

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

Interview with Sally Seagraves

October 7, 2016

Interviewer: James Stoneking & Jackie Landon

Interviewee: Sally Seagraves

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Transcribed by: David Franczak, James Stoneking, and Jackie Landon

Duration: 46:08

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00:00

JS: Okay, so this is James Stoneking interviewing Sally Seagraves. It's October 7th, 2016. We are in Fintel Library, located on Roanoke College campus in Salem, Virginia. This is for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project oral history initiative.

Alright, Sally, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and where you grew up.

00:25

SS: Sally Seagraves, and I grew up in various areas of Virginia and North Carolina.

00:30

JS: Okay, and what year were you born?

00:32

SS: 1959.

00:34

JS: Okay, and what's your earliest memories of like where your locations were like growing up?

00:39

SS: Radford, Virginia.

00:42

JS: Radford, Virginia, cool.

What was your home life like with your parents and siblings? Do you have any siblings?

00:50

SS: I have two brothers and a mom and dad. I feel like I grew up in the typical American middle-America home. Lots of outdoor play and lots of interaction with my family.

1:10

JS: Would you say that your household was really religious growing up?

1:14

SS: We did have religion. We grew up United Methodist, and we attended church and youth groups and, you know, various things. I was baptized/confirmed in the church growing up.

1:31

JS: So what schools did you attend growing up, then, if you said you kind of went all over? Did you attend the public schools or...?

1:38

SS: My parents were educators and I grew up going to public school. My dad was my principal all but about three years of my life.

1:50

JS: And so you said you went all over, what are the different areas that you spent your education at?

1:56

SS: So, in Radford I started in elementary school. My dad went back to school to get his doctorate at Duke University so we moved to Durham, North Carolina. So I lived there for a couple years and then we moved to Sanford, North Carolina, and so there that's middle school through graduation of high school. I went to East Carolina University for a year and then transferred to Radford University, and that's where I graduated.

2:29

JS: Cool, so you stated that you started in elementary school then in Radford, so what was the culture like of that school at such a young age? Do you remember?

2:41

SS: A typical school, I mean, you know, I remember having good friends that lived in the neighborhood and we'd we ride our bikes to school. Probably 12 blocks or so, and we took public transportation, you know, home from school. I don't recall anything really out of the ordinary, you know, it was just school. You went, came home, and did your homework.

3:26

JS: So then you spent the later part of your school then for a majority of it in North Carolina. [*Sally agrees*] Is the culture there any different when you were getting older?

3:37

SS: I remember in middle school that we had some segregation in the school system and we were bused to another school from where we originally started attending, for that... You know, it had some tension at that time, racial tension and some stuff. So those were sometimes tense and kind of scary, scary times, but you know, move through it, so, that's about all I remember during that time in Durham.

4:26

JS: So, around that time did you notice like anything else of the segregation with like the lesbian/gay community or anything like that with the gender segregation that added tension to it?

4:39

SS: I don't know at that point that I was really aware that much of, you know, what my orientation was. I really didn't until probably almost getting into high school probably.

4:58

JS: Okay, and you said you were in North Carolina from what...?

5:02

SS: So I'm in North Carolina from fifth grade, and then I don't... Think we moved to Sanford when I was in seventh grade.

5:19

JS: And that's back into Virginia then?

5:22

SS: No, I'm in North Carolina from that point on, until I go back to college.

5:26

JS: Okay.

5:27

SS: Alright.

5:28

JS: So you started noticing segregation issues earlier on. Then when you started high school did anything... did you notice anything else with the culture after...?

