

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

**Interview with Erika Joyner
September 29, 2016**

Interviewer: Rebecca Proctor
Interviewee: Erika Joyner
Date: September 29, 2016
Location: Roanoke College Fintel Library
Transcribed by: Kalyn Fowler and Sarah Groft
Duration: 57:17

0:00 = Introductions
0:58 = childhood and teenage years (1945 – early 1960s); exploring gender; cross-dressing
7:11 = involvement in New Left politics in Detroit, Michigan; anti-war organizing; anti-racism organizing (1960s)
9:23 = negative views on homosexuality in the 1960s
10:42 = attending college at Wayne State University (c. 1966 – 1969)
15:52 = involvement in radical political groups; present at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago
16:52 = working odd jobs; founding a cooperative in Detroit
18:36 = getting married
19:47 = coming out to her wife as a cross-dresser; divorce
24:01 = finding a cross-dressing community online and through Tri-Ess (2000s?)
29:20 = founding Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge (2009)
31:36 = coming out to, and reconciling with, family members
36:45 = Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge & the Roanoke Diversity Center (2010s)
42:34 = playing the bass in various bands; the importance of music
46:38 = Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge
50:55 = current life as a transgender woman in Roanoke, Virginia; being part of a pool league at local sports bars
54:03 = national trends in transgender issues; restroom access policies

0:00 (checking sound levels)

0:25

RP: This is Rebecca Proctor. I am here with Erika Joyner in the Roanoke College library. It is Thursday, September 29th at around 10:30am. This interview is part of the [Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project] LGBT oral history project. So, would you mind telling us your full name, where you were born and your date of birth?

0:47

EJ: Erika Joyner. I was born in Niskayuna, New York [on] September 23rd, 1945.

0:58

RP: So, let's start with talking about your childhood. What was your childhood like?

1:04

EJ: I was extremely shy and reserved and focused inward. My parents say I didn't utter a word until I was three years old and then it was a three-word sentence, so I do a lot of processing. I remember always gravitating toward the girls for playmates and social situations when I was really young. I liked to tear it up with the guys sometimes, too, especially on our bikes, but in school situations, socializing in school, I was sort of drawn to the girls' side of the gym, or playground, or whatever. And, I always felt more comfortable there. So, being introverted, I just put all of my energy into school studies and basically was a nerdy guy who didn't do much with sports and got pushed around a lot by the macho guys. And, just never identified with that whole assertive, macho "let me see if I can pee farther than you" kind of mentality. It just didn't fit. But, I kept thinking, "Well, the only reason it doesn't fit is because I'm such a failure at it," so I internalized it all and spent a lot of my childhood feeling victimized. Just all in my head. And, some of it, of course, in reality, because that sort of behavior in my part just invited guys to pounce on me and the girls to say, "that's just a weirdo." So, [I] spent a lot of my young teenage years battling that. So, going into like teenage years and puberty, I just... this tremendous urge came to wear my mom's stuff—you know, her lingerie and take the socks and, you know, make myself into a woman, or young woman, or girl, or whatever. And it is very powerful. Just a very powerful thing. And it got all mixed up in my... with the hormones going and everything, so, yeah, it really got powerful. And, of course, I would quote-unquote "succumb" to this urge and then be terribly distraught about it because I thought it was just such a shameful act. I just didn't know how to process that. And that's really, that's so common with transgender [people], at least in my experience, male to female [persons], is this whole thing that a lot of us, maybe most of us, do in the period of transitioning, or reawakening, or whatever, is we purge. We gather around me what I need to present as [a] woman and then feel so shamed about it, and upset, that I just throw it all away. And then, it can be expensive [*laughter*] over the long haul. Anyway, so, I went from this whole... so, anyway, I didn't tell a soul about this. Not my parents, not my, at the time, my brother and then later my sister and my younger brother were born, but I didn't tell anybody. And, the further along I got the more I just stuffed all these feelings and, in the process of discovering myself, I buried that part of me.

