

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

**Interview with Michelle Bennett  
February 27, 2017**

Interviewer: Sarah Sinoski

Interviewee: Michelle Bennett

Date: February 27, 2017

Location: Fintel Library, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia

Transcribed by: unknown

Duration: 1:21:14

0:00 – Introductions

1:01 – Family background; relationships with parents

3:52 – relationship with the church

5:03 – hearing about homosexuality in the 1960s; her father, a college professor, is accused of being “homosexual” (1960s)

7:04 – exploring her gender and sexuality through literature; the role of the library as a source of information about homosexuality (1970s)

10:50 – first significant lesbian relationship (1980s)

13:23 – life in Durham, North Carolina, in the mid-1980s; getting involved with a Catholic gay organization in college (late 1970s)

15:34 – involvement in the Catholic gay organization’s speaker’s bureau

19:33 – a gay bar in Jacksonville, North Carolina; lesbians in the Marines

22:45 – discussing employment; work as a “community builder”; working in arts management

25:54 – getting thrown out of the house at age twenty (c. 1980)

28:02 – relationship and marriage with Alice, her partner of twenty-seven years

32:18 – talking about hobbies, friendships, and choosing your own family

36:17 – moving to Roanoke in the late 1980s; getting a job at WVTF; meeting Alice

41:28 – issues at WVTF: censorship of gay-related programming; being “out” at work

46:59 – thoughts on Terry Gross and “Fresh Air” and the show’s lesbian following

51:45 – the gay scene in Roanoke: The Park; Backstreet Café; rural gay migration to Roanoke

56:58 – gay neighborhood (Old Southwest); opening a business in Grandin Village; living in Raleigh Court

59:41 – the atmosphere at CUPS; dealing with belligerent customers, including a fight over a gay-related painting on the wall

1:10:00 – what does the future look like for gay people in Roanoke? Rise in hate crimes under the Trump Administration

1:15:37 – current relationship with father

1:16:55 – opening up a CUPS coffeehouse at Roanoke College

1:19:25 – closing remarks

0:00

[Checking sound levels ~ 30 seconds]

0:30

SS: My name is Sarah Sinoski. I'm sitting here with Michelle Bennett on February 27th, 2017 as part of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project oral history initiative, and we're here at Roanoke College in Fintel Library.

0:46

MB: Hi.

0:48

SS: Hey! So, to start out... where were you born?

0:54

MB: Johnson City, Tennessee.

0:57

SS: When's your birthday?

0:58

MB: November 18th, 1959.

1:01

SS: Where was your family from originally? Were they from around Tennessee?

1:04

MB: No. They were from Ligonier, Pennsylvania in the western part of the state. My father was attending college in Johnson City.

1:12

SS: Tell me about your family.

1:15

MB: My parents were extremely young when I was born. My father was in his first semester of college. Obviously, I was not any kind of a plan. So, I feel like I grew up with that in some ways. They had both of us, both of their children that they were going to have, by the time they were twenty. So, by the time they were in their forties, we were gone and they were still quite young. So, they were very poor at first, struggling, students, whatever. My mother didn't go to college until I was in high school because she worked all the time. They were great, they were very smart, they were basically good people. Didn't always agree with them, still don't.

2:05

SS: What's your relationship with your family like now?

2:07

MB: My mother passed away two years ago. My father and I are not getting along very well right now, but it's an issue of his not an issue of mine. And I have a younger brother who's 16 months younger than I am and I have a good relationship with him although we are not in contact very much, but... we're buds. We just don't live in the same place and we don't have friends in common.

2:36

SS: You mentioned that your father worked at a college?

2:39

MB: He was a professor of English at Malone College in Canton, Ohio. That was his first teaching job. Like I say, I was born in the first semester of his first year. And he was a mess, like every first year. They were young and stupid. I mean they told us that, so...

2:58

SS: What did your mother do?

2:59

MB: Anything. She taught at private schools, because she did not have a degree for a while, but she was an artist and an art teacher for most of her working life. But she did, both of them worked, any job that came along. My father worked in hospitals, they did whatever job. No problem with working in our family.

3:23

SS: What would you say was the most influential person in your life while you were growing up?

3:29

MB: Besides my parents? Or definitely, I mean definitely my dad. I'm very much like him, I look like his mother. He has a very strong personality. I wanted to be like him. And I am, and now I'm a little bit sorry.

3:52

SS: Did you attend a church?

3:54

MB: Yes, my father is also a minister. Attended church almost all my life. I don't anymore. I feel like I've done all my time in church I need to do.

4:05

SS: What kind of an experience would you say that it was for you?

4:09

MB: What, church? I started going to church as a child in the sixties, so it was church. I mean, it's what you did. It's what you did every Sunday. If you were lucky, you got to go out for lunch afterwards. My father was a minister. But he wasn't ordained until I was in about the 5th grade. I don't think of my father as an especially holy man. I know he's a believer and always has been, but he's also an intellectual and I think that's always a hard pair to put together. He's not always a super nice guy; he's a regular man who happens to be a minister. He's really a very good preacher. He's a very good speaker; he's a very good teacher. So his best stuff was all done in the pulpit. He was not much of a pastor, if you know what I mean.

5:03

SS: When you were growing up, do you remember hearing any stories or jokes about homosexuals? And if so, in what context? Church, or school, or...

5:12

SS: Never at church. That did not come up in those days then. My father taught at a small college in Ohio, and I remember arguments and discussions and learned later that—and we left Canton when I was twelve, so I was very young for this—but my father was accused of being homosexual. And I'm really not a hundred percent sure that he isn't, or at least bi[sexual]. But... it was a thing and it was not a cool thing in the sixties and I think it had something to do with him not still teaching there, not going on teaching there. But I don't know what. He was a very exuberant and exciting teacher, he's a very very good teacher. Funny and great at it. So students really liked him and our house was always full of students who became friends because my parents were only a few years older than they were. People that I think of as my godparents are former students of my dad's. He was, you know, a very popular guy and so was my mom, who was shy—very shy person—but they had such good friends there. But something happened and I think it was that my father was accused of being gay. And I don't know whether he had gotten caught, or whether it was just an idea, he was in the theater, he is very... he could be taken for gay. He has been at other times, I'm sure. Don't know if he's ever tried it, my guess is yes. But it's not something I'm gonna be discussing with him. He's now 76; I don't need to know.

7:04

SS: Do you remember what age you were when you became aware of that?

7:08

MB: It was early... so say, second grade-ish? What is that, eight? Nine, eight? I have no idea, something like that. He had a student who was gay, and I didn't know for sure what that meant, but it was very interesting to me because I already knew at that age that I wasn't like everybody else in the family. I wasn't like everybody else I knew. I didn't know in what way; I just knew. I thought it was that I wanted to be a boy.

