

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

**Interview with Linny Caldwell
February 23, 2017**

Interviewer: Megan O'Neil
Interviewee: Linny Caldwell
Sound Check: Brian Fersini
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Location: Roanoke College Fintel Library, 220 High Street, Salem, Virginia

Transcribed by: Bridget Reardon & Hannah Listopad

Duration: 66:47

0:00 = growing up in Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s; defining The South
2:02 = graduating from high school and attending Radford College, then Old Dominion University (1970s)
2:55 = high school activism (late 1960s - early 1970s); involvement in anti-war movement, Christian youth group; falling in love with a woman
7:50 = reflections on childhood trauma; the absence of memories
9:40 = choosing between religion and sexuality
11:43 = post graduate life in the Tidewater (late 1970s)
13:40 = teaching at several private Christian schools; in Tidewater, then in Roanoke in the late 1970s / early 1980s; imagining motherhood
16:35 = On not being "out" to family and friends; dealing with heartbreak in isolation
19:12 = missionary work in Japan; stopping off in Southern California in 1984
22:29 = discovering a gay community in Southern California; getting involved with ex-gay ministries; turning away from God
28:45 = coming back to Roanoke (1990); involvement in First Friday
30:54 = career in social work
34:14 = Fostering children; adopting children (1996); defining family
39:13 = Discovering the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke (1990s), and then the Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge (2000s)
42:10 = MCC vs. UU; becoming a leader at MCC
44:45 = political awakening after the election of Obama (2008)
47:04 = Roanoke Diversity Center; experiences as a camp counselor at Diversity Camp (2016)
50:58 = Native American religious practices; Two-Spirit people
54:56 = Radical Faeries
01:01:05 = Feelings of Sex Positivity
01:05:07 = Closing Remarks

0:00

MO: My name is Megan O'Neil and I am here with Linny Caldwell in Fintel Library in Salem, Virginia. It is 5PM on Thursday February 23rd, 2017. So, let's start from the beginning. Can you tell us some about your childhood or where you went to school?

0:16

LC: Sure. I grew up in Blacksburg, Virginia, and went to school at Blacksburg High School. It was back in the day where we basically went from elementary right to high school. So I was in high school in the [19]70s in Blacksburg.

0:37

MO: So, do you feel like growing up in the South really impacted you as a person? Impacted your development? Do you consider Virginia the South?

0:45

LC: That's a good question. I guess I do consider it the South. Perhaps not the Deep South. It's definitely not Alabama, Mississippi, but it's still not the North. I guess I consider Virginia part of the Bible Belt. So, in that sense it's definitely the South. I guess I don't know whether it's growing up in Virginia—you know, that's the only place I grew up so I don't have anything to compare it with—if it was that or if it was the era in which I grew up. I was born in the [19]50s and so I think at that time in our country there was a bit more homogeneous culture I think throughout the country and I was definitely raised in a culture that was Southern as far as politeness and rules and manners and stuff like that, but again, I don't know if that was so much the location as [it was] the time.

1:57

MO: So did you stay in Virginia after high school or did you go out of Virginia for your higher ed[ucation]?

2:02

LC: Yeah, I graduated from Blacksburg and I didn't want to go to Virginia Tech just because I already had a lot of association with Tech, actually, which I'd like to talk about that, but we'll see how we spiral back to that. I went to Radford and at the time it was Radford College, which is now Radford University. I was there for two years and after I left that next year is when Radford went co-ed. So when I was there Radford was an all girls school. So I was at Radford College for two years and then I transferred to Old Dominion University, which is in Tidewater in Northern Virginia and graduated college there.

2:49

MO: So why did you decide to transfer? Was it a two-year program or did you transfer for...?

2:55

LC: Yeah, that's a good question. Let me see where to go with that. In college... It's hard to know how to balance both of these pieces of my life. I fell in love with a woman. This was in the early [19]70s, again in Radford. And at that time we didn't even really know that there were other women like us. We felt very much isolated. It was sort of a[n] out of the blue kind of experience of just falling in love. We were roommates there for those two years and then she was actually from the Tidewater area. To tell you the truth I'm not exactly sure what made us think about moving but we decided to move back to where she was from [and] live in an apartment. We both finished then at Old Dominion. So that was the reason we left. That whole experience is definitely a big part of my story. We had mentioned earlier off of the tape that a big thread that runs through my story is the intersection between sexuality and spirituality. So I'll go back a little bit to my high school experiences. I became involved through some older students—older friends who were a part of what was going on, and again this was in the late '60s and there was a lot of the anti-war movement happening at Virginia Tech, and somehow I kind of fell into all of that with these older students and loved it at that point. So I had a bit of a taste of the hippie movement and the counterculture while I was still in high school as a part of Virginia Tech. Then, kind of right on top of that, there were a bunch of Virginia Tech students who started reaching out to Blacksburg High School and formed this Christian Youth Group and again I kind of fell into that. My childhood didn't involve really any religious experience. We went to church on holidays pretty much. You know, Easter, Christmas, that kind of thing. There was not a consistent involvement in a church. My parents were not necessarily religious. But I fell into this whole Jesus movement thing as a high school student at Virginia Tech. It was, as I've looked back on it now with some years of hindsight, I realize that it was not just a religious experience but it was a social experience as well. For me it was trying to find a place where I belonged, where I felt connected, where I had community, where I had family, and I think that that's also part of what I was looking for in the whole hippie movement business although part of the hippie movement for me involved a sense of rebellion. I had a lot of anger and rebellion that I didn't really understand. Again, a lot of this is coming inside as I've looked back. I grew up an only child. Both my parents are alcoholics. Again, I grew up in that, and so it just felt natural, it was all I knew, but it affected me. It certainly impacted my development, my sense of security, and I had a lot of anger toward my parents that I thought was just cultural rebellion but now I look back and can see some of the psychological, sociological basis of some of that. So here I am in college feeling finally like I've found a family, I've connected. There's this huge community that I'm a part of and then suddenly I fall in love with a woman. Which at that point set me personally on somewhat of a schizophrenic journey, I think, for the rest of my life or at least a long period of my life where I was trying to make sense between, like I said, sexuality and spirituality. So that's how I got to Tidewater, that was all part of me moving in with my girlfriend.