7:11

EJ: So, like late teens into my twenties, I dated girls, got into music, started getting into New Left politics. I was a member of the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam and a group called People Against Racism that dealt with racism in the white community as a parallel effort to support the awakening of black self-determination and, you know, in the streets of Detroit, and [I] started getting into food co-ops and alternative lifestyle, lived in a co-housing with a bunch of crazy other hippies and found out what it was like to just try and communicate on a real and honest level and get into all sorts of problems from trying to find ways to deal with interpersonal relationships given the old constructs

and trying to change the world and all this stuff. So I learned a lot about human nature by all the mistakes that we made. So I guess that sort of describes my childhood. You know, I went to college...

9:23

RP: If I could for a second, just bringing it into your earlier childhood and high school years, did you have any exposure to the LGBT community at that time?

9:31

EJ: Absolutely none, did not. You know, my view of gay and lesbian was just, you know, "those weird queers," "those strange people that did all these nasty things," and it was just totally what that dominant thought of the time was. I didn't even question it.

10:09

RP: I know you said you were introverted growing up through early childhood and high school, was it? So, did you have any close friends that you ever considered opening up to? Or was it just never an option for you to talk to anybody about this earlier on?

10:24

EJ: Never an option. I had a few close friends, but it just never came up. I mean, I just stuffed it. It was gone.

10:36

RP: What year was it that you graduated high school?

10:41

EJ: '66.

10:42

RP: Ok, so you went on to college directly after [that]? Can you tell us where you went, and your graduation year from college?

10:50

EJ: I went to Wayne State University, and didn't graduate. Went for three plus years.

11:00

RP: Ok, so while you were in college, did you have any more exposure to the LGBT community, or did you still have the same feelings about gay and lesbian people?

[long pause]

11:20

EJ: I'm trying to picture in my mind some of the people from way back then, which it's kind of fuzzy. I think it was like "don't ask, don't tell" back then and there were probably people that I was friends with that were gay, but it never sort of came up. So, I led a sheltered life. And it was still, although there were certain areas where I put myself out

there, like my music, but still in college I was just very protective of myself and nervous about dabbling in areas that were strange or uncomfortable.

12:38

RP: Ok, so you've told us that you identify as bi [bisexual] ... is that something you explored in college or did you not accept that until later on?

12:47

EJ: No. This is maybe, I don't know, five or six years ago when I realized I was attracted to guys as well as girls. It just sort of started happening. So, I'm a late bloomer.

13:19

RP: Do you think being a transgender woman at the time, even if you hadn't officially accepted that, do you think that shaped the way you grew up? Like in college, do you think that shaped the friends you made and the experiences that you had, just the feelings that you had inside you at all?

13:41

EJ: Well, I didn't, in college, I never... it was like there wasn't even that context. So I pretty much did the same thing I did when I was going to grade school and high school and stuff, or like at parties, is just sort of gravitate to where the women were having conversations and kind of try to see what that was all about... it was just so much more interesting than sports. *[laughter]* But I was like "well, this is me and I'll just stay at the periphery of all this interaction so that I'm not drawn in enough to get rejected," which was a big fear of mine—being rejected. So, I don't know. I don't think I really... maybe if I just really jumped into the middle of these experiences, I might have reawakened these feelings earlier in my life. But, somehow it just wasn't happening. Like, the whole desire to present as a woman didn't surface in me until I was like halfway through my marriage. In my middle or late fifties.

15:52

RP: So, you said you did not graduate from college? What is it that you went on to do instead of staying in school?

16:00

EJ: Detroit Committee to End the War, People Against Racism, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], Marches on Washington. I was part of the rabble in the streets in 1968 at the Democratic Convention where Mayor Daly was gassing us in the streets and we were running up and down trying to keep from getting our heads beat in and carrying signs... so that was my education more than college.

16:52

RP: So, once you were done participating in all those kind of things, what was your first job, I guess, outside of school?

[long pause]

17:09

EJ: Well, I would just do a little bit of this, a little bit of that. I scored psychological tests for a while for a professor, worked at the post office for a while, and then started up a co-op garage in Detroit with some friends... trying to make a little money on the side on jobs that we'd bring in for ourselves and then have a section of the garage given over to people coming into work on their cars and kind of tried to do that—didn't make any money at that. I've just odd-jobbed it my entire life, basically. So, no career path, no long-term job, no time clock. Do a lot of traveling, just live hand to mouth.