7:42

SS: How would you say that that affected that part of your childhood? Did you feel closer to your dad or maybe further apart from other people?

7:52

MB: No, no. Well... there was just some stuff that I never discussed with people. Stuff that was in my head, my closest relationship was with my brother for years. I mean we're almost twins, so... But I didn't discuss it with him either. I just, my own sexuality and what I grew to realize was my own sexuality, I kept completely to myself. It was not something that I wanted to discuss with my parents. I didn't have that kind of relationship with them... and didn't want to start. A lot of what I learned about like, gay people, I read in the library. When I could.

8:36

SS: Was the library the place where you were figuring out more about yourself? What was the library to you?

8:44

MB: Yeah, it was a great place to go and look stuff up. I mean, I was raised by educators, so my father said always, "It's not what you know, it's knowing how to find what you want to know." Which is still true, but it's in our pockets now, but then it wasn't, it was at the library. And I looked up a lot of different things to find out the information I wanted to find out. There was no... I mean the section about homosexuality in libraries in the sixties and seventies was in the crazy people department. It wasn't a celebrated thing like it is now. So, yeah. I spent a lot of time in the library looking up, finding authors, finding women, finding men who were writing about that. And there's always been people writing about it, you just had to figure out who they were and where they were, and how could you find them. So I did a lot... all the way, really, through college. There were no computers when I was in college.

9:45

SS: Do you remember maybe having a moment of finding a book and identifying with it?

9:51

MB: Oh yeah. The first fiction piece probably [was] a book called *Rubyfruit Jungle*. A very well-known lesbian book from I think it was written in the late sixties, early seventies. By a woman who lives in Charlottesville named Rita Mae Brown. It was her adventures of knowing she was different and leaving home and going to New York and finding her people. Well, I didn't leave North Carolina. I stayed there. I left New Bern as soon as I could. It wasn't until I had left home that I did anything about it. I mean, I wanted to leave New Bern and I wanted to not live at home anymore, but for a million reasons, not just... because of that.

10:40

SS: We talked a little bit about this, but did you have any other friends or family who identified as gay or different?

10:46

MB: None.

10:50

SS: When were you first aware of your preference for women? When did that pop up?

10:56

MB: Well... it was kind of in my mind in high school, but I mean... and I did not date very much. I had friends who were guys, and we sort of traveled in a group, so nobody was dating, it was just a bunch of people. This was in like the mid-70s, mid-to-late [19]70s, and it really wasn't until I was in college [*laughs*]. Bizarrely, I had a terrific crush on my high school English teacher. And after I graduated from high school, I had had her for English for three years, I went to college, flunked out my first year in college, came back to my hometown and went to the community college where my father taught for a year, that'll teach you, and then went on to college where my brother was at East Carolina, and basically I think intellectually I knew I was gay, but still had not done anything about it, really not done [anything]. But I still had this tremendous crush on this teacher. We ended up having a ten-year relationship. So... and I had to talk her into it.

She was 19 years older than I, she was a virgin, she was Catholic, she was ridden with guilt, she was exactly the same age as my parents... she was, you know, I had to talk her into it. It took me a while. We did end up having a relationship, we never lived together, but when I left college I moved to the town where she was living, which was not my hometown anymore, she had left there. We had a ten-year relationship that was very enlightening. This was my twenties, the most sexually active decade of my life. I was in this relationship, but I was also in the restaurant culture where I worked, and if you know anything about it, at that time anyway, it was sex, drugs, and rock and roll all the way. And I did all three.

13:18

SS: So what year and what location, which city are we talking about?

13:23

MB: Durham, North Carolina, and I moved there in about '83—'82, '83—and I lived there for three years. Like I say, I started out working at an arts council at first, I've worked at a radio station, I've always had a ton of jobs. But I ended up working at a really nice restaurant as a cook, and fell in with a bunch of Duke students, or Duke students on break. Hung out with them, and had this relationship with this woman but we didn't—we had some people that we socialized with together, but not a lot. She was teaching in North Carolina in the [19]80s, it was not a cool time for her to be “out” or seen with somebody who was out, you know.

Once I came out, I never went back in, that is, I've been like way out. First of all, when I figured out I was gay for sure, it was truly a relief, because I'd spent so many years thinking that I was just, like... the problem. Something I didn't understand. Something nobody else was, obviously. You know, I just spent a lot of time in my head thinking “well, whatever this is, it's a mess but I'm going to have to deal with it. But there's nobody I can talk to about it.” I don't have that kind of

family. My parents were not the kind of people you could say "I need to talk to a psychiatrist," or something like that. Not until my mother found out that I was gay that she'd tell me that I should go to a psychiatrist, but, of course, by then I was like "yeah, no." But yeah, I was relieved because it was a thing. It was the thing that somebody else had heard of. There were other people. I joined a gay organization in college that was associated with the Newman House, a Catholic organization although I'm not Catholic. Although I've seriously dated two Catholics, so I might be honorary at this point. Just because of the relief of "there's other people with the same stuff in their head."

15:32

SS: Do you remember what the name of the organization was?

15:34

MB: Oh no, I have no idea. It's probably called the same thing. Newman has had that program for zillions of years, and it was a speaker's bureau that was available. We, some of us were available to speak in different classes that were usually sociology, health, psychology classes that we would speak to, and our deal was, you know, we would talk briefly about our experience, and this was when we were still in the crazy portion of the textbooks, wish I could think of what the real word I want to use there. But then we would answer any questions. And people just, I mean, there weren't television shows, there weren't commercials with gay couples, there was not a general knowledge of what gay people did in bed, even. So what do you do? I mean, that was really a question, and I got so that I could answer it, although I usually just gave them five guesses, you know what I mean? But, you know, when I came out I came out with a vengeance. I did not come out to my parents. My brother had already figured it out, before I did, of course. It was not anything I wanted to discuss with them. It was not gonna be cool. The thing with the English teacher? That was not gonna be cool either. So I just didn't, I mean, here was something about being gay back in the day, made you a terrific liar. All the gay people I knew at that time lied. A lot. You had to. That was just how you survived.

17:19

SS: Were there any really particularly memorable questions that you remember being asked in those meetings?

17:26

MB: In what meetings?

17:28

SS: With the Catholic...