5:40

SS: Yea, when we moved to, my dad took up a principal position in Sanford and we moved. It was a very tense racial condition. People were throwing bricks off of railroad tracks onto windshields of cars. Things like that, so I remember... being scared for him in the role he was, but he, you know, really was a great leader. He came in and really persevered with that with conversation and respect. In our household, you were respectful and prejudice was not an area that you wanted to venture into in the household. It was not tolerated. So... and I remember a conversation around it, just the quality of people and showing respect and, you know, we had a lot of peers that were not growing up in the same environment and, you know, homecoming queens, things like that, I remember [there] being some prejudice entered in that, it was not very pretty. And... again, I think I was becoming aware that something was different about me, but kids made fun of, you know, they would call... it wasn't even that a person was gay, if you acted something [gay], there was slang involved. Just like there was slang with any prejudice, but... it was a long time ago so [laughs] you know, I just, I knew I was different. Although I had boyfriends, relationships. My faith was, you know, I was still attending church and stuff. So you know you have questions because you feel like or you've been brought up that there's heterosexual, man and woman, is the relationship. So... all of those questions were in my mind, how much I thought about it because I was very, very active. I played in the band, played sports. So... all my activities kind of circled around those things, so how much time I had to spend. Thinking about those things was probably nominal but they were there.

8:39

JS: So you said you were pretty active in your school then with sports and being in the band and everything. Was there a circle of friends that you might have had in school? How was like your culture with them, you were talking about how the school was throwing around slang terms and everything about homosexuals and stuff like that? So, what was the culture like between just your circle of friends then? was it the same or different in some way?

9:06

SS: You know, I felt like I knew just about everybody in high school. And it was a fairly large high school, I mean our class was probably four or five hundred kids. So you knew a lot of people. I did have a circle of friends. I lived in a gated community so, you know, there was a group of us that hung out in that community. And many are still dear friends today. So... when you say culture, I don't, you know, I just feel like I was a typical kid growing up in America. Not facing any more adversity or prejudice than maybe other people. But, it was there, and I do remember it being there. The Ku Klux Klan was very prevalent there. You could call the number and a recording would play about their rallies and where they were going to be. So, you know, but that's about my extent of, you know, being a kid and calling it and listening to it, not really acting on it just knowing that it was there. And that was probably some of the peer pressure that came from just being a kid.

10:49

JS: So you said that it was from your high school years that you started kind of having some feelings, general feelings about maybe being different than everyone else? Did that like cause any fear for you or anything back then? or was there like any kind of resistance against feeling the way you were feeling?

11:10

SS: I don't recall having fear. But I don't know that I wasn't suppressing a lot because I had a high school sweetheart, and it really wasn't until I left high school and left the town that I lived in... and again maybe I did have fear, because I remember it was almost, I didn't want to embarrass my family. I didn't want to put any pressure on them because of, you know, how I might feel. So when I left there it probably was a little bit liberating for me. But, and that's when I really probably had my first relationship with a female.

12:13

JS: One last question before we move on from high school. Cause you're talking about how you kind of noticed a lot more things then. Did you notice anything different with your family's culture, between your siblings or anything like that in your high school years? Different from when you were younger?

12:33

SS: No, I don't recall. We were around each other a lot. Played a lot of golf, you know, spent summers at the pool. Both my brothers, we all worked. We all worked jobs, while growing up... So I don't recall it being different from when we were younger to those high school years.

13:08

JS: Were you close to your brothers [*Sally agrees*] and everything too?

13:10

SS: Yes.

13:11

JS: Yes.

13:12

SS: Yes, yup we were and still are. My younger brother is deceased now, but my older brother and I grow closer. We live far apart but we pick right back up where we left off when we get together for holidays and stuff.

13:36

JS: So after you graduated from high school then... can you talk about where you went after that and what year you graduated in?

13:45

SS: So I graduated in 1977 and I left for East Carolina University. Lived in the dorm, all-female dorm there. Had some folks around from my high school, met new friends. My boyfriend and I were, he was in Florida, I was in Virginia. So it was starting to, you know, we were trying to figure all of that out, and eventually ended the relationship. And I felt like I loved him very much. When [he] talked about marrying and having kids, the whole nine yards, but the one thing I felt was that I would never love him like he deserved to be loved. Because of how I felt when I

was with a woman. So, that was hard to come to terms with and hurting him, after dating the majority of high school. Like we had brief separation times but, you know, we were kids, too. But, that was something I never told him and I wish I had have been honest about it, but I didn't feel like I could.

