

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

**Interview with Garland Gravely  
February 26, 2017**

Interviewer: Madison Pinckes and Erik Weed

Interviewee: Garland Gravely

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Index:

0:00 = Introduction

0:23 = Experience at Patrick Henry High School (mid-1980s)

1:09 = Move and Life in Boston (mid-1980s)

1:40 = BAGLY (gay youth group) in Boston

2:47 = Move to Miami and the party life

3:05 = LGBTQ community in Miami

4:34 = Struggles in Boston and Miami; race and sexuality

5:28 = Going to The Park in high school; receiving mentorship from female impersonators

6:15 = Struggles of High School

6:54 = People of Color and LGBTQ community

7:16 = Move back to Roanoke

9:02 = Roanoke's gay community and The Park

9:55 = Attending college at VCU in Richmond, and love of fashion

11:05 = People of VCU/Richmond and the LGBTQ community; relations with family members

13:09 = Move to Washington D.C. and life there

13:48 = Moving back to Roanoke (2004); experiences as a gay man in Roanoke

17:00 = Church Life and relationship with God

19:15 = Fashionista Roanoke and relationship to the LGBT community

20:52 = Roanoke Diversity Center involvement

21:24 = African American LGBTQ community (or lack thereof)

22:58 = Inspiration from experiences and struggles

23:41 = more on BAGLY

27:17 = Family, friends, and church life (Roanoke, Boston, and Miami)

28:42 = Appreciation for New York and goals

29:54 = Major role models in Fashion; characterizations of the Bible Belt

32:06 = Relationships, dating, and gay bars in Roanoke, including Macado's/Cuba Pete's

35:43 = Roanoke Diversity Center and volunteering

36:32 = Gays in Fashionista Roanoke and Transgender population

37:46 = The Black Church; stance on LGBTQ issues

39:02 = Social media and dating

41:24 = Old Southwest, a gay neighborhood in Roanoke

41:42 = Straight people at the gay clubs

42:41 = Identifying members in the LGBTQ community; gay bars in Roanoke

43:40 = Looking back on Dating

44:59 = Mentoring and Guidance; problems affecting LGBTQ youth

47:04 = Relationships with Women

47:20 = African American members in the LGBTQ community

47:58 = Looking back on high school

48:17 = Future Plans and Closing Remarks

0:00

Madison: Okay. It is February 26<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm in downtown Roanoke. This is Madison Pinckes interviewing Garland Gravely. I just want to mention that this is a second interview. The original recording had some audio issues. So we are redoing it. Okay, so I just want to start off by asking about your high school experience at Patrick Henry.

0:23

Garland: Going to high school, it was a little bit difficult. You know, I wasn't the most popular kid in high school. I felt isolated when I was in high school, and looking back on it now I think it's because of my race and being black, and also it was, you know, my sexuality, as well, cause I came out when I was sixteen and at that time you know my high school it was very clique-y and also was very racially divided.

0:54

Madison: When you came out in high school, who did you come out to?

0:58

Garland: Well, to myself and just a couple friends, a couple of female friends that you know... that I felt like that I could trust and they were like "Garland, we already knew." So, they were not shocked.

1:09

Madison: After you graduated high school, what was your next move?

1:13

Garland: I left to move to Boston with my oldest sister. I just needed to get out of Roanoke at that time. I wasn't happy, I was depressed. And so I just wanted to get out of Roanoke and start a new life.

1:25

Madison: When you got to Boston what did you do, what were your...?

1:29

Garland: I worked. I went to school briefly for a while to college and I dropped out because my mind wasn't into that. I joined a gay youth group and met people through that way.

1:40

Madison: In the previous interview, you mentioned that the gay youth group was called BAGLY.

1:44

Garland: Yep, the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth.

1:47

Madison: What were some of the things you participated in through that group?

1:49

Garland: They had weekly meetings where they would just pick a different subject. You know gay-related, of course, and they also had on Sunday afternoons where they would just have a space for the kids to hang out.

2:03

Madison: How many people were involved in BAGLY?

2:05

Garland: Could be like 35 to 40 people. People came in and out and it wasn't like you had to have a membership or anything like that. It was just basically open—those two days—were open to whoever wanted to come.

