't know [*laughs*]

9:05 HT: definitely. Earlier you said something about looking gay, could you explain what looking gay was back then? What that entailed?

9:15 RS: well some folks have a voice that's rather gay, mine's kinda deep. I would wear ties to work and go to Kmart and they'd ask me if I worked there. I had a mustache back then, my hair was a little darker, most people thought I was a cop. So I just didn't look the part of a gay person and again I don't know what that is. These days it's a little more rainbow. I have a rainbow tattoo now, so depending on what kind of shirt I wear that's exposed, but, you know, I don't hide it. So it's just an overall look, a little feminine, a little prancy, or the term they used back in the day was flaming. And you could just tell folks, certain folks were gay, some couldn't hide it. Some didn't want to hide it. And a lot of the times because they couldn't hide it or wouldn't hide that's what got them beat up or bullied in school and in public.

10:10 HT: was there any like specific clothing that you would delegate as looking gay back then?

10:16 RS: very short shorts, tank tops, and short shorts on older guys, that was the main thing. Sometimes they would do bandanas, in fact back when I was first learning about things in the '60s and '70s there was a culture of bandanas or they would call them handkerchiefs. If you put them on one side of your pocket it meant one thing, if you put them on the right side of your back pocket it meant another thing. Colors meant different things: which you were into, what you did. That kind of faded away over the years because, I don't know, folks just didn't want to advertise or whatever. But those were prevalent in the bars really before I started going to the bars. But it was heavily into the porn that I used to watch back then, and the books that I would read. It was kind of like the secret message in case the gaydar would work but that was letting the person know what you wanted to do, and that way you wouldn't wind up getting together and not be compatible in the bed or have to waste your night being with one guy thinking you were going to get one thing and he was into something else. I kinda wish that would come back because that was, it's kind of like saying "hi, I'm gay. I like to do blah blah blah," instead of having to waste time and money and a night with a guy that's not going to do the blah blah blah.

11:31 HT: definitely. So you were talking about identifiers earlier, like the bandanas and stuff, do you remember any specific ones, any specific?

11:42RS: Like what the colors meant?

11:43 HT: Yeah

11:45 RS: well, initially I thought it was just 3 or 4 but it wound up being like 25. They had the solid colors, they had... I don't know if they had multiple color bandanas back then. But it was mostly where you put them, you put them in your back pocket if you were receiver of sexual things, and the left pocket if you were a giver of sexual things. And I may have those reversed. I think you put them in front pockets for certain other things and we have discussions at the [Roanoke] Diversity Center today. We don't put labels on ourselves because most folks don't like a label. But we kind of have to label ourselves in order for other folks to know... well, I like to know if someone is gay or not because I'm not gonna waste time trying to see if they want to date me if they're straight or if they're pansexual who are folks that are attracted by people's personalities and other things about them besides their looks. There are panromantic, pansexual, gender fluid. There are all kinds of things now. So instead of us being men and women that have sex with men having men and women having women or whatever, we're just human beings and sexual beings and we have sex with whoever attracts us, and that's why I think why people are trying to get away from the labels. I saw just the other day on a website there's some dog tags you can get and there's one for gay, transgender, gender fluid, this that and the other, and you can combine them, put two on thing. And that kind of gives a signal once folks get to know what these things mean and let folks know it's kind of like the hanky situation only its in necklace form and you just wear those to be yourself and identify... make your sexual identity more of an obvious thing.

13:42 HT: Okay. So you can talk about from the past or the present, what kind of gay lingo... is there any kind of gay lingo that you have used, have been exposed to?

13:59 RS: Well, yes, you notice it a lot on the gay [web]sites now. They wanna know if you're circumcised or not circumcised and they just shorten it to "cut" and "uncut" which is kind of gross. But anyway, those are some of the things that come to mind right off. None are really flooding my brain at this second, but I think the question was kind of a shock, but I guess that's it for this moment unless something comes to me.

14:34 HT: definitely. So we're gonna change a little bit, going...

[Rodger wanted to stop and clarify how descriptive he could be with his responses.]

Part 3 (13:56)

0:00 HT: So earlier you mentioned pornography. So could you tell us before the Internet and multi-media things like that, how this came about or how you went about accessing [it]?