7:50

MO: Okay, so I just want to go back to clarify a little bit. So when you were in high school and you joined into the hippie movement and this religious community, did

you feel like you were struggling to find community before that? Or was that just when you really found your niche?

8:05

LC: Good question. That's interesting. I don't think I've thought about it. I don't really recall having many memories up until that time in my life. It feels like it was mostly a blank slate, and that's another piece of my development. Which again, years of therapy, we're talking a lot of money has gone into therapy through my years, and it feels like my life began in high school when I had those connections and those relationships which makes it even more meaningful and significant that I felt outcast, that I felt rejected and not accepted for who I was as a lesbian by this Christian community that I had begun to embrace. So I don't know that I was actually searching or that I was aware that anything was missing. I feel like that up until that point I was just putting one foot in front of the other and just very numbly living life. I think I was pretty numb.

9:23

MO: So when you did fall in love with this woman in college, did you feel like you struggled with the religious... and did you maintain your connections with this hippie community through college as well? As well as the Christian community?

9:40

LC: Yeah, the hippie community stuff kind of faded off and was replaced by the Jesus movement. And that's a whole sociological period of time in our history which is an interesting study in and of itself. You know, the '60s, the '70s were an amazing time, I think, in the history of the Christian church because the Jesus movement was a point in time where I think the church caught on fire. You know, it was phenomenal for me and again I've lived a few years and I've been in a lot of different churches since then and I feel like the life that I experienced in those days was closer to what I feel like the Bible described Jesus and his experience and walking with people in the first century. So, that didn't fade away. That's what I'm saying, is that it was so important to me. I was telling someone the other day, the dilemma that I found myself in was feeling like I had to choose between the two people that I love the most on this Earth, and that was Nancy and Jesus. And I, for whatever reason, cultural, societal, my own stuff, whatever it was, I didn't feel like it was okay. I didn't have permission to love both. So for many years it was that struggle of loving one or the other. So I tended to immerse myself either in the Christian world and deny my sexuality or kick God to the curb and not want to have anything to do with religion and then express myself as a feminist, as a lesbian, but not until much later in life did I figure out how to balance those two.

11:43

MO: So what did your life look like after graduation? Did you continue your life with Nancy for a long period of time? What did you do after college?

11:54

LC: Unfortunately, Nancy and I did not continue a long-term relationship, again, because of that conflict. I was much more into the religious part of life than she was and I think eventually it just became a stress on our relationship that I kept dealing with guilt. I felt very guilty about loving her. Again, it was this off and on, "I love you but I can't love you. I love you but I can't love you." And she finally had an affair, which at the time devastated me, absolutely devastated me, so that ended our relationship. We were living in an apartment together, so we moved out. I continued in the Tidewater area for a few years. I did various sundry things after I graduated. I graduated with a degree in Psychology, which at that point in time doesn't really equip you to do a whole lot. But this was 1976, I guess, that I finished at Old Dominion and so I stayed. I've always loved children. I've always been very involved with kids, even in high school, babysitting in the summers, you know, in people's homes keeping lots of kids, teaching vacation bible school, those kinds of things. So I've always had this affinity toward children. I think I did that for a few years and then I actually started teaching in Christian schools. So that was the next journey, the next step of my life was teaching.

13:40

MO: So were you teaching religious teachings or was it just the typical public school like math, reading, that kind of thing?

13:49

LC: It was what's called Christian Schools. So it was small, private, Christian schools that I've taught in, I guess maybe three different [schools]. The first was down there in the Tidewater area and again it was a church-sponsored school so I think we had... This is making me remember many many years ago. I don't think... I'm really trying to remember how young... you know, if there were kindergarteners? I know I taught 5th, 6th, and 7th [grades] which was an interesting thing because it was all three of those grades. But again it was a very small school. I probably had anywhere from 18 to 20 students in those three grades. At that time it was a curriculum that was designed where students were doing their own individual thing. It was very self-paced and I did a lot of just monitoring. So that was that first experience. Then I ended up moving back to the Roanoke area where my parents are. Again, my parents were still in Blacksburg at that point, but I moved to Roanoke. So that was my first experience with Roanoke. In the late '70s, early '80s, I was teaching at a Christian school here in Roanoke. Again, another small Christian school, part of a church, and I taught fifth grade there. And it was teaching everything, all of the subjects.