2:14

Madison: Are there any relationships that you developed with people that you still highly regard from that time period?

2:20

Garland: There's a couple people that I used to hang out with that I still keep in contact with via Facebook.

2:27

Madison: What were some of the things you guys did together?

2:29

Garland: Clubbing, out to dinner, running around town, just hanging out on the weekends, weekdays, after work and school or whatever.

2:36

Madison: When you were in Boston, when you guys would go clubbing, did you mostly just go to gay clubs?

2:41

Garland: Yes.

2:43

Madison: Was there a big gay club scene in Boston at the time?

2:46

Garland: Yes, yes there was.

2:47

Madison: And then, after Boston, what was your next move?

2:50

Garland: I moved to Miami, Florida.

2:51

Madison: Okay. What were some of the things you were involved in in Miami?

2:55

Garland: The nightlife [*laughing*]. I didn't join any groups or anything like that. It was just a big party Mecca. So I just partied a lot when I was down there.

3:05

Madison: Would you say that when you were there that the LGBTQ community was pretty wide spread, pretty large?

3:11

Garland: It was large but most of the people there were transients—they were on vacation. I mean it was more of like a party scene. It wasn't like a well established, you know, gay community. I think they had a gay community center at that time and maybe there were some gay organizations but I wasn't interested in it. I wasn't involved in the community that way.

3:31

Madison: When you were living in Miami compared to when you were living in Boston... I guess to rephrase that, did you hang out or associate more with members of the LGBTQ community in Miami or in Boston?

3:43

Garland: Both.

3:43

Madison: Both?

3:44

Garland: Both, yeah.

3:45

Madison: Would you say that the same amount of people?

3:47

Garland: Yes, yes just different people. Yeah.

3:48

Madison: When you were living in Miami, were you more drawn to members of the LGBTQ community? Or is it just the way that things kind of... How did you, I guess, make friends when you were there?

4:00

Garland: Well, I lived on South Beach and at the time South Beach was a gay Mecca. I mean it was like the gay neighborhood basically, so you couldn't help [it], I mean you always were around gay people 24/7.

4:11

Madison: Are there any relationship from there that you still...?

4:15

Garland: No.

4:15

Madison: ...keep in touch with?

4:16

Garland: Well, my best friend—who actually I was best friends with him in Boston—him and his partner live in Fort Lauderdale now, so he is the only person I keep in contact with. At that time the two years I was there, the friendships were just very transient. I mean people basically... this is one of those cities where people were just coming and going, you know?

4:34

Madison: You mentioned before that your experience coming out in high school was very affected by obviously your race and your sexuality,—not obviously but your sexuality affected coming out. Do you think that you had similar kind of issues when you were living in Boston or Miami?

4:53

Garland: Boston... being part of BAGLY, the gay youth group, really helped me to become a stronger person and more acceptant of my homosexuality because for the first time in my life I was actually hanging out with people who were just like me. No matter what race they were, we all shared pretty much the same sexuality.

5:12

Madison: Did you notice that race played any role when you were living in Boston?

5:17

Garland: Um hmm [agreement].

5:17

Madison: It did, in what ways?

5:20

Garland: Well, Boston at the time wasn't a very friendly city. I mean, it was still racially divided sorta like what Roanoke was at that time.

5:28

Madison: When you were in high school, did you have anyone that you could like look up to or kinda of like guide you I guess through the journey of when you were coming out and you were first really being open about your sexuality?

5:41

Garland: I can honestly tell you it was when I started going to The Park, and I was meeting people there. Particularly it was the female impersonators that at first embraced me and they kinda took me under their wing. I was never a female impersonator but I'm just saying they were the first ones to kinda take me under their wing and kinda, you know, mentor me in a way.

6:05

Madison: How did they mentor you?

6:06

Garland: Just by talking about the gay life, or if I needed anything, had any questions, they would just be there for me, so like a mother figure if you will.

6:15

Madison: When you were in high school in Roanoke are there any experience that stand out that affected... that were, I guess, in connection with your race and your sexuality, were you ever like targeted or...?