17:32

MB: Oh. Oh yeah, the speaker's bureau! Oh gosh, they asked everything. I mean they literally asked "what made you like this? Did you choose this?" I'm like "yeah, you don't get a menu at birth or whatever," so... "no." At that time, my response was often "why would I choose to have this hard of a life?" Because it was hard. It was difficult, it was not easy to be gay, to be out. I

didn't have like a pocket of gay friends at the college that I went to, I had very few friends. I worked almost the whole time. I worked, I had a job the whole time I was in college. *[laughs]* I worked with two gay men—two black gay men—who were my mentors at the time, and they were fabulous, they were funny, they were part-time drag queens and they were hysterical. They were lovely guys, but they were coworkers, so... I didn't have any like group of gay friends that I hung out with that we were teaching each other stuff. I was making it up as I went along.

18:51

SS: What high school did you attend?

18:53

MB: New Bern Senior High School, in New Bern, North Carolina.

18:57

SS: Did you go straight from high school to college?

19:00

MB: Yeah, mmhmm, right. I went to UNC-G [University of North Carolina, Greensboro] for my first year and literally flunked out. I was not ready for that at all. I had a lot of stuff going on in my head, and did not go to class often enough. But I did go straight from there. I suggested to my dad one time that I either not go to college or not go to college right now, and it wasn't optional for him. He didn't have any understanding of that and that was it.

19:31

SS: Did you ever spend any time in the military?

19:33

MB: No, no. But I worked in Jacksonville, North Carolina after I left college, after I graduated. I worked for a record bar for like five years when I was in school and out of school. There was a record bar in Jacksonville that I worked at that the Marines and I—in eastern North Carolina there are three military bases, like right there, practically cheek by jowl. And they're big ones. And so there was always a very big military presence in that area, always is. And so I went to, I had heard that there was a gay bar in Jacksonville, and I heard that it was called the Friend's Bar, so I called them up and they wouldn't tell me if it was a gay bar, because it wasn't safe, and especially not safe in a military town. So I decided to take my chances. I was living in a small community outside of Jacksonville. Drove in, and went in the bar and it had, like they do, you open a door and there's sort of like a vestibule, anteroom kinda thing, where you pay and join, because those clubs were always private clubs, and then you go in. And I go in, there's this young man behind the register, and he says "Don't touch anything!! We got tear gassed yesterday." And some guys had opened up the door, thrown in a tear gas bomb, and run off, you know, just for laughs. So they had wiped everything down, and cleaned everything, but tear gas takes a while for it to go away, so you were okay as long as you didn't touch anything, you know; and the poor guy behind the counter was crying, looked like hell.... So I went in. That was kind of scary and weird, but I went in and I met what they call "WMs," women marines. I don't



know if they still call them WMs, but met a big table full of them, and we all talked, and they were in danger of losing their jobs instantly, and their livelihoods, and getting a dishonorable discharge, and the whole nine. And they took the chance of going to this bar because one of the things about being gay in those days was you really did look for opportunities to be around people like you. I went to a gay bar in college, it was a hole, but it was the only one. We were in rural, eastern North Carolina. It was not a city. So this one in Jacksonville lived on, even though it was dangerous and scary to go there. It wasn't much of a place, you know, it was tables, a DJ, music, dancing, whatever, but you could to some extent be yourself. But man they were always super paranoid because of their situation. But they had chosen this military life for whatever reason, you know, because it was their family's thing to do, because it would get them away from their families, I mean, whatever. So I wasn't in the military but I did have these kind of brushes with them.

22:45

SS: What would you consider your occupation to be now?

22:51

MB: I'm underemployed right now. I'm a former business owner, and I sold my business a little over a year ago. My true calling is marketing and graphic design, but at my age and my self-taught status, it's difficult for me to keep up with technology, frankly. I'm the merchandising director for a music festival called Floyd Fest, but, that's a new job and I can't even tell you how that's going yet so I don't really have an occupation at this time.

23:31

SS: And you were talking a little bit about sometimes some kinds of work you have done. Was there anything else notable that sticks out in your memory?

23:39

MB: I've had over forty jobs in my life. My best and most favorite job was working for Mill Mountain Theatre as the marketing director. I was there eleven years. It was an amazing time with an amazing group of people. The theater itself, and the arts, but certainly the theater especially has always been open to the gay community, and it was a great place, although I was very settled by then, my partner and I had been together for four or five years when I started working there, so it wasn't like I was searching for a community or anything. Some people describe me as a community builder; wherever I go I sort of gather people around. I did it when I owned a business on Grandin Road, which is a very small business community in Roanoke, it's only a few blocks, but I was very active in that and got a lot of stuff done, got money raised, got projects initiated. So, going back to your occupation question, if I got to choose I would probably say community builder, but that [Mill Mountain Theater] was my most favorite job. But I worked in radio, I worked in public radio, I worked for arts councils, most of my work has been done in non-profit arts organizations of one kind or another.

25:06

SS: Did you have theater in your life when you were in high school or college?

25:10

MB: Yeah, my father really loved theater. I did some theater all along, but there wasn't a strong theater program at my high school. My degree at East Carolina is in arts management, so I took theater courses, but I also took music, art, business, because there are artists. But I'm not an artist. I'm not an actor, not a singer, not a musician, not any of those things, I can't paint, but other people are needed to make the arts survive, and that'd be me.

25:52

SS: Have you ever faced any type of discrimination throughout your life?

25:54

MB: Oh yeah. Nothing too severe, and I do tend to answer back, so people who said stuff, even under their breath, would get it back full force from me always, and that usually stops people. In some ways I've been very lucky. My mother threw me out; that was probably the biggest form of discrimination I got. When she figured it out, and she figured it out because I got seen by somebody, she was so angry and so frightened, and first of all wanted to know what she had done in raising me that had made me like this. And of course there's no answer to that, but she wanted an answer, and she screamed at me for quite a long time, and then she said "and I want you out." She piled my stuff in the driveway, and said "take it with you, you're not coming back," and I didn't go back for a year, and my father did not call me, or anything. My mother was sort of a tyrant, so he just didn't want to get into it, so he didn't, he just backed out of it; and she was mad, she was very embarrassed at the thought that her family would find out about it because they would not think it was okay, and they did not think it was okay. I didn't tell them though. That was probably my biggest sort of shocker: being gay, having my mother saying that "we're done." It took many, many years for that to heal.

27:48

SS: How old were you at that point, what year was it?

27:50

MB: I was probably 21? 20? I was in college, not out though, something like that.

28:02

SS: Did you ever marry?

28:05

MB: I did marry. I married Alice. I didn't marry a guy, but yeah, Alice and I got married legally two years ago. October two years ago. So, yeah, I did get married.

28:20

SS: Did you ever have children?

28:21

MB: No, God, never wanted to either, when you had the weird parenting I had you wouldn't want to pass it on. Now my brother has a daughter, and she seems fine, so who knows.

28:32

SS: Does she know about...?

28:32

MB: Oh yeah, yeah.

28:37

SS: Does that affect your relationship with her at all do you think?