15:24

MO: So you really liked kids before this. Did you think that was a really fulfilling part of your life? Did you really enjoy teaching?

15:33

LC: Kids have always been a super fulfilling part of my life. I've always wanted to be a mother. I've always had a very strong nurturing, caring part of me. Which again I

think is a piece of the conflict that was set up for me in terms of who I was as a sexual person. Because in my mind, again, whether the culture actually said this to me or whether it was how I interpreted it, at that point in time in the '70s and the '80s it was my belief that to be a mother I had to have a husband. So it was this packaged deal of the white picket fence, the husband, the family, the children. To even going outside the realm of that at that time was not part of my thinking.

16:26

MO: So you got that fulfillment from children through...

16:33

LC: Through teaching at that point.

16:35

MO: So when you moved, just thinking about this, when you moved to Tidewater with Nancy had you been "out" to your parents about your relationship with Nancy or was that something that hadn't been...

16:47

LC: I was not really out to anybody. It's kind of hard to be out to other people when you're not really out to yourself. So the answer to that is no. Although it's interesting, years and years later after my father had died, I had this conversation with my mother—coming out to her—and she looks at me like "This is news?" So even when Nancy and I were together my mom knew that we were more than just roommates. That we were more than just friends. But the culture didn't know that and society didn't know that and this circle of Christian friends that my family had become did not know that. Which made that break up with Nancy even more devastating for me because in the eyes of everybody else "What's the big deal? Your roommate just moved out. Why is that so significant?" No one had any idea that this is a woman I had lived with for over three years, that I was madly in love with, and I didn't feel the freedom. Not out to anybody.

17:57

MO: So when you got home did you feel like you found that community again? That religious community to immerse yourself in to deal with that heartbreak? Or how did you cope with the [heartbreak] for a while?

18:10

LC: That's a good question of how I coped with the heartbreak. I coped with the heartbreak by adding a whole lot more salt to the Atlantic Ocean. We lived very close to the ocean so I could actually walk. And I did. I walked up and down the beach probably every night just crying my eyes out, just bawling, but again feeling very isolated and very alone. There was no one that I could share that pain or that grief or that loss with. I don't think that I was sharing it with God either. I think that because I felt so guilty and so ashamed of loving Nancy that my whole relationship

with God in that grieving was just, “I’m such a horrible person. Forgive me for this.” So it wasn’t even a healthy grieving in my relationship with God if that makes sense.

19:12

MO: So, from teaching in Roanoke, where do we go from here? What is the next step that you took?

19:21

LC: Next step was—and actually this step began when I was in Virginia Beach. Nancy and I had become a part of a church in Virginia Beach that was a very missions-oriented church. And I don’t know if that means anything to you in terms of just the whole Christian world, but this was a church that a lot of people would go out from to share about the love of Jesus in other countries and suddenly I felt like that’s what I wanted to do. So I sort of started down that path of pursuing “Where will I go?” It brings me back to those many many many months that I would walk along the beach and cry. I think I came to a decision whether it was conscious or not that I would just give my life to God for the rest of my life and I would not be a sexual being. You know, if I couldn’t be who I was I just wouldn’t be sexual. So I just was devoted to [I’m] totally gonna share the love of Jesus with the whole world. What happened is I got involved with this group and I ended up going to Japan. That was my next step was: I’m heading overseas for the rest of my life and I look back on it now and I say, “Just how far can you run from your sexuality?” Well, I tried running to Japan. I was there for three months. That was the intention of that first experience; it was just a summer thing. So then I came back to Roanoke to this church where I was teaching and where that church was totally in favor of me being a missionary, going to live [and] spend the rest of my life in Japan so that was the trajectory that I was on. The interesting thing is that, and I so believe that this was God, that there was a plan for me to find myself, to really accept who I am as a queer person. I didn’t use that term then, but the term that I use now in identifying myself is “queer.” And so part of my “Okay, I’ve spent a summer in Japan. That’s what I’m going to do for the rest of my life,” involved this little stop along the way in Southern California. Because there was a group there, a place where I could learn all about the mission field and where missionaries came back when they were on furlough, things like that. In Southern California there’s a large Japanese population. I could learn the culture. I could learn the language, so that’s what I did. I headed out in 1984 to Southern California. Everything I owned and my little dog was packed in my Volkswagen Bug and off we went, cross-country. Now, little did I know how that was going to change my life. So, I’ll stop and you can ask questions.

22:21

MO: What turn of events came to that? Why aren’t you still in Japan, kind of thing? What happened in Southern California?

22:29

LC: I got stuck. I landed in Southern California in the ‘80s and there are a few gay people in Southern California, *just a few!* And by this date and time, they were a bit

more “out” than the gay people who were around me here in Southwest Virginia. You know, part of what I want to talk about and I know somewhat the thrust of this is like, what it was like in Roanoke. I talked with Dr. Rosenthal about the fact that I don’t really have a whole lot of experience with that. I do a little bit, and we’ll come back to that, but at this point my experience in Southern California was my eye opening experience to the gay world, to the fact that there were gay and lesbian people who were accepting of themselves and very out and very open. I didn’t expect that. I had no idea that that was why God was taking me to California but that’s why God was taking me to California. So rather than staying however long I was going to stay there and then heading on to Japan I never left California. I ended up staying there for about ten years.