15:18

JS: So was that like your freshman year in college then [*Sally agrees*]... that all happened?

15:21

SS: That all transferring that freshman year.

15:25

JS: So then going into your sophomore year, then, was that kind of when you were able to...?

15:32

SS: So I transferred to Radford University. All females on my mom's side of the family attended there. I had a job. So I took care of three kids for a doctor who is a good family friend, known for years. And he and his wife had divorced and had three kids. So they were five, seven, and nine [years old] when I arrived. And, he was an OB/GYN and so he delivered babies, so that was my major role, was to be there on particularly the nights where he would be at the hospital on call. And, so I had a lot of latitude... went to classes, ran the kids around. Still played sports and stuff, intramurals. And, my first relationship, and I don't remember when it kind of ended in that time but it ended. And, I had short relationships through college. I always say I was preparing for my partner today [*laughs*]. But... living and having those kids kind of, it was hard but I had times where I could go out, socialize, and meet people, so...

17:11

JS: As far as socializing goes were you part of any on-campus activities? I know you talked about intramural sports [*Sally agrees*] but anything else on campus as well?

17:20

SS: Just intramurals sports... that's all I recall. I wasn't in any sororities or anything.

17:34

JS: So you at this point then, you kind of know your sexual preferences [*Sally agrees*] and everything like that. Did that effect you all like partying or anything like that in school, did you party or...?

17:44

SS: Yea I partied [*laughs*]. You mean, did I party...? I partied, you know, with straight people, I partied with gay people. For many years, I kept them very separated because I had straight friends and I had gay friends. And, so I did keep that kind of separated. Which is not too easy... when you're in a small school in a small town. But, again, you know, I'm not quite there being comfortable, it's still, I don't feel that I'm going to be accepted. So... I'm, you know, still kind of living that secret life.

18:45

JS: So, you talked about then basically two different circles of friendship [*Sally agrees*], one straight and one homosexual then. So, when your straight friends, did you kind of...? Did they know you were kind of "out" or were you kind of...?

19:01

SS: They probably did. I didn't share [it] with them. But, you know, when you go back and talk to people a lot of times they know. They knew. And, you know, my family probably knew but hadn't shared yet. So...

19:24

JS: So, after you started then in college... How much did you talk with your family then, or did anything change with them?

19:35

SS: No. I went back home for holidays... Usually when I was home I was probably around a lot of my high school friends that would be there for, you know, home. But after time I would say my college friends were kind of my primary friends at that point. And they would come home, we would visit my house. And I would bring college friends home, and usually straight [friends], at that point and, my little brother was still there in high school. So, my parents would be there, or they'd be on a trip, or just depending on the time and the situation...

20:33

JS: So did you come out to your parents then during college, or at all?

20:38

SS: No I didn't. I did not come out to my family until... my dad passed away and... [*whispers to self*] I'm trying to think... I'm in my thirties probably. And he died suddenly, so it was very devastating. And at that point I really felt like... nothing else could really hurt me anymore than I was hurting at that point. And I wrote my mom a letter and told her. She already knew [*chuckles*]. And I told my sister-in-law. My younger brother was married, and she said to tell her something she didn't know. So, you know, again, when I've shared with people I've had good experiences. But I will tell you even today, even doing this for me is outside of my box. But something that I want to be better about and I feel like [if] I want people to be honest with me, then I have to be honest back. So...

22:03

JS: So back in your college period and everything, you talked about your earlier experiences in school. With kind of being unaware of different things potentially going on with anything like that. Then, getting into high school, kind of more segregation and a little bit more fearful environment. What about college as a whole then? Did any of that escalate there or...?