6:28

Garland: Not physically targeted but just...

6:32

Madison: I mean any kind of...

6:32

Garland: Well, mentally or emotionally, just feeling isolated when you know people don't want to hang out with you it's either because you're gay or because you're black, you know, because I got it from both sides. I mean there where people within the black community who didn't want to hang out with me or get to know me because of my sexuality and in the other communities, it could be either one or both.

6:54

Madison: Do you think that, not just, I guess, you personally, but in general people of color who are a part of the LGBTQ community have a completely different kind of experience than I guess white members do?

7:10

Garland: Um hmm [Agrees]. Because you are a double minority. I mean, you still have to deal with being of your race and also your sexuality.

7:16

Madison: So, after you went to Miami, what was your next kind of move in life?

7:23

Garland: I came back to Roanoke because I wanted to go back to college. I knew that I couldn't spend my whole life just partying, partying, partying, partying, partying, because I was raised by my mother and grandmother and they emphasized education, education, education, like I have six of us and all of us had the opportunity to go to college. You know, that's my grandmother and my mother believed in education strongly. So I knew in the back of my mind that I didn't want to spend my whole life just partying you know five, six, seven days a week. And so I came back to Roanoke to, you know, work and get myself together, reconnect with my family and my friends that I had left, and then also to go back to college at some point.

8:01

Madison: How were you feeling about yourself when you came back to Roanoke?

8:06

Garland: I felt more empowered than when I left because of my experiences living in a bigger city and when I lived in a bigger city I was more independent and I could truly be myself. So it took me a while to really acclimate myself to Roanoke, because at that time Roanoke was just a totally, I mean, definitely different from South Beach. I went from being open about it and people not caring to coming back to the Bible Belt and having to face those same old issues, you know?

8:34

Madison: Did you feel your sense of self was stronger or...?

8:38

Garland: Yes, absolutely, I felt my sense of self was a lot stronger than before I left.

8:44

Madison: Would you say that developed further when you were living in Boston or when you were living in Miami?

8:48

Garland: Boston was sort of like the beginning of it but Miami was really where I could really... it was just such a free community. People just didn't care; you could pretty much be who you wanted to be as long as you were not hurting or harming others. I mean they didn't care.

9:02

Madison: When you came back to Roanoke, how would you describe the LGBTQ community at the time?

9:07



Garland: Really the only thing we had at the time was really The Park. I mean you know it was just if you wanted to meet other people within the community, you went to The Park.

9:17

Madison: What was The Park like at the time?

9:19

Garland: It wasn't bad really. I mean I was used to going to places where it was like, you had the top music, top DJs, it was a totally different atmosphere. So I felt like I went from, you know, here, then I went backwards as far as the nightlife scene or even the gay community.

9:39

Madison: Did you feel at anytime boxed in by Roanoke or...?

9:43

Garland: Yes, absolutely I did. I felt really, really boxed in.

9:47

Madison: And so, after you came back here I know you eventually moved on to go to Richmond for school. How did that come about?

9:55

Garland: I just knew I wanted to go back to school and I knew I wanted to major in fashion, merchandising. And I just sorta [said] if I'm not gonna stay in Virginia, I'm gonna go to New York because I was kind of, you know, I went to Virginia Western [Community College] to get my general studies out the way and then I was debating whether I was gonna go to Radford University, VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University], or just go to FIT [the Fashion Institute of Technology] in New York. Then I thought, "well, you know, it's best if I stay here in Virginia." Also I thought VCU was a better choice cause I would be in more of an urban [center]... cause I prefer an urban setting anyway. So that was a better choice for me.

10:27

Madison: How did your love of fashion really come to fruition?

10:30

Garland: I've always loved it. It was really Miami, South Beach, as sort of... it was like this is what I truly want to do, because at the time South Beach was becoming a Mecca for the fashion industry as well. You had people from New York and Europe coming to Miami, because it was the hot spot, it was the place to be at the time. You could flip through, you know, a fashion magazine like *Harper's Bazaar* or *Vogue* and you would see actual scenes from like a restaurant, or part of the beach, or a hotel that was right on South Beach. I mean South Beach was the big place to be at the time for the fashion industry.