23:38

MO: So when you got to California, did you feel like the queer culture, like being “out” and being comfortably out, do you think that was just a stepping stone to integrating your sexuality and religiosity? Like, did you have to be around people that being out was culturally acceptable?

23:58

LC: Eventually, and it was perhaps a stepping stone, but it was a far distant stepping stone from the final ultimate stepping stone, because what California gave me was an experience in the culture of the ex-gay ministries. Again, I don’t know if that term means anything to you but there are still some of these that exist now and unfortunately so. Back in the ‘70s and ‘80s, particularly before the American Psychological Association and the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] had actually said that being queer was not a disorder, there were all these Christian organizations that rose up to say, “You can be healed. God can save you from being gay.” I say unfortunately, I fell into one of those. Remembering, for me, what I said earlier of that conflict of feeling like I was being forced to choose between the two people that I loved the most. For this period of time in my life, a large period when I first got to California, I was still connected with this Jesus movement, very strong culture of Christians, and so the people that I met were people who were saying, “It’s a sin to be gay, and God can heal you.” So for probably two years, maybe a little less, I was involved in one of those kinds of ministries.

25:44

MO: What led you to leave that ministry at one point?

25:48

LC: I finally just had enough. I think I finally reached a point that I just said, “This is not me.” I tried. I really really tried hard not to be gay and it just wasn’t working. Thank God it didn’t work! Finally, I just had had enough. And unfortunately that meant that I got very angry at God. So by the time I left Southern California it was that phase of my life where I kicked God to the curb. I was over it. I was just so angry and frustrated with the Christian everything, but that gave me permission that

allowed me to then explore what it was like to be a lesbian and what it was like to be in the gay culture. So that's where I was when I came back to Virginia.

26:49

MO: So you said God led you to Southern California so you were meant to have that period of time in your life where you didn't accept God or you denied God in your life? So that was a learning experience?

27:04

LC: Great question. I feel very strongly that God has had a hand on me all of my life and even though there have been times that I might have on the external part of me said, "I don't want to have anything to do with God." There's a deep deep part of me that is very connected to the spiritual. I have come to the place in my life currently where I believe there are all kinds of names of God but that God is God. There is spirit. So, yes to that question. I think that as much as I struggled in this small human experience of making sense between my sexuality and my spirituality there was an overarching spirit that just is so above all that shit. I hope that's okay to use that word on this tape because that's what it is. It's just crazy human stuff and the truth is so far above that. I feel very strongly that, yes, God took me there. And that even when I said, "I don't want to have anything to do with Christianity," that didn't hurt God's feelings. God didn't go anywhere. God was perfectly okay. Now I'm back to where I am at this point. I think that was all part of my evolution, I think. Just kind of thinking of the seasons in the evolution of my life to get to where I am now.

28:45

MO: So you came back to Virginia as more or less an empowered lesbian, proud to be who you are?

28:56

LC: Kind of. I was getting there.

28:58

MO: So where did you go from there?

29:01

LC: Then I landed in the Roanoke area and that's the little bit of taste that I have of what was happening here in Roanoke. Again, I think a lot had been happening in Roanoke prior to that point. I landed back here in the early '90s and at that point found a group of women, an organization, called First Fridays. So the First Fridays was a group of lesbians, most of them were from the Roanoke area, a few came from the New River Valley, or Lynchburg or Bedford, other places, but the core were people who lived in Roanoke and we met once a month. The first Friday of every month so that was my first real experience of connecting, again, with a group. I just thought about this, how, you know, the theme of my life, like I said—and I think this stems back to my early childhood abuse, neglect, my parents' alcoholism, all of those kind of things—I was always searching for that place to belong, for that family, that

community, that connection, and whether it was the hippie movement, whether it was the Jesus movement, whether it was all these various churches that I've been a part of, at this point in the early '90s it was this lesbian circle. Along with that I was also somewhat involved with a woman's reading group that was happening at Virginia Tech. This was mostly professors and students from Tech. So it was those two things that, yeah, were helping me to find out about.... And again, it's kind of funny to say that I began to really explore the whole gay culture back here in Roanoke when I had just lived in Southern California for ten years, but again I was conflicted when I was in California.

30:54

MO: So when you were here in Roanoke what kind of work were you doing? What kind of work were you doing with First Fridays?