22:27

SS: You know, there was the "gay dorm" on campus. My aunt was a professor there at that time, and she was head of the P.E. [physical education?] club. And of course, you know, everybody who majors in P.E. was gay at that point [*laughs*]. But I can remember her having the P.E. club come over and help close her pool. And I was there. And that's my first, you know sort of when I first met some of the ladies there at school. And a lot of those became friends, you know, later on... in the latter years.

23:21

JS: So like, as far as on-campus groups and everything... Were there any groups, like the gay groups or anything like that on campus that you're aware of?

23:33

SS: I just remember them having [there] being the gay dorm. And so, you know, they came and sat at the basketball game and I was with my straight friends, and you know, there were comments that were made at times. And, you know, when those comments are made then you kind of pull back, alright.

23:59

JS: If you wouldn't mind, would you share any, any comments if you feel comfortable doing so?

24:04

SS: That I heard?

24:05

JS: Yeah.

24:06

SS: [*Speaking to self*] That was a long time ago... But, I don't know though. I don't think they called em.... Well they did have a song that they sang and it was "L E B I S E N [L.E.S.B.I.A.N.], we love women more than men." Kind of, you know, with "lesbian." I remember that... And [they] might just point them out at the sporting event. Like, you know, "there they are," "here they are..." You know, "there's the girl from the gay dorm," that type of thing.

24:58

JS: So going out of college then, what year did you graduate from that, and what did you do next?

25:05

SS: I graduated in 1981, and I came to Roanoke to find a job. And my first job was at Merrill Lynch, and I worked there for a brief period of time. And then I went to work at a earmold company, for the next several years. So that was my first venture into the working world.

25:45

JS: So you went from your early school experience, to high school, to college. So that's definitely a time of discovering yourself [*Sally agrees*]. When you came to Roanoke then, did that help free yourself even more?

25:59

SS: I had a relationship. When I moved here I was in a relationship. We lived together, we were roommates. A few of us lived in a house... That was probably [for] a year, maybe... And then I really, I had a relationship, I dated on and off, but not really anything serious at that point.

26:40

JS: Were you like completely out then at this time?

26:42

SS: Oh no. No no no no no [*laughs*] no no. You know, you could still... you know, it's the '80s [1980s], alright? And there is not a probably a provision in your employer's rules and policies and stuff... [*James says something indecipherable*] that sexual orientation is accepted. So I lived in fear that if my employer found out they might eliminate my job. So, no, I'm not out at this point either.

27:37

JS: During this time I know that it was kind of the specific areas downtown, where they call them like the gay bars and stuff like that. Did you still go to those or anything?

27:46

SS: Yeah, the Park was the club that you went to. And, you know, I frequented there quite a bit. I can remember times where somebody might come into there that was in my straight world. And, sometimes depending on who it—it didn't happen a whole lot—but depending on who it was, if I left or, you know, stayed on a particular side of the room or whatever. So I don't remember that happening very often, maybe a time or two... But after a while when you get older and that scene is not your scene anymore, so...

28:44

JS: Did it make it hard [to] go into that, kind of, out-in-the-working-world after being in college. Where you able to be more open in college than you were, out in the... after you got a job and everything?

28:58

SS: You know, you still have... I describe it as almost two separate lives that you're kind of leading. So, yeah, I went to parties and I went out to the club and, and you know. I also interacted in the business world with, you know, some of the people that I worked with and stuff... But still I feel like that there was a divide there. That I was keeping two pots of folks, so to speak.

29:38

JS: So going forward a few years, do you know what year you started attending Metropolitan Community Church?

29:48

SS: It was right after the Backstreet shooting, because I had no idea it [MCC] was here. I was attending a Methodist church in my neighborhood and somebody had told me about it and so I asked two questions: I asked if the pastor was ordained and if there was a cross in the church. Now that I look back those were two crazy questions for that denomination, but you know those were my questions. So then I tried the church, I went to the church one Sunday and you know it was small, in a storefront area, there was like a room in a closet area—the annex, kind of—and it was packed. Lot of great folks, the pastor was phenomenal, and so I gradually migrated from attending the Methodist church, because I was involved in some committees and counting money and stuff. So eventually I moved solely to Metropolitan Community Church and that was probably right around 2000, 2001.