11:05

Madison: When you were in Richmond going to VCU for fashion—well, first, I want to ask, was the program I guess diverse in the sense of sexual orientation or was it...? What were the kind of people that were in the program like? Were they straight, or part of the LGBTQ community?

11:24

Garland: I think you had a few. I mean most of the guys that I knew of in the program were a part of the LGBT community.

11:30

Madison: Were you able to be open about your sexuality in Richmond more than you were in Roanoke?

11:34

Garland: Yes I was, because no one knew me. Moving back here it was, you know, you had to think about your family, because you're coming back and everyone knows your family and you have to worry about, you know, so and so would call my mom saying "oh, we saw Garland doing this, that, and the other." You know, I would just freak out about that because I had not... I had changed so much. It was kinda like "why are you caring what I do and what I don't do?" So, I had to kind of be more, a little more back in the closet in Roanoke because of my family being involved in the community and knowing the community and my brothers, my sisters, and my mom and grandmother because they were very active in the community.

12:14

Madison: Do you think I guess that kind of stigma affected your relationships with your family members?

12:20

Garland: Yes it did.

12:21

Madison: Does it still affect them today?

12:23

Garland: I think it has gotten better. I think, you know, it has gotten better for a lot of people.

12:28

Madison: Going back to when you were living in Richmond, were you active at all within the LGBTQ community?

12:33

Garland: Not at all, because I was busy working full time and going to school full time. I didn't have time and I mean basically if I had time and if I wanted to go, I'd gone to a club to go dancing with friends. But as far as being active in the community, I just didn't have the time to.

12:47

Madison: When you were going to clubs in Richmond, where they gay clubs?

12:49

Garland: Yes, yes.

12:50

Madison: Did you find that the scene, the gay club scene, was different than what you had experienced in Roanoke?

12:56

Garland: More, it was more to do. It was more clubs to choose from, yeah, absolutely.

13:01

Madison: if you had to go back in time, is there anywhere that you would of, that you have lived, that you would have stayed if you could have for a longer period of time?

13:09

Garland: For a longer period of time? Actually, no, really. Really, I mean I have no desire to go back to Boston. I wouldn't move back to DC. The only thing I regret was that I wish I had moved to New York City from Boston instead of going to Miami. I kind of wished I'd gone to New York City.

13:25

Madison: You mentioned you lived in DC. How long where you in DC for?

13:29

Garland: A year in a half.

13:31

Madison: What were you doing there?

13:33

Garland: I worked in retail and, you know, I was trying to establish and get something started so I can go from DC to New York and that didn't happen. I made the decision to come back to Roanoke. Cause I wasn't really happy in DC. I just knew that I didn't want to be there.

13:48

Madison: When you came back to Roanoke after VCU, what was the first thing you really got involved in here?

13:56

Garland: Oh, I mean it was DC.

13:58

Madison: Oh, sorry.

13:59

Garland: Yeah, [from] VCU I went to DC for a year and a half and then I came from DC to Roanoke...

14:02

Madison: Okay, when you got back from DC, when you came back I guess to settle in Roanoke, cause that's where you have been for...

14:09

Garland: Since 2004.

14:10

Madison: Since 2004. What was the first thing you got back involved in when you came back here?

14:15

Garland: I tried to reconnect with friends that I had just, you know, when I lived away for several years... I tried to reconnect with them. And then I started meeting new people. So I really didn't get involved with the gay community as much. I mean I went to the clubs every now and then. But I was more focused on reestablishing my life here and with my family and then meeting new people.

14:35

Madison: When you came back... I guess, as your friendships, as you reconnected with your friendships, and as you established more friendships, did you become friends with more people from the LGBTQ community or did it just not matter, it was just...?

14:54

Garland: It didn't matter. I think I became more friends with straight people, believe it or not, then, you know, of the gay people. It really didn't matter to me whether at that point if you were a part of the LGBT community or if you were straight, it just didn't matter to me or what race you were, what shape or size you were, it didn't matter to me then.

15:09

Madison: From your perspective as a gay man in Roanoke, how in the past almost twenty years, no [counting]... since you got back in 2004, looking from the outside in, as a gay man, how would you describe your experiences if that makes since?