18:36

RP: So you said you were or are married?

18:41

EJ: Were married.

18:42

RP: Were married.

18:43

EJ: For twelve years yeah.

18:44

RP: So how did you meet your partner?

18:47

EJ: It was at a meeting of the Appalantic Federation of Co-Ops, where at the time I was living in Virginia and she was living in North Carolina. And we were just into co-op things in each of our own areas. And we met at a conference and started hanging out together at conferences and stuff. And we finally decided to go ahead and get married.

19:33

RP: Did you have any children?

19:36

EJ: She had a child who was ten when we met, so we didn't have any children ourselves.

19:47

RP: So when you decided that you wanted to present yourself as a woman, how did you go about talking to your partner about that?

19:59

EJ: It wasn't a decision. It was... like a freight train, [*sound effect*] boom, that just swept me. And I was still in denial mode and said "you know, if this is going to hit me again I am still going to take it to my grave." You know, I don't know what's gonna happen, but I'm not going to tell anybody. And so I just went into this whole repeat of the way I was

trying to cope with it back when I was a teenager which was this whole purging thing and just totally trying to take that part of myself and separate it outside of myself, and deal with it as if it were some sort of aberration, and it just didn't work. That, let me tell you folks, if you wanna choose that as the coping mechanism, it is doomed to failure [laughter]. And so my wife kept saying, "there is something that you are hiding from, you must be seeing somebody else on the side," and I'd go, "oh, no I'm not, I'm not." But really I was, I was seeing Erika on the side, although she didn't have a name or you know it was all so nebulous. But you know, I knew I was taking my energy away from the relationship... and then, I just refused to deal with it and refused to deal with it and refused... and it just split us apart. And we went to counseling and I dug my heels in and I just said, "it's not coming out." Finally just one evening you know... and, my wife she was persistent, she is a persistent, strong-willed woman and she just kept at it, bam bam ... and I just found myself "okay, I have been cross-dressing for the past year," plus or whatever it was. "I've got these feelings, I don't know what to do with them," and it cut her so hard, that all she could think of is "you've been dishonest, you haven't been loyal to the relationship, this is totally unfair, you know, you're a real asshole" [laughter]. And I'm going, "it's true, it's true. I've really been an asshole, it's true," but she was not at all able to drop for a moment her hurt and her fear and everything and realize that I was hurting, and so I pretty much made the move to move out and get my own place, and we were separated and about a year later we got divorced.

24:01

EJ: And at the time we had been going through marriage counseling and then that blew apart, and then I started seeing a therapist, just on my own, and I said "I don't know how to deal with this," and he was saying, "well, there are two directions that I know of that I might be able to help you [with], but it is your choice. One is behavioral modification," which is like what the Christian therapists want to do with gay people and transgender people, is to do behavioral modification to the point to where you stop having these feelings or desires or, you know, "we can do that, or, I know of some resources if you want to look further into this part of your personality, and I can help you do that, it is your choice." So, duh [laughter], you know I'm real glad I took the path toward self-realization. And this was back when the internet was still fairly, not nearly as well developed. I started going on the Internet, dial-up speed, and started finding out I'm not alone. And that is another [one of the] most common things coming out of the closet, "oh my god, I'm not alone!" And it has just been a progression from there. And here is where I really started delving into the whole area of: what's it like to be gay? What's it like to be lesbian? What's this transgender thing? And starting to get concepts that would start to match the feelings that I was having inside. So, yeah, I don't know where we are in your questions, but that's really after my separation and going out on my own, I really started discovering myself. And Erika, the name just came to me. I don't know where it came from. Except I figured it's probably sort of an extension of my male name. So anyway, I just started finding out more about Erika and hooked up with this woman who was starting a Tri-Ess chapter. Tri-Ess is a national organization with chapters all around the country. It's a—I don't know if it still is—but it was a steadfast heterosexual male cross-dressing organization. And at the time when I was first coming out of the closet, my friend took me to a Tri-Ess chapter meeting in Baltimore, and the first time I ever went

out dressed as Erika, with somebody else in a social setting, I went and got a makeover at Macy's, and I was petrified. And I was walking, you know wobbling, on my high heels across the parking lot, so anyway, you know, it was just, from that point forward I started purposely pushing the envelope... "This scares the hell out of me, well let's do it".,, and putting myself into other social situations, and connecting up with Roanoke Diversity Center. I helped start that organization. I was right on the ground floor of that and help start Ladies and Gents [of the Blue Ridge] and I have just sort of continued coming into my own.