0:13 RS: well, I took recent trips to D.C. When I was in Richmond, it was only a two hour drive [to D.C.], so I would go up there a lot and buy magazines in bookstores and take them home and we looked at a magazines not for entertainment but I actually get to see the guys that I liked without the shirts that I liked to see and didn't have to approach anybody and say "hey can you

take your shirt off?” so that was a fun thing to do. The other thing that was available was what they called bookstores. At one point they would have books like novels around the front of the store and so that if anyone walked in they could get a novel, and it was a bookstore, but really what it was was a back room. You would get change from the guy at the counter and go back and put quarters in a little—you would go in a little booth, and there was a little machine there—and you would put quarters in. You’d get three choices of videos and you could sit there and watch videos in a little booth by yourself or with a friend and do whatever. They didn't encourage being with a friend but you could sneak them in there. As time grew on the regular books disappeared and it got replaced by actual VHS videos tapes that you could rent from the folks. It was kind of like the porn Blockbuster. Folks remember back in the Blockbuster days. You had a membership, you could rent those movies bring ‘em back in two or three days and that's how you accessed porn back then.

Those places still exist and they've changed drastically. At some point the police made them change the doors. They would chop them off so that were just three or four foot doors. You could see people's feet. You could see two people in there or whatever, so it kind of got really hard to be gay, and a lot of times when you meet a stranger you wouldn't want to take them home because you didn't know if they were gonna come back later, steal or kill you whatever. So, they were safe in one way but the cities wanted to crack down on them. But you go to places like Cleveland and in D.C. and there's bathhouses and they're legal and then you go in, you get your locker, you get naked, and you do whatever and you do whatever and you leave. I've been to one in Cleveland, a friend of mine took me there. He lived there and I went up there to visit him and it was right down the street. I used to go here to the bookstores and I would go “wow, I'm old, they're old. I'm not attracted to an older person.” So when I went to Cleveland to the bath house I kinda went “okay, I'm here. I'm old, he's old, he's old, he's old. The only difference is they're naked,” so it really didn't help me a lot with the bathhouse, but they had those things going on and they're an outlet for a lot of folks. They're usually open 24 hours. You pay one fee and you can stay for a day or two or whatever. I don't think there's a lot of food so it's kind of not healthy, maybe a snack machine or whatever so if you were in there too long you'd need nourishment besides just a bag of chips. But that's the places that we went and the things that we did. Some people still do those things. Anonymous sex is something people enjoy because they don't come along with the baggage of a relationship or someone hanging around you that you're not attracted to. I knew a person that would go and have sex with anybody and anybody because they, that's what turned them on, being with someone they didn't know attracted them. I was always, “they had to look good,” I had to be attracted to them. So that made me the odd person.

3:44 HT: That's great. So we do understand that you are a gay man. Have you ever had an experience with women?

3:52 RS: I have. I met a guy in Richmond when I just moved up there. He was a high school kid and I really fell for him and moved to his side of town over a year or so because I really wanted to be around him. He worked in my shop, and of course being underage, I couldn't do anything, and he got really close to me. His father had left his mother, his mother worked second shift, he had a key to my house and we palled around together. And we were together for two years as pals, and when I told him I was gay he stayed away. I guess that could be a little slogan, “tell em you're gay, they'll stay away,” but he was one of my closest friends, and then I came back to

Roanoke in 1984 and I was driving around the block—the area that I had mentioned earlier—and saw a guy that resembled this guy in Richmond except he was taller, and he had his shirt unbuttoned and he just looked almost like that guy and I'm going “oh boy, here's the guy that I've liked for years and here's one that is selling it here to me.” So I pulled over. I gave him my phone number because I was busy that night. He called me in a week, we had a month or two relationship, and a 15-year friendship. And we're sexually over the 15 years and he passed away 5 or 10 years ago. But when I found out that he would not... I tried everything I could to make him like me and love me but I found out you can't make people love you and people are gonna love or like you if they want to, and he kinda liked my money, he liked what I did for his kids and his ex wife, and he loved me in his own way, but he didn't love me in the way I wanted to be loved by him. And at one point I said if I can't have him I'll go straight. And I worked at Mill Mountain Theatre box office and there was a stage manager that kind of liked me at a party and we kind of had a 3 month relationship and we had sex frequently. I was still having sex with him on the side, and she wanted to get married. I said “if you're still talking to me in 5 years we'll get married,” because I figured in 5 years she'd find out one way or the other that I was gay, but again it comes back to sexual beings. It was fun having sex with her because sex is just a thing, but I was more attracted to guys. And I remember Star Wars being on TV, years after it was out at the theaters, and she wanted to have sex so we're sitting there on the couch and she's having sex with me on the couch and I'm looking at Star Wars because she wasn't a guy so that's another reason, another way I knew I was gay, and that I liked guys. But we broke up when she moved away and I wrote her a letter telling her the truth. So she found out, kind of a bad way, but she found out I was gay, and that kinda cleared my conscience of it anyway, but she was a sweet girl, and that lasted three months. She's been the only one. I'm close with girls but I don't have sex with girls.

6:49 HT: Definitely. Could you tell us a little about your role during the AIDS epidemic, like during the time it was going on, did anything happen to you? Have you experienced anything?