15:31

Garland: [Agrees] You know, isolation, fear, coming out, and then going from isolation and fear to progressing to being comfortable with who I am.

15:42

Madison: if you could give your younger self advice, what would you tell yourself?

15:48

Garland: Not to worry about what people think about you...

15:51

Madison: Yeah.

15:52

Garland: And to just learn to love yourself and accept yourself.

15:55

Madison: Also looking back to all the different places you lived, would you say that they all shaped you equally, or, I mean, you have been to some pretty prominent places. I know you mentioned that Boston was really like the time that helped you develop who you are; but do you think that they all kind of brought different aspects of your life together in a way?

16:19

Garland: Yes, absolutely.

16:20

Madison: How would you describe that?

16:22

Garland: Absolutely. Like for Boston, it was getting me through my teen and early twenties. Miami was more of just partying and being free and living sort of the hedonistic lifestyle. DC was where I just... Richmond was education, the focus was education. DC was more about trying to establish myself after college and what I wanted to do. And then coming back to Roanoke was just basically taking everything that I have learned and what I have become and bringing that back here.

16:52

Madison: How would you describe the path of life for someone who is of color and also gay?

17:00

Garland: It is not easy. I mean it is not easy. You go through battles every day; it is either one or the other or both. But for me I just have to stay strong and just my faith and my spirituality and my belief in God and my spirituality has really gotten me through a lot of things.

17:16

Madison: Do you feel like being black and being part of the LGBTQ community is not acknowledged enough?

17:26

Garland: No. I think it's gotten better but we still have a long way to go.

17:30

Madison: Where have you seen the improvements?

17:32

Garland: The media, television, the movies. You're starting to see a lot more, you know, gay people who are coming out. The only thing in the African American LGBTB community, you still don't have enough role models to look up to; more so in the Caucasian, the white community, you have more people that are more out, but in the African American community it's still a stigma to be gay. It's gotten better but there's still that stigma.

17:56

Madison: Really. So, how did does it thrive? I'm just surprised by that.

18:02

Garland: Well, because the church is the center of the African American community. So a lot of people are very religious and, you know, to them homosexuality is a sin and an abomination so you are constantly fighting with that. I fought through that for my whole life. I think it's gotten better; there are some black churches that have gotten more progressive in their thought with that, but it's still a long way to go.

18:24

Madison: Are you active in your church?

18:28

Garland: I am.

18:30

Madison: I know I asked this in the previous interview but do you think that your sexuality and kind of, I guess, the stigma you felt from society about your sexuality has affected your relationship with God?

18:45

Garland: Not anymore, because I believe that God loves me for [who I am]; I was born this way. It is how He created me. He created me this way. So my whole attitude changes so the naysayers, they don't bother me anymore.

18:59

Madison: Did you feel it ever affected you or did you ever question your relationship with God?

19:02

Garland: Yes, because growing up, you were always told that it was wrong and it was a sin, so growing up. But as I've gotten older and I've developed my own beliefs, [a] personal relationship with God, I realize that that's not true.

19:15

Madison: So I know you started your own fashion non-profit called Fashionista Roanoke, and how is it... are you very active with that and the LGTBQ community or are they kinda like separate entities to you?

19:32

Garland: We've done some things with the LGTB community like a couple of the organizations here in Roanoke, we've done fashion shows for as fundraisers, so I'm involved in that way.

19:41

Madison: How would you describe your relationship with the LGBTQ community in Roanoke now?

19:46

Garland: I think it's okay. I'm not really heavily involved in any just one community. I'm spread out over all different communities so I don't have an exclusive relationship with the LGBT community, because I'm all over the place.

20:03

Madison: Do you think that like being spread out has affected your relationship with the LGBTQ community like because you're kind of active through everything? Do you feel like you can be more of a voice there or...?

20:19

Garland: Actually, I'm comfortable where I am because I feel like I need to be for me that it is good that I'm involved in different communities because I think different communities need to get to know me as an African American person as well as a gay person as well because a lot of times I can be involved with an organization or at an event and I may be the only openly gay person there as far as I know or what I can see there. So I feel like I need to be in those places because that's the only way to me that you are going to break down barriers. I don't believe in segregating myself or putting myself in cliques.