28:39

MB: No. [*Slight pause*] She's nineteen now, she's big.

28:48

SS: Are you in a relationship now?

28:50

MB: Yeah, twenty-seven years.

28:56

SS: Do you live together?

28:57

MB: We do live together. We've lived together almost from the get-go. Except for the first year, and she was leaving a long-term relationship of twelve years, and I was leaving the school teacher ten-year relationship, so I had moved here [Roanoke] for a job, she had been living here for a number of years, like five years, and we met through mutual friends who introduced us cause they thought we would get along and then after she and I, we had all hung out together, they came to me and they said [*whispering*] "Do you think she's gay" and I said [*whispering*] "I don't know"; she was very closeted. Her ex-partner was an attorney, who wanted to be a judge, and that was never going to happen, and they were just very, very closeted. I don't think there was anybody in the community who didn't know about them, but they never discussed it. Alice was definitely the wife, because although she was an attorney as well, she was not as successful of an attorney, that is, she worked for a legal aid, and her partner was way up there and going higher. And they didn't want it [their sexuality] to affect anybody's chances, so, you know, it wasn't a thing.

When Alice and I met I thought she was great, she was going through a hard time at the time, her Dad had just died—very young, and very suddenly—so she just hung out with us and did stuff, you know, whatever. The couple that introduced us, a straight couple introduced us, they got married, and we knew each other for almost a year before at a party, a going-away party in fact for the couple that had introduced us, we went to this party, and both had a lot to drink, and

I took Alice home, because she wasn't fit to drive, but I didn't take her to her home, I took her to my home. This was just going to be a one-nighter we said, you know, whatever, and that was twenty-seven years ago. That was not a one-nighter by any stretch of the imagination, and I said to her "here's the deal, I don't do closet. If you're going to be with me you're going to have to get right over that, like, now." And she did. She came out to her co-workers, and of course, they were fine. She works for the state, they were fine. We all had a lot of nightmares, she's four years older than I am, so she had even clearer nightmares of that era, of just knowing that you just didn't say it because it wasn't good. She had been in a long relationship with her previous partner, and I said "Did your parents know you were gay?" and she said it was never discussed. And her parents are both dead now and it was never discussed. Although she and her partner lived together and Alice and I lived together, and I'm sure her parents knew, her father died, and I'm sure her mother knew, but it was *never discussed*. And you could really get away with that then. I don't think you could get away with it now.

32:18

SS: Do you socialize with gay men and lesbians now?

32:21

MB: I do but not because they're gay men and lesbians, because they're friends. I have way more straight friends than gay friends. I've met such wonderful people the years I've lived in Roanoke, they are all very dear to me, but I don't hang with people just because we do the same thing. I have certainly, like I said, lesbian friends, but I don't have an exclusively gay or lesbian circle of friends at all.

33:00

SS: What do you like to do in your leisure time, what are your hobbies?

33:03

MB: I read a lot, I do hang out with my friends a lot. I have two good friends in particular. I do yoga. Because I'm working in this job, I work from home a lot, free-time is an odd thing, but I love to drink beer, trivia games, trivia quizzes, and stuff like that all over town. Yeah, I don't have a "hobby" or anything.

33:40

SS: At this point in your life, what would you say is important to you?

33:43

MB: Friends for sure. Friends, it all comes down to friends and love, you know? The sort of weird side benefit of growing up gay at the time that I did was that many of us had minimal contact with our families, and so we did what sort of became to be known as choosing your own family. And that's what I've done, and I regard my family—my friends as my family. When Alice and I got married two years ago we didn't invite anybody who was related to us. The people who are important to us live here. We just... it was a lucky strike [*unintelligible*]... is that you could say "These people I can't deal with, and I know that I look like them and am related to

them or whatever, but I can't deal with them, and they don't want to deal with me either. So I'm just going to deal with people who can." And that's, you know, what I've always done.

When I worked at the theater, I was quite a bit older than a lot of the people that I hung out with, the production crew, and stuff like that, they were all younger and we took them in, you know. We gave Thanksgiving dinner every year, our house was a place they could hang out, and make calls, do their laundry, whatever, I mean, just being aware that people... it's a wonder people get through their twenties it's such a God awful decade. It's fun and everything, but you feel insecure, you feel like you don't know what the fuck you're doing, for a good ten years, and you need all the help you can get, and anybody who's old enough to remember and look back and go "they're having a harder time than they're showing." When I owned the coffee shop all of my employees were in their twenties, and I'd like to think that as well as being a boss, that I was somebody who could be, you know, serious with them, helpful to them, a guide, a mentor, whatever. Not a parent, but a good friend. A good friend with a little more experience. It's very important.

36:17

SS: Do you remember at what point in your life you started to feel more settled? If you did, from that tumultuous time in [your] twenties?

36:26

MB: Yes, Alice and I got together when I was about twenty-nine. And she was thirty-three. And yeah, we became a family right away. Our children were cats, but, you know, it works out. Yeah, I've felt very settled since then. I never cheated on her, never wanted to, never needed to, don't see that I will. We have an amazing life. I'm so lucky.

37:00

SS: How long was the transition time between that kind of feeling of unsettled versus the knowledge that you were settled?

37:13

MB: Really short in a way. I took to Roanoke when I moved here, I guess I was twenty-eight, into a job that I had gotten all by myself, you know. My first job in public radio was at the community college where my father was a professor and I got a job there, and, you know, we did not work together because he was a professor and I worked for the radio station, but we were, you know, can't go anywhere without his luggage; and in Roanoke nobody knows him, and that was a great thing. I got the job very much on my own merits, and did it. Just moving here sort of changed my life to not having to be his shadow anymore, or whatever. So just meeting Alice, and falling in love with her, and just... I asked her to live with me, almost immediately, within the first month. I said "Well look, we're travelling back and forth at seven o'clock in the morning to go to work, let's just not do that," and she said "No, wait, I think I need to do it for a while." And that was fine. I had bought a house at that time in sort of a working-class neighborhood in Roanoke, and it was very small, but we lived there for ten years when

she moved in, so, yeah, I kind of grew up all at once. And it was really moving to Roanoke in a way. I never really thought about that, but it's true.

39:05

SS: So can you tell me more about the way that moving to Roanoke changed your life?