30:59

LC: Workwise, I was teaching again. Oh no! That's not true! When I came back in the nineties, okay... part of what I did in Southern California is get a Master's degree. SO I had my undergraduate degree in Psychology. In Southern California I taught in Christian schools again and so while I was teaching I also went to grad school in the evenings. So I taught during the day and went to grad school and got a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family and Child Therapy. And another really interesting evolution that happened when I was in Southern California was that... I mentioned to you the whole thing of how I've always loved kids and how I've always wanted to be a mother. I had a significant experience that I think is important in my evolution. Like I said, I'd always kind of in my mind associated that to be a mother I had to be a wife and so I was still going down that road and I was dating this guy in my graduate program, and so the two of us were pretty close. You know, he was a very nice guy and we were beginning to be close. No sexual relationship at that point. We went on a weekend trip to San Francisco for a conference, and we stopped along the way and I don't know how this conversation came about but I'll never forget it: we're just kind of standing there at this bar looking over the ocean and he says, "You know, I don't think I really want to be a parent. I don't have any desire to have children." Something in me just clicked at that point. And I said, "that's it. I'm done. I'm done. I don't need a man to be a mother. I am done." And that was so freeing. That was so exciting. So, by the time I got back to Roanoke these little thoughts, this stirring—and again, it's 1990, so there was a bit of a role model out there that you don't have to have a husband to be a mother, and so when I came back that was really where I was headed. I was considering what will I do with my career, which again, was psychology, counseling, therapy. That's always been my main interest. How will I fulfill this desire to be a parent? So when I got back I applied at various places. Ended up getting a job with an agency called Connections. It's a specialized foster care agency and I worked with two groups of people. The first group was Southeast Asian refugees. These were minors who had come from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Which is interesting because it takes me right back [full] circle to my interest in Southeast Asia and 'Nam and all of that. At the same time I also started working with children in foster care who had significant emotional, psychological

issues. So that is what I was doing career-wise. And I did that for about seven years as a social worker.

34:14

MO: So, since you had gotten in your mind that you were going to be a mother, how did you go about doing that? Did you look into adopting, fostering children, because it's what you are going into professionally?

34:23

LC: Bingo. That's exactly. And again I think this is all that path, you know, that I feel led by spirit. After about seven years of being a social worker I just kind of woke up, I guess. You know, it feels like I woke up one day but I know it had been coming. And I marched over to the Department of Social Services, and I had a lot of relationships. The agency that I worked for was a private agency, but we contracted with a lot of the local departments. They would send us their kids. So, I just basically made an appointment with the director and said "Here I am. I have a Masters in marriage and family therapy. I've been a social worker for seven years. I'd like to be a foster parent." But I want to be a foster parent that provides these direct services to these very needy, challenged children because what was happening, and what still often happens, is children come into foster care and their needs are so intense and they are so severe they become assigned to this separate agency. And unfortunately, sometimes it's many different placements and moves before they get there. My personal feeling is that that's the worst thing our system does to kids. Kids are already removed one time from their parents. They don't need to have multiple losses, and changes, and moves from foster family to foster family. So, I went to Roanoke City and I said "Here I am." And they basically accepted me and said "yeah, we will make you," and I was basically the very first parent with Roanoke City that was a specialized foster parent.

35:59

MO: Did you being a lesbian or being even a single mom affect any of that?

36:04

LC: Do you think I was "out" at that point, Megan? Okay, alright [*laughter*]. It's 1990, I've gone through a lot of my personal stuff, but my sense of what was going on in Roanoke, even at that time in First Fridays, is that there were still plenty of us who were very closeted. It was still an era where you could lose your job. You could lose a lot by being out. So, even though it was the early '90s, it wasn't the kind of freedom that we have today. So, no, I was not marching over to Social Services as an out lesbian. I was marching over there as a qualified person to do this job and I was marching over as a single person. So the fact that I was a lesbian didn't really come up. It wasn't an issue at that point.

36:53

MO: Was the single mother an issue or was it just since you were so qualified, that was less of an issue?

36:59

LC: Yeah, that's interesting, is that at least in Roanoke, for quite some time, they have been very open about approving single male and single female [parents]. Now, obviously I think there are more women who are single parents, but Roanoke City was open. I will say a nice plug that Roanoke City has moved, and at this point in time, they approve gay and lesbians [as parents], as well. The State of Virginia does not allow a lesbian couple to adopt, or a gay couple to adopt. So, if I were in a relationship and wanting to adopt, it would be either my partner or myself. I don't know exactly how that has changed now that we have equality and there's marriage. I'm not really particularly up on the legality of that piece. But, for me, I became a single foster parent.

37:50

MO: Was your goal adoption at any point? Or was it just fostering?

37:54

LC: Yeah. You know, I've always always, you know, ever since I thought about being a parent, been very open to adoption. Always thinking "gosh, there are children out there who need families. Why not be that family." My intention when I became a foster parent was very influenced by my training, and my background as a marriage and family therapist is in systems and in believing that children have those connections with their biological family, and my goal was to support that. And philosophically I still really do believe that, but again, I feel that God had other plans because the first two children who came into my care were two young boys. Scotty was four. Carl was seven. They came to me in 1996 and they are still my children. They are a part of my three kids. I have three children.

38:55

MO: So, two boys, and then who is the third?

38:56

LC: I have a daughter who is 20 now.

39:02

MO: So, foster care, working as a social worker at this point... So, you mentioned you weren't out in the '90s, is that a fairly new thing? Is that something...

39:12

LC: ...to be out?

39:13

MO: Yeah.