20:52

Madison: Yeah, I appreciate that. I remember you mentioned something about the Roanoke Diversity Center. You were active through that. Can you tell me more about that?

21:01

Garland: I was one of their founding board members. I was friends with the two, at the time, the president and the vice president who actually started—planted the seed—for the RDC so I was one of their founding board members.

21:14

Madison: What were some of the things you did as a founding board member?

21:16

Garland: Helped them to organize and get everything... bring people in. Just to get everything, the process, started of creating a community center.

21:24

Madison: Would you say in Roanoke that there is a big African American LGBTQ population?

21:31

Garland: I believe so, but it's hard to tell because it's not an organized, unified LGBTQ community, African American community. I mean I know there's a lot of us here but we're not organized together. I mean there is no, you know, like most cities will have an African American LGBTQ, you know, group, or social group, or whatever it is. We don't have that here.

21:51

Madison: Are you friendly with members that are African American of the LGBTQ community.

21:55

Garland: [*Agrees*] Yes.

21:56

Madison: So I guess I'm trying to get at how diverse is the LGBTQ community here?

22:03

Garland: I think it's very diverse but it's still, because of the area that we live in, I think you still have your cliques. So yeah, I think it's definitely diverse.

22:12

Madison: Living in Roanoke and I guess you seem to know everyone... I remember in our last interview...

22:19

Garland: [*Agrees; laughter*]

22:19

Madison: ...strangers were saying "hi" to you. Do you think that you can be a role model for people because you are involved in so much and you are such a diverse person? Have you been able to do any outreach with anybody?

22:33

Garland: I think I have been. I think just by me being present and just me being me, I may be a role model to people. I don't know. I mean someone comes up to me and says "Hey, you've inspired me to kinda not be afraid of who I am and not be afraid to think outside the box and do things that are out of the box and not be afraid to be the only one," whether it be a person of color in a situation or the only openly gay person there.

22:58



Madison: Throughout your life, like what has continuously inspired you to be the way you are?

23:03

Garland: Just the life experiences that I've had. The people I've been honored to meet. You know, I love the fact that I have a lot of hetero straight male friends who accept me for me and love me for me just like I love and care for them and we're friends not because of my race or my sexuality; they just like me as a person.

23:21

Madison: Have you ever struggled in your life with straight people?

23:25

Garland: Yes, I have. I mean, because you, in those days, it was like you know homosexuality was something that was looked down upon. I think because now it's got better because we're more open and visible in mainstream society now than we were twenty, thirty years ago.

23:41

Madison: When you were living in Boston, just going back to BAGLY, what were like, I guess, I know you mentioned that you guys would go clubbing and you would do dinners together; what were some of the things that were discussed when you had the meetings?

23:57

Garland: As for as it can be anything on how to come out of the closet, you know, establishing healthy relationships. They would have a different topic every week.

24:06

Madison: Were there people of color involved in BAGLY?

24:08

Garland: Yes. BAGLY was very racially mixed. Because it was the only thing at the time that we could go to, so you had a lot of people that were from the suburbs of Boston who would come in to go to BAGLY because they had no other outlet. Some of them were still in the closet and their parents, their families, didn't even know they were gay because they were too afraid to come out. So BAGLY gave them that outlet to be themselves.

24:28

Madison: Was it easy to let go of BAGLY?

24:30

Garland: No. As I got older, after a couple years and I started meeting people who were outside of that, and I just sorta just drifted away. You know, I started to establish relationships outside of BAGLY because it's sorta like when you leave high school, cause when you look back on it, I mean, BAGLY was like an extension of high school. It really was. At the time that was fine because I was like 17-18 when I

first moved to Boston and joined them. But you know, when you're early twenties—19 [or] 20—you kinda feel like, "okay, this is still high school." So I was ready to move on at that point.

25:03

Madison: When you were active in BAGLY, did you still kind of feel like you were suffering? I mean maybe not from the group itself, the group wasn't causing it, but your own inner isolation?