39:09

MB: Well, like I said, nobody knew my family. And I had always sort of been a product of that, and by being involved with somebody for a long time who knew them, cause my English teacher knew them, I just kind of never got out of their shadow. And my parents were teachers, my brother was a teacher. I was not going to do any more time in school than I had to, was not interested in grad school or anything like that, you know, never have been—maybe should have, but did not. Moving to Roanoke, I found my feet. I rented a place, I had cats and my car and a job, I was making friends, very quickly, and I worked with such great people at the radio station, and I met people within the first six months of living in Roanoke who are still my dearest friends. It was just a place I grew up, really. I mean it was a transition, but I wasn't feeling it as a transition, I was kind of just plowing along, but I got to be a lot happier. I got to be in a relationship with somebody who lived in the same town as I did and who didn't need me to hide how I felt about her. She had grown up with a very... you know, born in Manhattan, grew up in the suburbs, father took the train into New York every day to go to work, all that jazz, you know, very sort of TV family-esque, it seemed to me, with a lot more money than I had, than my family had, and she had like real furniture [*chuckles*], and stuff like that, so, you know, it was a growing up time. You know, we both worked, we took vacations.... That kind of thing.

41:23

SS: So how did the job at the radio station intersect with your life at that point?

41:28

MB: At WVTF? That was where I was working. The funny thing about VTF. I was a public relations coordinator. I was assistant, basically, to the director of development who is still a close friend. And she and I had met previously in a public radio conference when I had been working at a station in North Carolina, in New Bern. And... [*pause*] the interesting thing about that was the guy who was the general manager at that time was a very conservative guy. He worked for Virginia Tech, who owns that station, but he lived here and he lived in Boones Mill, and he came from commercial radio. He didn't really drink the "kool aid" on public radio. He really wanted it to be more commercial and he had problems with some programs. His main problem was with a program called "Fresh Air" which is still on public radio and its host is a woman named Terry Gross and she has always interviewed many people in all different fields, not just, you know, writers and authors, but scientists and you know, whatever. Very interesting woman and she had always spent a lot of time talking about gay issues to the point where I actually thought she was gay. I met her years later and I said "Are you wearing a diamond?" and she said "Ya" I said "Are you married?" and she said "Ya," I said "To a guy?" she said "Ya," I said "Oh my god!" In this town he wanted to cancel the show, and in fact he did cancel it for a while, and there was such an uproar that it got put back on. And I told her when I met her "we

fought—the gay people in this town fought to have your show back on." Because it was the only place, even on NPR, that we were hearing gay people being interviewed, gay people talking about their lives and their experiences. Not necessarily because they were famous for being gay, but because they were famous for being good at something and they happened to be gay. So, that was cool. And so that was a big deal at the station was the cancellation and then coming back of that show.

And at the same time, there was a guy who worked at the station who was gay, but he was very closeted. And I worked there and of course I wasn't closeted at all and he was afraid that if I was too out he would be outed and he would lose his job. To make it kinda extra twisty, we were next-door neighbors. Bizarrely, we were next-door neighbors. I had bought a house in the same neighborhood as his and we did not get along. He was terrified of me. I always speak up, I talk a lot in meetings. He was petrified that I was gonna make something happen because I was just so damn noisy about everything that would affect him. And he just, oh my god [*emphasized*], and I heard from other people he can't stand you, he doesn't know what to do about you, and I'm like "it's not about him. I'm not doing anything *to* him. I'm just, ya know, doing my job." And we had this kinda very uptight general manager and so these meetings were always very tough, they were like a monologue for two hours, and you'd break in and try to put your two-bits in and it was just a kind of crazy and sort of tense place to work and this guy being so freaked out by me just kind of made it tenser, you know? He's still with the same partner... when I owned the coffee shop he was one of my regular customers, they both were, we got to be friends, you know... [*chuckles*] He's back at the radio station. I mean, it's kind of, it's come around to be a very nice and lovely relationship, I'm not close or anything, but you know we run into each other. And he and I haven't really acknowledged as such that we had such a hard time before, but we did kind of. He came up and he, very shy, very reserved, but he came up and said "Hello" and we talked. I mean we just talked about regular stuff and it was kinda like "okay, we don't need to be enemies"... because we were for a while. That was kinda a strange thing.

46.11

SS: What is the acronym WVTF stand for?

46.15

MB: WVTF stands for... [*pause*]... it's a Virginia Tech thing that, it's a something foundation. It's the people who run the radio station and it's a Virginia Tech Foundation, but I don't know. Western Virginia something, I don't know. You'd have to look it up. But it's always going to be VTF.

46.43

SS: And at the time that you were talking about when the gay people wanted to put "Fresh Air" back on the airwaves, what year was that?

46.52

MB: That would of been in the very late 80s early 90s, '89-'90, like that.

46.59

SS: Was there a lot of representation of queer people in the media at that point?

47.05

MB: No, but there weren't not... But, it was just that Terry Gross always, you know, she asks a lot of semi-personal questions anyway and she talks to people about how their childhoods and everything affected their art or their whatever it is they did. Talked to a lot of actors, people who have artistic or creative processes, and she talked to them about how their lives were affected by their work and vice versa. And it wasn't so much it was that it was all gay, there was, I mean, National Public Radio was certainly known as having a sort of a liberal bias and her show, which is primarily an interview show, is fairly liberal too. So there was a liberal group in this town that were outraged. It wasn't just that there was a queer uprising, but there were gay people who knew about it who were missing it, but also a lot of other people. When Terry Gross spoke here a few years ago and I had a chance to meet her—this would have been about 2005 or 2006 probably—and when I met her, you know, I told her that story and I went to hear her speak that night at the Jefferson Center and there were a lot of women in the crowd, there were a lot of lesbians in that crowd. And I went up to her again, although I had met her that same day at lunchtime privately with one other coworker and had and told her, you know, what we had done in Roanoke about her. I asked the question again at the meeting because I like to be in front of a crowd and got a big laugh sort of and a cheer from the women who were lesbians who I knew were there who were like "Yeah, what happened there? We thought you were like, one of us?" But she is one of us; she's just not one of *us*, you know!

49:16

SS: So for you what's the distinction between commercial and public radio?

49:21

MB: Oh, it's the same as for everybody. Commercial radio is... well, public radio is a non-profit radio and therefore they don't have commercials as such. Advertising is not allowed. However, they do have what are called corporate sponsors and corporate underwriters who get messages on the radio and they seem like commercials, but there are very strict guidelines as to what language they can use. They can't come on and go "Sunday! Sunday! Sunday!" they can't sell cars or anything like that by saying [whatever], you know, it's sort of a specific contract where you get recognition—name recognition—for your business depending on how much you pay. And it's funded through the [Corporation] for Public Broadcasting and the NEA, I think. And public radio in this country is a nationwide sort of network and National Public Radio, not all public radio stations are National Public Radio stations. There are public radio stations that used to be more in college towns or whatever that are local, local DJs, local music, or whatever, but they don't sell ads, they are a non-profit organization. Commercial radio is for-profit, they sell advertisements and they have those kind of sponsorships to make money.

50.45

SS: And just to be clear what is the NEA stand for?