29:20

RP: Do you remember what year it was that you started attending those meetings, and kind of getting that makeover?

29:29

EJ: The makeover was and the Tri-Ess period was maybe 2008, because I know the first Ladies and Gents meeting was in January of 2009, and at the time we were debating on about whether to try to become a Tri-Ess chapter or whether that was too limiting to the scope of the organization that we wanted to become. And so right around that time, I don't know, 2009-2010 or something, we actually decided to become Ladies of the Blue Ridge and then that progressed 2010-2011 something like that, to Ladies of the Blue Ridge - Transgender Alliance. Because we weren't just cross dressers, we were starting to realize that there is a whole spectrum out there and then of course we sort of did a dope slap and said, "okay, we really need to be Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge," you know, "let's be representative here." And so it was like, first of all it was just cross-dressing, male to female. Period. Then it was "well, okay, we are part of a continuum," and then it was like, full, there is a whole spectrum, and then this whole thing of genderfluid, and gender non-binary, and genderqueer, which I've been fascinated with... that the younger generation is bringing into fruition. So yeah, now I'm rambling so you better stop me.

31:36

RP: So, can I ask if you've reconciled any of the feelings that were hurt between you and your wife at the time? Do you have any sort of relationship?

31:36

EJ: We have and we do. It has taken a long time; it has taken about as many years as we were married, so it has taken about twelve years. But, in fact, just a little while ago, a couple months ago, she actually referred to me as Erika. But I give her a pass on that, I go, "if you want to call me by my male name, then hey, you know, that's okay." But yeah, she has come to the point where you know it is sort of like we do everything we can to meet ourselves halfway, so I cat sit for her, we recognize each other's birthdays and, you know, have conversations about her daughter. You know, stuff like that.

33:12

RP: So you don't have any relationship with her child that was involved in the marriage?

33:18

EJ: I do, yeah. She has two kids of her own, twelve and ten, now. And they don't know about Erika. That was her [daughter-in-law's] request, but she and her husband know about Erika. At some point that's one of the next envelopes that I need to push, is making and creating a situation where I can come out to their kids.

34:03

RP: Have you, I don't know how to word this, did you ever end up telling your parents? I don't know if your parents are still around or not, but did they know? Where they accepting of it?

34:15

EJ: I didn't. My dad passed in '88 and that was, back in the day when there was no concept of Erika. My mom lived to be 94 [years old], but by the time I realized what was happening, she was already starting to lose her mental faculties and was dealing with age-related physical stuff and I just didn't want to bother her with it. So they probably knew because of how strong the turmoil I was going through when I was a teenager. And the dressing, too, I mean my mom probably... I can't imagine she didn't figure out that things looked a little bit different in her lingerie drawer, you know, scratch scratch, but if they didn't know it was "don't ask, don't tell," kind of like how we handled a lot of our emotional issues in our family. My parents were very liberal. They let me and my siblings get away with a lot of stuff. But it was sort of like "don't ask, don't tell."

35:47

RP: Do your siblings know about Erika?

35:49

EJ: Yeah.

35:50

RP: Are they accepting?

35:51

EJ: They are. Yeah. They, I don't know how much they have delved... I'll have to ask them, actually... how much they delved into it to educate themselves, but my two brothers are sort of like "well, whatever floats your boat." We love you. And you know, like my younger brother is up in Michigan, my older brother is in California, and my sister is in Indiana. But when we spend time together, you know it is always, I'm just me, I'm just Erika, I'm their sister. So that's really good.

36:45

RP: So you were talking about Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge and how you helped found it, so I'm wondering how being a part of Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge and founding that organization has helped you come into your own and really be Erika?