25:12

Garland: Yes, absolutely. Still learning to get to know myself and still learning to love and accept myself.

25:19

Madison: What was something that really helped you learn how to love and accept yourself? I think it's really important to record that so...

25:26

Garland: Just getting older and my experiences and getting to the point where you're saying, you know, it's like the "ah hah" moment. I cannot keep worrying about what people think about me because I have to be happy and it was just coming to the realization as I got older that I started having these experiences, I was like "I can't control what people think about me. I have to still live my life and be who I am."

25:49

Madison: Do you ever still struggle with that?

25:50

Garland: Not as much. Not as much.

25:54

Madison: Do you think that being—I mean, you said earlier that you're a double minority so it's obviously harder in society—but do you think that there is in some way.... Like, do you ever feel that if you were like one minority or the other you wouldn't suffer as much? You're not saying you suffer but do you think there would be less stigma attached to who you are?

26: 20

Garland: I think it would be less stigma attached if I were heterosexual, you know.

26:31

Madison: Okay. Going back off of talking about BAGLY, when you were living in Miami, did anything that you learned in BAGLY, did you take that with [you]? I'm sure that it's carried with you for your whole life but is there anything that really stands out that when you were living in Miami you really embraced that you had learned in BAGLY?

26:48

Garland: Developing friendships and relationships and having that support. It was a big support group. It was having that support and mentors within the group. The adults were part of the organization that you could go and talk to at any time.

27:02

Madison: Would you say that support is probably the most important aspect of being part of the LGBTQ community?

27:06

Garland: Yes, absolutely, because we face so much out there. So we need to come together to support each other.

27:13

Madison: Where do you find the most support in your life now?

27: 15

Garland: Through my family and friends.

27:17

Madison: Has your family come to not terms with who you are, but has your family like been more open to who you are compared to when you were younger?

27:26

Garland: Yes, much so. Like my oldest brother who is, I mean he's in the music industry, so he was used to being around, you know, LGBT people. And my oldest sister, you know, her living in Boston she opened her mind because she started having friends, she has friends who were part of the LGBTQ community too, so having that support really helped.

27:47

Madison: Like, within your church, do you know if there are any other openly gay members?

27:54

Garland: Not that I know of. I have no idea. I'm not saying there aren't any. I just don't know any. As far as I know, I'm the only one. There may be others; they're probably just still in the closet.

28:02

Madison: When you were living in Miami, you were living the high life, the part life. Did you find it hard to establish deeper relationships with people because everything was, I guess, frivolous?

28:18

Garland: Yes, yes. I had more deeper relationships in Boston compared to Miami because Miami was just a good time. I had a few friends in Miami but other than that, it was much harder to make friends because people weren't really focused on that. You know, it's like I said, it was a very transient [place].

People were just either on vacation for a month or two, or they would come down for the winter season and go back to where they came from. So people were always constantly in and out.

28:42

Madison: How do you think your experiences would have been different regarding your sexuality, your race, or your occupation, if you had gone to New York?

28:51

Garland: I would have definitely would have gone to school there and been maybe more active. Because New York is where I've always wanted to live ever since I was a kid. I mean I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and I wanted to live in New York, so I think my life would have been... I think I would have probably gone back to school much sooner had I had the opportunity because FIT [the Fashion Institute of Technology] and all of that was right there. You had schools in fashion right there, so I think I would have done better.

29:14

Madison: Do you think you'll ever make your way up there?

29:16

Garland: Maybe. I don't know. I'm open to the possibility.

29:19

Madison: You seem like very open to really any kind of community or anybody or just trying new things. Is there anything that you still feel that you want to pursue in your life?

29:32

Garland: Just to keep making and building relationships with family and friends. [I] always want to meet new people and experiences and of course making Fashionista Roanoke the best that it can be.

29:42

Madison: I think it's so interesting that you really developed your love for fashion at a time in your life where you weren't rooted, because you were in Miami, but you found your passion while you were there...

29:54

Garland: [Agrees]

29:54

Madison: Do you think that if you had, I mean, you said you always felt this way about fashion, but do you think that Miami played a key role in developing that?