39:13

LC: Yeah probably because, again, the being fully out comes back to that conflict of the spiritual and the sexual being integrated. So, what I described earlier is that for me, I tended to deal with it like a seesaw. That is kind of my visual image, that I could be a lesbian and spirituality wasn't a part of my life, or I could be a Jesus follower and sexuality was not a part. It was just this damn seesaw and when I came back to Virginia from California I was in that phase where I didn't want to have anything to do with God, and that lasted for a while, but I suddenly felt empty. That didn't fit. That's not me. And so I landed at the Unitarian church which for me was a good bridge. The Unitarian church here in Roanoke is amazing and at that particular time the pastor was Kirk Ballin and he was so amazingly accepting. So yeah, that was the first place that I began to be "out," was at the Unitarian church. And at that time, the Unitarian church was undergoing a process called Becoming a Welcoming Congregation and what that meant was that they would be welcoming to the LGBTQ community. So there was a conference that they had somewhere in North Carolina, Durham or Chapel Hill or somewhere, and I remember going and I remember it was the very first time I remember being in a place where those two things were somewhat integrated. We were in a church building. I think that is just where we happened to have the conference and we were singing songs that, you know, could have been considered spiritual or not, but it was a room full of gay and lesbian people and it was like overwhelming for me because it was the first time, like I said, that those two pieces of who I was could be joined in the same place. So that was the beginning of my journey, was through the Unitarian church. And then you're aware that there is a church in Roanoke called Metropolitan Community Church, the MCC. And, when I first moved to Roanoke, and I visited it, it was a little too Jesus-y for me. You know, I was still in that "pretty mad at God" [phase] and so I kind of had a push-pull relationship with MCC for a while, but maybe ten years ago or so I started pursuing a bit of a relationship with MCC.

42:10

MO: What triggered the movement to MCC from the Unitarian Church?

42:16

LC: That's a good question. I don't know. I had my children when I was at the Unitarian church because in my experience a lot of times becoming a parent prompts parents to want some sort of spiritual education for their children. So I mean I did want my children to have something, some sort of experience with the spiritual, with God, and so they were a part of the Unitarian church... I don't know. You know, that's an interesting question. I'm not really remembering exactly what that shift was and how it changed except that I guess I can say, and again looking at myself, knowing my whole history, I'm a Jesus follower. That's the reality of who I am. It just took me a very long time to be able to own that at the same time that I own my sexual identity. So, my children were also a part of MCC, you know, when they were younger.

43:24

MO: So what has your experience at MCC been like, cause you mentioned that it was very Jesus-like. Was it different by the time you moved?

43:32

LC: No, no. It wasn't different; I was. I have been a part of the MCC only since we've had the current pastor and since MCC has been in existence here, there have been several different pastors. So, you know, again, my experience, like with any church, is that church is very flavored by who the pastor is. So, I can only speak for Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge as it is right now, with Joe Cobb as the pastor. In my mind, Joe is an amazing person. He is very much out and open and inclusive, highly regarded and respected in the community, very involved and very politically active as well as enlightened and educated about all of these things that we discussed, you know, the sexuality and the spirituality being integrated. So, my experience there over the past two years has increased and deepened to the point that now I'm not only a member, but I'm a deacon, I'm very involved, very much a part of the leader[ship]... a leader of that particular church.

44:45

MO: So, just thinking about political involvement, like you mentioned Joe Cobb was politically active, do you consider yourself politically active?

45:02

LC: Yeah. You touched on this earlier when you asked about First Friday and I kind of went on. My experience with First Fridays was not that it was a political activist group. The reading group—the book study that I was a part of at Virginia Tech—was a bit more focused on political activism and I think that might have been part of the context of a college campus and university, highly educated professional people. My experience with First Fridays is that it was a social club. It was primarily social activities and by the time I landed here in the early '90s, I think it was really fading. It was fizzling out. I can't remember exactly, you know, how long I was involved or, you know, how much longer First Fridays even stuck around, but my sense is that it eventually just sort of dissolved. And so there was less political involvement. I didn't see myself very involved politically probably until Obama ran and I think because up until that point I was pretty disillusioned about the political system itself and I woke up. I was very excited about Obama and very much on board, and very much proud to be an American again and excited. So, my political activism has been since then and much more now at this point. Very much politically active and strong in fighting for what I feel is social justice for all people, for all minorities, not just the queer community but for everyone that's really in jeopardy of losing rights at this particular time in our history.

47:07

MO: I completely agree with you. I think that's a wonderful thing. So, your involved with the [Roanoke] Diversity Center, right?

47:13

LC: [Yes].

47:14

MO: Is that tied to some of your political activities?