50.48

MB: National Endowment for the Arts.

50.52

SS: How do you spell Terry Gross?

50.55

MB: It's T-E-R-R-Y G-R-O-S-S. And her show is called "Fresh Air."

51.04

SS: And you said it's still running today?

51.06

MB: Yes, it's on WVTF. Twice a day cause they have two stations so, yeah, it's on a couple of times a day.

51.16

SS: Do we know how far like the listenership stretches? How many people listen?

51.21

M: The show is recorded in Philadelphia every [day], it's not live or anything, but she's in Philadelphia I think. Oh yeah, thousands, I mean tens of thousands. Yeah, she has a huge listenership. She's a nationally known and recognized interviewer. You should check her out.

51.45

SS: Has the gay social or sex scene changed a lot since you've moved to Roanoke?

51.53

MB: I don't know, I'm not really in it. I used to go to the gay bar. When I moved here there were two gay bars and now there's just one and we've reached the time where in some ways we almost don't need them, that is, even in Roanoke gay people can go to any bar and be gay, you know? But it used to be not like that and so now gay bars are often the place where drag queens and the whole... yeah, the whole drag movement [is centered there]. That's the only thing that they still need a gay bar for in some ways. It used to be that The Park, which is the larger gay bar in Roanoke, and has been for some time—it has been open for over thirty years, I think. You know, it has no advertising, it has no windows, has no, it has a sign with no flashy lights or anything like that, it's not right downtown, it's kind of in an industrial neighborhood up the street from downtown. It always was a little hard to find when I moved here, but I found it. And it's called The Park so it doesn't, you know, it doesn't say like it's "The Gay Park" or anything like that. So, I used to go to the bar from time to time. It was always the best place to dance in town. I'm God's own worst dancer, but sometimes you gotta dance, and I hung out with some people who loved to. So, we would go, but I haven't been on the market or anything since I moved here really, so I don't know. Roanoke is also the home to the other smaller bar which is no longer a gay bar—well, there was a shooting and killing there a number of years ago, ten

years ago? Ten years ago.<sup>1</sup> A guy was downtown and he stopped a guy that was outside of Corned Beef—Corned Beef & Company the restaurant downtown—and he said "Where's the nearest gay bar?" and he pointed down the street and told him what it was called and the guy went down there and opened fire and he killed one guy, a guy I knew. And shot six other people and they arrested him. His name was Ronald Gay. He had hated that name all his life and he hated gay people because of it. And so, it was a nationally covered story. At the time it was a deep shock. This bar is hardly bigger than this room twice, I mean just a little hole in the wall. It didn't have drag shows, it didn't have live music, it had a pool table, you know, and bar stools and it was just a little dumpy dive of a place and this guy went out and just started shooting. And he had a semi-automatic weapon so he shot for a while... freaked us all out for quite a while and the community really came together at that time, we had vigils and, you know, services. And we have a big gay church, the Metropolitan Community Church. We have a church, an MCC church in Roanoke, and the minister there, now, who wasn't then, is a guy named Joe Cobb and he's amazing. And he's always been very active... although, he was married to a woman from before and has two children with her who are both adults now. But, he and his partner also have two younger children now. So that group [MCC] really came together and sort of coalesced at that time.

We have a long Pride in The Park. It's not great, but it's an event. There's always been a gay community in Roanoke, partially because Roanoke is the largest metro area for a lot of rural [Southwest Virginia]. Just like people come to Roanoke to go to the doctor cause here's where the doctors are, or to shop because the real shops are here, before the days of the internet and all that. They also came from miles around to go to gay bars. If you grow up in Check or you grow up in Grundy or some place like that, there's no gay bar there and there's not gonna be one. So people come to town and Roanoke, for as small as it is, is *town* and that's where the gay bar was. So, it was a community of incomers in some way or young people who moved here so that they could be around other gay people. So that they could be themselves cause they weren't gonna be able to be themselves in Pulaski or wherever, and all the way west really.

56.58

SS: Did they come and set up shop where there's a certain section of the city that was more gay than other parts?

57.05

MB: No. No, there's not... not like that. There's a neighborhood in Roanoke called Old Southwest which is an older neighborhood, it has a lot of older houses that have been cut up into apartments. It tends to be a sort of a lower rent and it's a very mixed community there. People who own their houses and live in them, and have lived there for years. There are apartments where there's a moving population. You can see a beautiful home with a very well cared for house and yard and behind it, across the alley from it, is a crack house a few years ago. So, you know its kind of a mixed neighborhood. Maybe that, but no, there is no gay neighborhood or gay shopping district or anything in Roanoke. As a gay business owner who is certainly known for being gay, when I opened my coffee shop I didn't want to make it a gay

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<sup>1</sup> The shooting at Backstreet Café occurred on September 22, 2000.

coffee shop. I wanted to make it a neighborhood coffee shop because our neighborhood needed a coffee shop. I live in that neighborhood, and there's a little shopping district there, and there's a co-op, a natural foods co-op, there's a movie theater, there's some retail, there's some restaurants, ya know *blah, blah, blah*, good used book store, all that. So, that was the neighborhood I wanted to serve: gay, straight, old, young, whatever, I didn't care. So I didn't put out a rainbow flag or anything like that, but I did have customers who came because I was a gay business owner. But, I never like put that in the news or anything, I didn't promote myself as a gay business owner. Just as a business owner, cause I don't think there is... I mean I wasn't running a gay business. It wasn't like I was selling gay books or whatever. I was selling coffee. Everybody loves coffee.

58.57

SS: So that neighborhood that you're mentioning, that's Grandin?

59.01

MB: Yeah, Grandin, Raleigh Court, that whole area. And that's a very well to do part of the city in some ways, but it's also I think a fairly liberal part of the city in a lot of ways. We're very lucky to have this weird little business district that's survived from the [19]30s. Although the only sort of original businesses that are still there are the theater, probably. And the grocery store that is now the co-op has always been a grocery store, it's just now it's a co-op. It was a good place to land. It was the neighborhood I wanted to always live in when I moved to Roanoke, but I didn't live there for the first ten years.

59.41

SS: So would you say that your job running the coffee shop was leading into the community building that you were doing?

59.48

MB: Yeah, that was a big part of the community building. I really promoted myself and my business as a place where people could hang out. Where they could bring their kids, and we had toys and books, your know, we had comfortable chairs and all that. The neighborhood really needed something like that, and we didn't have a coffee shop at all so, ya know, yeah, I did do a lot of community building there. But, I can remember when elections were going on and the Tea Party was building and when Obama was being elected, and some days I'd have a lot of groups that met at the coffee shop and I can remember one night having a democratic group and a tea party group in the shop at the same time both having a meeting. They weren't bugging each other or anything, but I had an AA group the next night and a book club of old ladies that same night. It was just a meeting place and I wanted it to be. I wanted it to be wide open to anybody.