37:02

EJ: Just the stories and experiences that transgender [people] and allies that come into our support group meetings. Just being able to connect with people on an emotional level and hear and share our stories, just makes it that much more real. And it also makes it that much more, I can't think of the right word but, more real, more matter of fact. I mean this is just, you know, this is our reality, this is our subculture... I don't know why I can't think of the word. You know we are on the map; we're not just some concept out there, I mean, I've just become more emotionally involved... the feelings that I am having about myself are the same feelings that these folks are having.

39:04

RP: Can you tell us a little bit about the Diversity Center?

39:08

EJ: Yeah, that has been really interesting because there is a wider scope because the focus is on all matter of LGBTQA+, you know. And we are drawing from a wider pool of resources; so, the RDC board has got thirteen people on it. Ladies and Gents is a much smaller entity. Both of us are 501C3, but RDC is more formal, more structured, you know we do board training, we are just getting to the point where we have project managers, you know all of this sort of infrastructure that you need to run a business; you know, RDC is a business. You know, we've got financial... I'm the treasurer. So we have the bookkeeping, we have the program development, and we have the fundraising. So all of that is really exciting, and board dynamics, we have a thing called Team Spirit meetings where the board gets together, maybe at a board member's house, and we just share a meal and lately we have been doing personal histories. Each board member at each team spirit meeting will give a little presentation about their personal history. So it is like team building exercises, so we do that. And then, I have been working on a fundraiser letter and we realized that we have done over eight hundred separate events related to LGBT awareness. Over the past five years. You know we've got support groups that meet on a regular basis, like Ladies and Gents is one of them. A non-binary group, the bisexual group, the polyamorous group, there is another transgender group that is meeting. And we put on workshops; there is just a lot of stuff going on. So just to be a part of that, feel like I am part of something that is relevant. It means a lot to me.

42:34

RP: So I was informed that you play the guitar in a band called The Skittles, and I was wondering if you wanted to talk about that for a little bit?

42:44

EJ: Well, it is actually the electric bass, and it's a little four-piece combo that basically supports the choir at the MCC church. We don't play out anywhere, we just gather ourselves together and support the choir. Before that I was in a jazz combo with the bass, for about twelve years, called Loose Gravel. The county gave us a bunch of free advertising because you see these diagonal signs saying loose gravel all over the place and so, yeah, that was a lot of fun. And I have been in a lot of other bands from time to time, that are anywhere from garage band to actually making a little money at the enterprise.

43:55

RP: You mentioned earlier on that you were able to express yourself a little bit more through music, when you were having some of these feelings that you weren't really understanding, do you think you could delve a little deeper into that?

44:08

EJ: Music is something that has just helped keep me sane. Music is very special to me because it is a language, it is a universal language and it's a way to create an emotional reality that brings people together. There is nothing I love more than being proficient enough and in tune enough with the people I'm playing with to like make something happen. You know, like Loose Gravel would play at a wedding and we didn't think we had succeeded until we had everybody on the dance floor. And the bass is something that can really drive that because it is keeping the beat, so I'm tied in with the drummer, and it is signifying the chord changes, so I'm tied in with the rhythm and the lead stuff happening, so, you know, it is just great fun to get a groove going and then just "up the ante" a little bit. And get people moving. And music is a spiritual thing for me, it's a magic combination of proficiency at the instrument and reading the group will at the moment. Working intimately with the people you are making music with. It just, you know, keeps me sane.

46:38

RP: So you mentioned that you play at the church, is that a weekly thing, do you attend the church often?

46:46

EJ: Yeah, every week.

46:48

RP: So I've heard a little bit about that church, I don't know too much about it, so would you mind explaining the significance of that church?