47:16

LC: Perfectly tied to that, yeah. The Roanoke Diversity Center just happens to be housed in the Metropolitan Community Church building. There is not a connection. So, RDC is not necessarily a spiritual organization but it is an amazing place of support and safety, again, for the LGBT community. And my experience has been varied. I've kind of, you know, dipped my toes in the water of the RDC for maybe a year or two, but most recently, within the past year of my life, I've felt like I've dived in head first, and that's because of getting involved with the Diversity Camp. Are you familiar with Diversity Camp? Diversity Camp is, we've had three camps, and it came about because some of the people at the Diversity Center have had experiences of camp, primarily church camp, but again camp is a wonderful experience. I personally had a lot of camp experience growing up. I would go to church camp every summer. I mentioned that our family was not particularly religious, but for some reason I went to church camp and I loved it. I don't know that I associated it with anything spiritual, but it was fun. You know, it's summer church camp. So, what some people decided at RDC is to create that for the gay community. So like I said, we've had three summers. Last summer was my first time to be involved as a counselor. So, there were maybe fifty young people, anywhere from, we've had a very young child, so there was like, maybe, a six year old, but typically they were, you know, kids anywhere from twelve to twenty-five or so. I think [that] is the typical age range of the campers and then for every couple of campers, they want to have a counselor. Most of the counselors are themselves part of the LGBT community. That summer, it's a week-long experience, an overnight camp, so everybody's staying there on the grounds. That experience opened me up to, first of all, this generation, which again, I was born in the '50s so my experience is very different than the experience of this generation, so that has been eye-opening and educating to me. I have had to learn a whole new language, words and terms that I have no idea what they mean. It's just a whole new language. But meeting people, young people, who are so brave and so clear at that age about who they are. Which, again, is astounding to me. You've heard my story. You've heard how long and, you know, it took me forever to come to a place of being sure of who I am and to see someone who's 17, 18, 19, 20 [years old] and they know who they are. Kudos. I'm just so excited for that person to have that experience. So, going to camp as a counselor has changed me much more than I think anything that I could have possibly have given to the campers.

50:42

MO: Wow, that's awesome. So, you mentioned new terms and everything, have you had any experience with like transgender people in general? I'm sure you had transgender campers.

50:58

LC: Oh definitely. This experience, like prior to Diversity Camp, not really very much understanding at all about transgender issues, but I would say that that particular topic is the one that has exploded the most for me because I have met very many people who are transgender and again, trying to understand and support their journey. I also have another sphere of my life. Within the past year, I've gotten involved with a couple of things that have been really the impetus for changing me personally. One is a Native American tradition called Naraya and that is a sacred celebration and dance that is the Shoshone, it's from the Shoshone culture, the Shoshone tribe, and has been brought back to life. It's always been a part, but almost died out like from maybe the '60s until just maybe the '80s. And so, I've been really privileged to be a part of that, and that has been an experience that I have gone through once, and I'll do it again. It's an annual kind of thing. These dances happen throughout the country. The primary purpose is to dance for peace, to dance for our country, our culture, our world, and to dance with individual intentions, but to know that that's then going to influence and affect the world in which we live. And the amazing and wonderful thing about Naraya is that many of the people who participate are two-spirited, which in Native culture, historically—you are not going to read this in our American history books—but historically, the truth is that most Native cultures honored and respected two-spirited people. Do you know what I'm talking about if I use the term two-spirited?

53:14

MO: From my understanding, it's someone they considered, like, what we would consider transgender.

53:19

LC: Possibly, and I think it could be even broader than that, but definitely someone that, in our understanding of queer. You know, that not following the typical binary understanding of gender and gender identity. So yeah, trans for sure, but I think it is even broader than just trans, but definitely having an honoring and a respect spiritually for someone who is of that, that's their nature, that's who they are. So the Naraya honors that, and many of the people who participate are two-spirited people. So that has had a big influence on me in my spiritual sexual journey and particularly because, like I mentioned earlier, I'm a very strong Jesus follower and yet I think that—I love to use the illustration of a mountain and that there are many many paths to get to the top of that mountain and what's important is that you get to the top of the mountain. And once you are at the top of the mountain, it's really insignificant how you got there and so, again, I think that's part of that stuff that our culture gets all wrapped up in, in saying “oh, got to go this path, got to go this path.” No no no no no. Just get to the top of the mountain. And I'm very much influenced and drawn to Native American spirituality. So that's been a part that's been significant for me and that just has begun this past year. My first dance was last April.

54:56

MO: You mentioned two parts. You had the native American part and then there is another?

55:01

LC: You are a very good listener. The other part I mentioned to you the other day when we began to talk and that is that I have been introduced to the world of radical faeries. The world of radical faeries, that term and the definition actually was begun back in the '60s by a man named Harry Hay, a few other people. Harry Hay is considered the father. My understanding, like I'm not an expert or anything, but you know, my understanding is that a part of what he was observing as a gay man in San Francisco in the '60s was that gay people at that point, and again, the difference between what was happening in California and what was happening for me maybe in Virginia, but that even then, gay people being out—which is being assimilated into regular heterosexual culture—which meant that they were losing their unique, special gift that gay people bring to our culture. And that's the part that I grabbed a hold of, that I truly believe in, that gay culture, queer culture, brings a uniqueness and a giftedness to our overall culture and that to stamp that out, to try to push that away or to deny it, is missing a huge piece of inclusive diversity and beauty and color and wonderment that we need, our world really needs. So, that's the faerie part, is that obviously he was encouraging, and it was primarily begun with gay men, and for many people who consider themselves radical faeries, there is still a bit of that division between male and female. And that has historically been a part of the gay rights movement, is that very often men and women have had a hard time playing together. Gay men and lesbians, and very often there has been that split. Not always, and I think we work hard to try to make some peace with all of that, but the radical part of course has to do with politics and what was going on in the '60s. And it's interesting to me. I feel so much like I have come full circle that here I am in my sixties, I'm 63 [years old], and I start out back here at the hippie movement, the Jesus movement. The Jesus movement was very hippie-ish with Jesus at the core. So, it was all very much alike, and then I went through this dead period where I felt like I was just totally, blinders on, unaware, uninvolved, and now I have come back to this place that I feel like my eyes are open and suddenly I have an awareness of politics, radical politics. I have an awareness of my own identity as a queer person and I have an acceptance and an inclusiveness of that whole spectrum of queer. Again, like you said, including trans, which I have gotten to meet one of my very closest friends is a person born male, who is now identifying female and yet maintaining what appears to me a beautiful balance between male and female. And this is someone I've met through this whole radical faerie community that exists around the country and around the world actually. So, yeah, all of that has turned my world upside down.