7:05 RS: Well it was one of those things, kind of like murder I guess, because it only happened to other people. You saw it on the news. You saw Magic Johnson, Ryan White. You didn't know anybody in Roanoke that had it so you just went and did whatever you did, and then all of a sudden I had friends that were HIV positive. I started losing friends that were HIV positive. I became safer in bed and folks say, “I've been tested. I was tested last week and I'm negative,” but you don't know if that's the truth. You have to be safe with everyone. You can't really take their word, because if they had sex with anyone after they were negative then they could be positive and it may not show up for six months. So I treat everyone I'm with as if they are [HIV] positive, not in a negative way but just to make sure that they don't get anything from me, if i have it if hasn't come out yet. And I don't get anything from them in case they don't know one they're lying about it. Because my thing is, because I'm not the most beautiful boy in the room, that if I say that if I were HIV positive, they would go away because a lot of people have a phobia about that. And one of the things that I try to bring up during our events at the [Roanoke] Diversity Center is that HIV is not the only creature out there, and you gotta be careful with all diseases because right now, syphilis is running rampant in Roanoke and a lot of men of color are on the DL or “down low,” so they're hiding things, and them and some white folks are spreading it with their straight partners because a lot of folks are bisexual or whatever. Like I said we're human beings,

we're sexual beings, and we're going to have sex with whoever we're attracted to at any given moment or after any certain amount of glasses of wine or liquor.

9:09 HT: [*laughing*] Definitely. So you mentioned the Diversity Center, could you tell us a little bit about that?

9:18 RS: Well, I've been with the [Roanoke] Diversity Center a little over two years. I came in quite by accident, didn't know it existed, until the person that was the board chair at the time, Frank House, mentioned to me in a meeting that I would be a good candidate for the board because of the things we had been talking about in a group that I was with or in. And I told him I'm disabled and I have some health issues that I just like to sit around, my favorite thing is sitting around, the less I do the more I like it. I never get bored of doing nothing, doing nothing is my favorite thing. So I said my head-part really wants to do it, my body I don't know if I can do it or if it will hold up. I said but I'll let you know. So he went away and a week or so went by and I'm in the shower washing what little hair I have and I thought "who has ever asked me to be on the Board of Directors?" I said "nobody." I said "when are they gonna ask me again, at 58 [years old]? Probably nobody." So I said "let me call me Frank, and see when the next meeting is," and I did. And I went to the meeting and gave them my spiel of who I was and what I was doing and they took a vote and voted me in as a Board Member at large. And when I joined I got cards of course that said I was with the Diversity Center and I went out in the community, mostly The Park, and I was giving my cards out to everybody to let them know about the Diversity Center because we would have events and nobody would come. Partly because no one knew we were here. Like me. I've been here all my life, I didn't know they were here, and they'd been here a couple years when I found out about them. So I was kind of doing a liaison thing after I joined because I was so excited I was on the Board of Directors with an organization that I thought was doing great things. And then an opportunity came up that I could be the Liaison for the Diversity Center and they again voted to have me do that. I got new cards that said Liaison. I went back out to the community, and did the same thing. And over the years as Liaison I was always fair, approachable, and friendly to folks, inviting them to the Diversity Center and just about six months ago, Frank, the chair, decided he was going to step down because his partner was having health issues. And they were both on the Board of Directors, one was chair and one was vice-chair, so I started kind of shadowing Frank. Learning what it took to run the center and then on February 16th [2016] the board took a vote between me and a few other folks and I became Board Chair. Since then I've changed things up a little bit. We had a film group that showed films every Sunday. And I said, "well if I'm taking it over and I do the same things as before it's going to be the same thing and no one's going to know anything has changed." So I changed it to the Rainbow Cinema, we had theme months. We have had our film attendance grow from none on some days to 12 or 15 people depending on the film. We have the *Mama Mia* sing-along every year. We watch the ABBA movie. The more time goes by the more people are coming in. We used to have Rainbow Chats with one or two people sometimes just board members. The last one last week had 14 folks so, we're kind of outgrowing our space and all for the better. And [we] are looking for a space downtown hopefully in the next few months or so, we'll be downtown, be more visible, and have a bigger and better things to have for folks to come and enjoy.

13:00 HT: definitely. So is there anything else you'd like to share with us, any stories, anything we haven't asked you?

13:09 RS: Well, not really, maybe a promotion of such. The Diversity Center has the only diversity camp in the state of Virginia. In fact, Josh Olinger on our board, he came up with this idea, and he heard from a person that was going to one of the camps that he worked, and said, "we need a camp just for us." So that's where that idea came about...

[Rodger became emotional, so we chose to end the interview.]

END.