1:01.03

SS: Have you ever experienced any discrimination for it being a meeting place and you being a gay business owner?

1:01.09

MB: Yeah, there were a few people who, you know, had a problem with it. If they said they had a problem with it I'm like, "if it's a really big problem you can definitely get your coffee somewhere else." There's a 7-11 next door and they sell coffee. I mean, I don't have any need to bar the door or make a big scene. I have a print—it's on a canvas so it looks like a painting and it's a portrait of former Governor Bob McDonald, but he's wearing make up and it says "Virginia's a Drag" and this was before the... it was when he was trying to, he was blocking gay marriage and he was blocking some other gay thing at that time. And the attorney general, the next attorney general, Mark Herring, was a guy who kinda got that done in Virginia—but I had won this painting at an auction for Planned Parenthood. And I hung it up in the store and that was a little pushy. Normally you fear in retail you keep your opinions to yourself or else you cut off your arm to spite your face. I don't want to put a sign on the door that says, "No Republicans." Cause republicans need coffee too. And I'm certainly happy to take their money. I don't need to love them. I just need to sell them something, you know? I don't need to give them shit either. I just need to be a business. Business of not making flower arrangements for gay weddings. Why would you turn away customers? That doesn't make sense to me. It's just flowers. It's not got a little sign on it that says [*whispering*], "Flowers for Gay People." I mean that's just not a thing, you know? But anyway. I had a guy come, several people come in and sort of give me hell about that painting, but it was very small. It's probably six or seven inches high and maybe a foot across and it was funny and I liked it and a lot of people didn't mention it but I had people come in and take pictures of it and I had one of the Falwells come in and take a picture of it one time and that was a little off-putting. But I finally had a guy, a guy stole it. Customer stole it. And he was very right-wing, an older guy. He came in every Monday at the same time. Was very cranky and everything, but he drank tea and he wanted to come here cause we made good tea, so you know whatever. And I didn't work Monday nights so one of my employees called me and he said, "I think that guy took the painting." I said, "Are you serious?" and he said, "Yeah, he's gone and the painting's gone and I'm pretty sure it's him." And I said "well..." I called the police and, you know, they came and took a report and everything and, so we just kinda waited and the next Monday, he came in for tea again. And my employee called me and said, "He's here!" And I said, "How about the painting?" And he said, "Not here." So I said "okay." So I came down to the shop and I sat down with the guy and I said, "Did you take my painting?" and he said "yes." And I said, "Well why?" and he said "because it's really disrespectful to Governor McDonald." And I said, "Well, first of all he's under indictment right now, for some dishonest, you know, dealings with money," and he said "he's an honorable guy" and I said, "Well, I don't think so, and if the painting belongs to me and it's my opinion, it's also my shop, so I need you to bring it back," and he says "I am. I'm planning to bring it back but I'm gonna change it a little bit." And I said, "Here's the deal, it's an original piece of art and it has value. I know the artist, I've talked to the police already, so... I can't have you do that. I need the painting back in its original condition or the police will be coming to where you live, which I know. I must have the painting back." And he had a lot of reasons why this whole concept of the governor in drag was just not appropriate, it was immoral... it was whatever. And I said, "We're not gonna have a big discussion about morality because you stole it." And he said, "Well I always meant to give it back." And I said, "Yeah that doesn't. That's not a thing. You stole it. It's not yours, it's mine, and you took it and that's how that goes." And he did finally return the painting later that week. He left it with a note at the door and the note which was like written on

a paper towel. He was an odd guy, talked again about how he hoped I would rethink my feelings about the governor and all that. I'm like "Okay, crazy dude." But, but you know, he was still willing to come in and drink my tea which sort of cracked me up. But he was the only person I ever banned. I was like, "I can't. I just can't have you back again here," and he said, "Ever?" and I said, "Yup, ever. I can't. Can't." You know, I don't press my politics on people very often, and maybe it wasn't the brightest choice to bring that painting in, but it did not give him the right to take it. It's really a weird thing.

I also had a lot of mentally ill people who were my clients, customers of mine. Mentally ill people usually don't work. They have a lot of time to spend and they need to spend it somewhere so they would come to the coffee shop. Some of them were gay... and my deal was, if you can, you know, hang out and not bother other people then, sure. And occasionally they would bother other people and I'd say you gotta go and they'd say, "Can I come back tomorrow?" And I'd say "yeah, but same rules." But, you know, they have money for coffee so don't begrudge them over coffee. And I thought I learned a lot about how much time people who are mentally ill spend walking around, that's why they're in libraries and stuff, because they can sit there for a while and nobody's gonna throw them out. And I wouldn't throw them out either, unless they didn't buy something or they were bugging people. I would throw [out] anybody who was bugging anybody else so you know. That wasn't a thing so that was kind of a weird lesson. We are thoroughly off topic though.

1:07:49

SP: So you mentioned about Planned Parenthood earlier, do you support certain businesses or nonprofit organizations?

1:07:59

MB: Yes, I certainly support Planned Parenthood. I was a customer of theirs back in the day. I had an abortion at Planned Parenthood back in the day. When I was twenty-five because sadly the restaurant business in those days made it clear to me that although I fell in love with women, you could just sleep with men. Sorry, but men would always say yes, and then you could throw them out because you know, you were just gonna see them at work the next day. So yeah, that's a very good organization and I've always supported it. I don't, you know, like I don't go to Chick-fil-a, you know. Their whole attitude about a lot of things kinda puts me off but I'm not a great boycotter. I'm not sure what else I'm boycotting right now? But yeah. There's no businesses that I support particularly because they're owned by gay people or not. That I know of.

1:09:03

SP: Do you belong to any sort of organizations at the moment? And if so, what do they mean to you?

1:09:10

MB: I have been volunteering for the past several months for Habitat for Humanity and they are a really great organization. They are very conservative. They are a church-based organization

for the most part, that is they are not run by churches but many of their fundraising and volunteering raising activities are done in churches, and that makes sense. But you know I'm a great supporter of them. And uh, I don't know. My partner is much more of a joiner than I am, and she unbearably ends up on the board of whatever she joins, so I just don't get into that.

1:10:00

SP: What do you think are maybe some of the challenges that are facing gay people in Roanoke at the moment?