58:50

MO: So, you mentioned it changed how you looked at things, but did it change how you, the radical faerie movement, did that change how you expressed yourself as well?

58:57

LC: *[laughs]* Yeah, yeah, definitely. What a good question. You know, I mentioned there's been this life-long struggle to make peace between the sexuality and the spirituality, and for the longest time I really thought that it had to do just with homosexuality, that it just had to do with me being a lesbian. But, my experience with the radical faeries and with some of the... there are some intentional communities around the country and so I've actually gone in this past year I've spent more time at one of these intentional communities than I have in Virginia, and I am getting ready to go again just in another month. So, being around these people who are living there, living the life, really immersed in these practices and these understandings has done a lot to open my eyes and I don't even know how to explain it except to say that I've had an understanding and a realization that, for me, I was very caught up in our culture's oppression of sexuality. Period. Not just homosexuality, but sexuality. I think that religious overtones particularly, but I think culture as well is very oppressive of people being sexual creatures, and truly expressing that, whether that's as a straight person or a queer person. And so, yeah, all of a sudden I feel like I've come into this full understanding of who I am. It has changed how I look. It has changed how I feel about myself. It has changed my relationships, the people that I am willing to fall in love with. It's all very much changed.

1:01:05

MO: With the sex positivity, do you feel like your relationships are better than they were cause you noted there was a lot of tension between you and Nancy early on?

1:01:16

LC: Yes, for sure. "Sex positivity," that must be one of those terms that I'm not familiar with! Okay, check it off. There's another one to add to my repertoire. Hadn't heard that one before. Yeah, sure, so I guess that's true. For me, finally sex has become a positive thing. Whereas you're right, with Nancy, I loved her and our relationship was sexual, but it wasn't positive, at least not for me because of the conflict I had so much. So, wow, what an amazing way to put it. Yes, you know, in having this freedom and this understanding within myself it has brought me to the place, within this past year, where yeah, I've been able to have relationships that have been more genuine, more authentic, not enshrouded in shame or guilt, and those are the two things. Those are the two demons that have followed me all my life. I tend to think in terms of metaphors and illustrations and when I think about this past year, and how I describe it, it feels like for most of my life I've been chained at the bottom of the ocean. And suddenly, the chain has been broken, and I have just exploded to the top. And, that's a freedom and a wonderment that I am so grateful for, and that I do give God credit for, because again, I'm convinced that as much as the people who would scream and yell about what God thinks and what God is telling us, I don't buy any of it. In my understanding, God wants us to have that sex positivity, that we experience the beauty and the wonder of our bodies, and of being erotic, and being connected and open with one another. So, I'm grateful to finally be at that place.

01:03:37

MO: That's a lot of personal growth within the last year. So do you think it was the involvement in these different communities that really had spurred that on?

01:03:46

LC: I think it's been my whole life journey. I mean, again, you talked about stepping stones, and was this a stepping stone? You know, all of my life has been a stepping stone, and so I can look at this past year and say "whoosh... things have exploded," but obviously we have to give credit to I've been moving along in this direction for a long time. But I will tell you that there were days that I thought I'd never get to where I am now. There were days that I thought I would go to my grave still with that sense of oppression and shame covering my sense of my sexuality, my sensuality, my sense of myself. I've always been uncomfortable in my body and I realized that that goes back to early years of having been sexually abused. And again, didn't even really make any connection between any of that until, you know, again, at various places in this journey. But again, that's all gone as well, that years and years and years of feeling displaced in my body, feeling uncomfortable in my body, it's just not there anymore. It's gone.

01:05:07

MO: That's wonderful. We're almost at about an hour so we're about ready to wrap up. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

01:05:15

LC: I think we've covered a lot. Is there anything else that you want to add as far as a question to wrap it up, or, I mean, I think we've covered a lot.

01:05: 24

MO: You know where you plan to go from here?

01:05:26

LC: Just living life with a tremendous amount of enthusiasm, and joy, and being a light in the darkness. Even though I look at your generation, and I am so proud of you guys. I'm so proud that we've come to where we are, there's still a lot of darkness, and I think that, you know, I bring something as an elder to say "I've lived a year or two. I know a little bit about what life is like and I can learn from you. I can learn from this generation. But I also bring a lot of love and a lot of stability." So, I think what lies ahead is just, I'm continuing to be around as many young people as I can, because that keeps me young, keeps me alive, and I think it offers whatever it is I can offer. To young people, too. So that's where I'm going.

01:06:40

MO: Perfect. Well thank you for talking with us.

01:06:43

LC: You're welcome.

[END]