31:26

JS: So before then, back in the late '80s they had the first Pride walk [Pride in the Park] in Wasena, that area, did you attend that?

31:37

SS: No no.

31:40

JS: Where you afraid to...?

31:43

SS: I probably didn't even know about it at that point. My first recollection of Pride was after I started attending church at Metropolitan Community Church.

31:57

JS: You started with the shooting and that's kind of how you found out about it. Can you go into details about how [you heard about the Backstreet Shooting]?

32:04

SS: Well, on the news. I mean, obviously, it was a story that was highly publicized and I remember seeing the pastor [of MCC] on TV and then just later in conversation with some friends of inviting me to come to the church [Metropolitan Community Church] there.

32:26

JS: So when you first started attending it [Metropolitan Community Church] that was back when it was on Kirk Avenue in downtown?

32:31

SS: [*Nodding in agreement*] Mhm.

32:33

JS: How long were you guys there for [Kirk Avenue location], do you remember?

32:35

SS: We were at that church for a year or two, and then we moved right up the street to a bigger space and everybody just grabbed a chair after church and moved it up. There wasn't much stuff but chairs. And we were there for several years before we bought the building. I was on the building committee to search for the next home. So I think 2004 we moved to the [new] building.

33:16

JS: So you talked about how when they would pull stuff out for the church, they were literally pulling it out of the closet. Did you guys ever discuss that?

33:24

SS: The original folks that started Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge were in the Unity [Unitarian Universalist] Church. Yeah, they literally had a box they kept in the closet and whenever [they had] service they'd bring the box out and set everything up, have service, and then put it back in. That was a common joke they'd say "church in a box, in the closet."

33:57

JS: What year did you [Metropolitan Community Church] move to your permanent location?

34:04

SS: I believe it was 2004, if I remember correctly.

34:10

JS: A while ago you mentioned you officially came out during your father's passing. What time frame or year was that? And how did that impact you?

34:27

SS: My dad passed away in 1998. So that's not too long ago if you think of how long we've

talked about coming through school, and college, and being a young adult. So it was quite a while.

34:55

JS: So you said at that time you came out to your family and everything, is that also when you came out to the community as a whole? Or is that still...

35:03

SS: No, I came out to my family. Still not [in] the business world. Even if you might ask me where I went to church, I might not share that because that was known as the gay church. I've been at my current employer for five years and I've had mentors along the way. My first mentor I shared after several months of mentoring that I had a partner and she said "you know you can share that at work," and I said "well, I don't know if I want to," and she goes "well, just know that you can share it." At that point, in my early years there, I was on the floor with some men and I heard again some slang used, and anytime I think I heard that I would retreat back. It wasn't until the recent years I had another mentor and she encouraged me to be open. I was in a leadership class and that was my task on my first meeting with her, [she said] "I want you to go back to that group and tell them," and I was like "okay" [*laughter*]. But again, everybody very warm, open, so all my experience[s] when I have told people have been good. I've not had any bad experiences, but at times it's still difficult sharing that personal piece sometimes.

37:08

JS: Is it because like you're afraid how they are going to respond?

37:12

SS: I guess probably so. I like to think that I don't care what people think but I probably do a little bit, truth be known. My partner is not out to her entire family; they probably know. So you know that's a fine line I kind of walk, with that still out of respect for her and she needs to decide when that time for her is correct and feels safe. So I still live in a little bit of it today. It's a lot. You know it's come a long way, the world's come a long way. I think there's additional that we all can do but I mean if you look back over time there has been a lot of progress. And progress for me.

38:17

JS: So you started attending the church way back when it was on Kirk Avenue, did you progressively become more involved with the church?