1:10:06

MB: I think right now, and this is, you know, way behind the fears that I think any immigrant has right now, is that the current regime is ticking off a list of things that they wanna change and I'm afraid they're gonna eventually get down to the gays. We're a lot less dangerous than they seem to think immigrants are. I was in an Indian restaurant yesterday for lunch and it was chock full of Indians. And so many of them were student age and I was like, "Can you go home? And if you do go home can you come back? Are you gonna lose your visa to go to school?" It's just horrible. We count on the input of... you know, the whole world looks to this country for innovation you know for so many things and for them to be clipping that off at the knees it's just insane. So I think, you know, I'm worried that things like being able to adopt children—gay couples being able to adopt children—might be something that could get on the [chopping] block soon. He might try to get in on the marriage thing again. Although I don't think the Supreme Court will let him. But, if he stays in for a while, is really gonna get a chance to change the Supreme Court. So who knows? It's kinda down the road there but it is something that most gay people I know have at least gone, "I'm a little worried." So who knows, I mean that's something. In Roanoke though, we're lucky, it's a really caring town, there are places to go. I had people come into the shop from time to time. Young people for the most part who would say, "I'm new. I've just moved here. I'm going to school here. Where can I meet gay people?" And there's a Diversity Center, there's a church, there's a bar. There's a lot of places in Roanoke. I think we're very lucky here to have such a free-thinking and also active community with a lot of values that I share.

1:12:34

SP: Do you find that there is a lot of discrimination in businesses at all against gay people?

1:12:41

MB: I don't know. I have never run into it, but a lot of people are afraid of me, because I say what's on my mind and I have a really loud voice. You know, there may be. Discrimination is one of those things that can happen and you have to decide if you are being discriminated against, how much you're going to accept. You can accept more discrimination than you should if you duck your head and don't stand up for yourself. Discrimination feeds on itself, but not everybody is as noisy as I am. I mean not everybody is not shy like I am. But no, I don't think actively. But who knows? Two Indian men just got killed in Kansas because some guy thought they were Arabian. He shot them at a bar and said, "Get out of my country!" He killed them, and injured another guy who tried to stop him. There were two gay men who were accosted in Key

West this past week or so by a guy who said, “Trumps in now. We don’t have to have you around.” So if that kind of thing is happening... who knows where we’re gonna go. We all might have to work harder at being active. I’ve been not very active for years cause I haven’t had anything to fight for. I have a feeling there’s gonna be some fights in the next while and I would be in the line for the fight, you know, and making sure that the right things get done. So we’ll see. A non-activist and a non-joiner like me might just have to suck it up and join.

1:14:41

SP: Do you think this might affect the atmosphere of places like The Park or is Corned Beef still around?

1:14:48

MB: Corned Beef is still around. Oh yeah, it’s the sort of young people’s gathering place downtown. It’s very big, it has a lot of different rooms. It’s very popular. Something of a meat market, I’m told. So yeah, I mean, I don’t think there’s gonna be... I hope there’s not ever going to be a time when you can’t go downtown and go into any restaurant or any shop, but who knows? Times are strange.

1:15:30

SP: So how would you say that your relationship with your parents worked out to this point, you said you still weren’t “out” to your dad?

1:15:37

MB: Oh, I am out to my dad. I came out to my dad many years ago and he had a problem with it initially, but he actually went to a conference for ministers, Christian church ministers, many years ago and spoke up for gay people and spoke up in my name and he loves my partner and so did my mother. That helped a lot. Alice is very acceptable. But, no. My relationship—my current state of my relationship with him—has something to do with him but the gay thing hasn’t been a problem in a really long time. When I have traveled to my hometown, I’ve gone to his church, people know me there. Alice is often with me. It’s a very small country church. I don’t know if they get it or not. I don’t make a big deal of it but I don’t make a non-deal of it. I don’t make up people anymore. I don’t make up male companions that I don’t have. I don’t have to lie now as much as I used to. And I just don’t. I got nothing to prove.

1:16:55

SP: So what inspired you to move CUPS the coffee shop to Roanoke [College], and were you hoping that it would be like the same social gathering place as the CUPS in Grandin has been?

1:17:05

MB: Well, the CUPS here you mean? I opened one here on somebody’s suggestion... Oh! The library and the head of the dining hall at that time. The head of the library at that time is now dead and the head of the dining hall is retired but they wanted a coffee shop and they had gone to Mill Mountain Coffee and Tea and said, “Would you open up a coffee shop in the library?” And Mill Mountain Coffee and Tea said “no” for economic reasons. They just decided it wasn’t

really viable. So they eventually came to me and they came in my coffee shop one day and said, "Can we talk you about this idea?" And I was all for it and they made it economically viable by the fact that they own the coffee shop. The college and the library own the coffee shop and all the equipment. The only thing that I was paying for was the person who ran it. And of course we stocked it and we took all the money home and didn't pay any rent. I don't know if they pay rent now but I didn't when I had it. So... I wouldn't have thought of it on my own but they wanted a coffee shop because first of all I think it was getting to be kind of a stylish thing for colleges to have a coffee shop in the library and the reason they chose the library is... Google had made the library less of a destination and the library still needs to be a destination. For a lot of colleges they were losing bodies in the library cause there was no reason for kids to come in. Certainly wouldn't come in if they couldn't eat and drink and play their music or whatever. So they made this library so you could eat and drink and then they put a place in where you could eat and drink there. The guy who was running this library when I first got involved was very much about, "Yeah if we don't make this a place where they can be comfortable in and hang out while they're working, then they won't come." So he did make it a place to hang out and that's how the coffee shop here got started.

1:19:25

SP: In closing, do you think there's anything that we missed, anything that's important to your life that you've seen change lately?

1:19:30

MB: No, I'm fairly old and set in my ways. I don't think there's any.... I think there might be changes coming but no, I'm good right now.

1:19:46

SP: Do you feel like you were a resource to LGBTQ kids on campus and was it very accepting when you moved here or was that a more recent change...?

1:19:56

MB: Here at, here?

1:19:58

SP: At Roanoke and at the Roanoke College campus specifically?

1:20:03

MB: I didn't have very much of a relationship [here]. The person who I hired to run the thing here was Sean Poff and he's still here. If there's anybody who has a relationship with this college and with the students—gay, straight, whatever; he's straight—it would be Sean. I was not a personality here. I was very big part of the personality-driven shop on Grandin Road but I really was not a personality here. I mean, you know, I've worked with administration but I didn't come here and I didn't work here, so no. I don't think I had any kind of effect on Roanoke at all but I mean Sean knows not to piss around with the clientele. And if a gay group wanted to meet or



whatever that wouldn't be a problem here at all. But no, I didn't have that kind of relationship here. I was just for making money.

1:21:02

SP: Thank you so much for coming out...

1:21:04

MB: Thank you.

1:21:05

SP: ...to do an interview with us. I really appreciate it.

1:21:07

MB: You're welcome. Glad to do.

[THE END]