46:57

EJ: It's part of a national denomination that advertises itself as an LGBT church, but just as importantly, LGBT Christian church. And just as importantly advertises itself as a truly ecumenical, all-inclusive church, so not just paying lip service to the inclusive, but the interpretation of the bible and Christianity and Jesus is in terms of God is love, you are born into this world accepted as who you are, and who you are to become, all within God's love. And it permeates this inclusiveness. It permeates all aspects, as far as I can see, of the church: the pastor, the congregation, the programing, the, whatever you call it, the teaching, liturgy, or whatever it is, I don't really... I don't identify simply as a Christian, so I don't know a whole lot about the bible and the structure, but it is all truly inclusive, which just makes it a terribly exciting place to be. It's a small congregation. It's a small congregation in a huge church, with a lot of overhead, and so it's challenging sometimes to keep this whole enterprise moving down the track. But it is a welcoming church, there's not just LGBTQ, there's several allies and people who just came one time

out of curiosity that are heterosexual couples. And it just blew their mind. And they said, “MCC? Baptist church?” You know, duh. And it just draws people in that are disappointed or fed up or have been abused by the more traditional churches. And there are a lot of churches in Roanoke that are really stepping forward and are trying to be accepting as they know how to be, which is super, it’s wonderful. So that is good to see, but I think MCC is something special, truly ecumenical place.

50:30

RP: Do you think being a part of that church has helped you on your journey?

50:34

EJ: Yeah. I feel so accepted and I look forward to walking into this atmosphere of total acceptance.

50:55

RP: So what is it like for you to be a transgender woman in Roanoke, Virginia? Do you have any fear of being transgender? Or do you feel accepted?

51:09

EJ: I really feel accepted, I really do. I, you know, there are obviously places in Roanoke that I won’t walk around, for fear of being challenged, in some way or another. But in all the things that I do, you know shopping at Kroger’s, going to the doctor, just whatever, the worst I have ever gotten is that look where they kind of tilt their head back and give you a kind of “what the hell?” look, you know, just give that look, but it has never gone any farther than that. And you know I spend a lot of my time in places where I already know I’m gonna be accepted. So that’s sort of like... but the one area where I have pushed the envelope is I am part of a pool-playing league. Shooting pool, eight ball, nine-ball. And all of the league games are out at sports bars, where they have a pool table, and the atmosphere and the culture at those sports bars is pretty, on the surface, is pretty redneck, beer-drinking, you know talking about football, the whole macho thing. And with the women kind of playing up to that, and a lot of sexual innuendo jokes going back and forth and all of this mainstream culture. And I just waltzed right into it. And was accepted because I was a fellow pool player. It’s like the pool trumped anything else. Pardon the pun. So, yeah. So that has been a wonderful experience. And I don’t know whether it’s, you know, to some of the people there I probably simply pass. They just take me as another one of the women, but I’m sure there are plenty of people where I don’t quote-unquote “pass.” But it doesn’t seem to matter.

54:03

RP: Do you think since Erika really became a big part of your life that there have been significant strides in being, not just in the Roanoke community, but the whole community of our nation being more open to transgender people, since you first [came out]?

54:24

EJ: Oh yeah, yeah, it’s much more in people’s consciousness now. And as a result it’s kind of putting things more on the line that the reactionary conservatives are stepping up

and you are seeing the H2 [HB2] bill in North Carolina¹ and all this trash talk coming from Trump and those damn Texans, et cetera, et cetera. You know, the challenges are starting to come to the surface. So this is the time for allies to step up to the plate. It really is. To take on that, and there is some more local examples. There is a situation in Montgomery County schools where there are starting to have to develop policy around transgender issues, so... I've forgotten the question.

55:49

RP: The questions was, do you think that the nation as a whole and also the Roanoke community has been making significant strides to be more accepting? Like, if you see it going in a positive direction?

56:01

EJ: I don't know about significant strides because to me significant has to include policy change and policy implementation. And I don't think we are quite there yet. It's all stirring up in people's minds and the awareness level is higher. But see, where you are seeing more, well, on the federal level you are seeing policy change, so you know that's a real plus. But on a local level it still seems as though the policy changes that are most visible are H2 [HB2], et cetera.

56:53

RP: Well, is there anything you would like to share with us before we conclude our interview?

57:06

EJ: Well, I'm just glad that you guys are doing this.

57:10

RP: Well, thank you so much for coming to talk to us.

57:12

EJ: Yeah.

57:13

RP: It was great, thank you.

[END]

¹ HB2, The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (2016).