38:25

SS: I did. You know I've served on the board for many [years], on and off, on more than off. And I play guitar in the praise band. Potlucks, you know, [I] love potlucks. I'm a Methodist so we always had potlucks, but yeah, I would say [I'm] fairly active.

38:56

JS: I know I heard a little bit about that band, do you remember the name?

38:59

SS: The Skittles. Yeah. One of our drummer's kids named us that, so one of the ladies in the choir, their child named us The Skittles.

39:11

JS: And when did you guys start that band then?

39:15

SS: I don't... On and off, you know, depending if we had musicians. The Skittles, so to speak, have just probably been in the last year or two I think. But we had times where we played and we weren't called anything just different instruments coming and playing at different times. My nephews have come up and played with us. Just various folks.

39:58

JS: I guess something I haven't asked you yet is like your political inclination, like growing up and everything to this day. Did that ever change at any point?

40:08

SS: My grandmother had probably the biggest influence on I would say all three of my siblings and myself. She was staunch Republican and so I have a lot of Republican tendencies. So I fiscally lean Republican. But I don't vote solely that way. I vote based on you know what I learn, what's important to me, that point on positions and stuff. And that's probably changed over the years, with just knowing more about... and the progress that's been made with you know same-sex marriages and things like that, so I probably lean a little more to the sides of the things that are progressing that, but I also don't want to sacrifice the fiscal piece and I really don't like big government so I'll vote according to what my gut tells me and my heart.

41:40

JS: And then another thing. We talked about kind of like when the first Pride parade [Pride in the Park] happened in Roanoke and you weren't much aware of that at the time until after that incident [the Backstreet shooting of 2000] kind of brought you more into the niche of that community. Did you attend any parades after joining the church?

42:01

SS: I haven't been in any of their parades. I've attended Pride and you know we normally have a church service there. I volunteer at our booth. We used to do the food there. I've worked on that. When I wouldn't attend I would just help deliver stuff and bring stuff back to the church. But I've never participated in the Pride parade.

42:37

JS: Did you start attending them then like right after you joined with the church?

42:43

SS: Yeah, my first pride was over in Highland Park and you know they wouldn't let any of the news people, [they] could only take pictures from certain venues and areas. It was very much monitored and controlled by the committee as far as the pictures and the filming that was taking place. And it's funny because now it's really not that way at all. They really don't do any of that anymore. And there's not a whole lot of press and stuff that comes out. I just think it's kind of an event just like a wine festival or a jazz festival or you know just news: here's another festival, here's another celebration of, be it Susan G Komen or, you know, whatever.

43:46

JS: So with all the different roles you take on in your church then, is there anything else you do within the community? I know you already do so much, that you've already shared with us.

43:54

SS: You know, I do different volunteer [activities], for different runs and stuff like that, whether I participate in walking or running. I do a lot of community stuff with my work [job] and volunteering and things like that, a lot of events, work events. So you know I feel like I'm circulating quite a bit in the community.

44:38

JS: So bringing it up to today then, like up until this current period in time, is there still just different places you feel comfortable with sharing things? Like you have your family and your church community, and then your different work areas, and do you only share with certain people within your work area?

45:00

SS: I'm pretty open at work. I mean, people know, a lot of folks know my partner. So I would say at work you know I have a picture of my family on my screensaver with all of us, so I would say [I'm] out at work and personally. There's just a couple areas that are pockets now.

45:34

JS: Yeah, you mentioned that you significant other right now, about how that's kind of the area that you can't open up to...

45:43

SS: Mhmm.

45:47

JS: Don't believe I can think of anything else, can you think of anything else you'd want to share with us?

45:55

SS: I think I'm good.

45:57

JS: Covered it all?

45:58

SS: Yes.

45:59

JS: Alright well, we'd like to thank you so much for coming out and having this conversation with us and for telling us your story.

46:05

SS: Thank you for having me.

[END]