30:04

Garland: A major role, because you saw it all the time. I mean, you walked down the street or on the beach or wherever and you would see photo shoots, or when we were going ou clubbing, you would

meet people and you would meet people who worked in the fashion industry. You know, they would come down from New York for the winter season and they were photographers, makeup artists, hair, just all kinds of heirs of fashion. I started meeting all kinds of people like that and going to parties and stuff like that.

30:26

Madison: When you kind of started to pursue those connections, did you get involved in anything down there?

30:31

Garland: No. I was just, like I said, my whole life was just parting, meeting people, and having fun.

30:36

Madison: Now that you're older, do you have anyone that you look up to or are there any role models in the media or anywhere that you can identify as people who inspire you?

30:47

Garland: Tim Gunn is a major inspiration for me. As a mentor, I mean, I would have loved to have had a teacher like Tim Gunn. Andre Leon Talley, he's African American, he was a former editor at *Vogue* magazine. I mean it's people like that that I kinda, even when I was in school, that I kinda looked up to that inspired me.

31:10

Madison: What do you pull from them personally? Like how do they serve your inspiration?

31:13

Garland: They are good at what they do. Tim was a fantastic mentor. He truly cares about people. Andre is this person who, as an African American male, he grew up in the South, you know North Carolina, so he's a Southern boy like myself [and] gay. You know, came out when he was younger so I kind looked up to him. The fact that he made it all the way to the top of the industry.

31:35

Madison: Do you think that your experience or being an African American man and being gay in the South, how would you characterize that compared to maybe the north? I think it's interesting that you brought that up that he was from the South.

31:52

Garland: Just, you know, we're in the Bible Belt. I think that's a big part of what we go through, is being in a more religious community. Up north, people tend to be more freer and more progressive in their thoughts.

32:06

Madison: And now in your, I guess, where you are in your life, you have found your passion. You've nailed that down. You're very active with your passion. Do you think that strains personal relationships at all, or are you able to give enough time to relationships?

32:25

Garland: I'm starting to try to give time to relationships now. There is someone that I am talking to so we're just taking it one day at a time to see where it goes, because I'm a very independent person. Don't call me 20 times a day, don't text me 20 times a day. I just need to have my time and me and then I think I'll be okay in a relationship, and that's hard to find. I'm not a needy person when it comes to relationships.

32:47

Madison: But that's so good, this is not really a question, more of a comment, but I think that it so interesting that you really should be so satisfied with yourself before you pursue a relationship with someone else.

32:55

Garland: Absolutely.

32:56

Madison: And I think that like you kind of have that covered.

32:59

Garland: Right, absolutely. You have to be. I mean, you have to be, you have to love yourself and be happy with yourself before you can give love and happiness to other people.

33:07

Madison: Do you think that your independence has, doesn't necessarily scare people away, but maybe turns them off...?

33:14

Garland: I think it has. I think it has in a way because some people don't know how to react to that, because they see they think that you're so independent. You're off doing all these things, and they don't know how to approach you, or maybe they think you don't need anyone. So that's one of the problems; there's pros and cons to anything, so that can be considered a con because people have that perception of "god, he's so busy in the community and I'd really love to talk to him to get to know him in a personal way but he just seems like he's just doing all these things." Some people can be intimidated by that.

33:45

Madison: Do you think that like the dating life, I don't know how to word that, do you think that dating in the gay community is different in the Roanoke Valley?

33:56

Garland: Oh much, much different.

33:58

Madison: How would you explain it?

33:58

Garland: It's harder. I think it's harder to meet people here and to really find someone who is really serious versus other places I've lived. I think, you know, a lot of people here tend to be more in the closet than they were in other cities that I've lived in. I mean, we have yet to have an openly gay, I don't know, someone on city council, prominent businessperson, you know. We have yet to have someone who is openly out in the community. I mean, I think it's gotten better for LGBTQ people here but I think we still have a long way to go. I mean it's better than it was like 20-30 years ago or 10 years ago even.

34:40

Madison: That's so interesting. Do you think that there is a subgroup of LGBTQ community that's, not maybe patronized, but overlooked in Roanoke?

34:50

Garland: Possibly, yes, yes.

34:52

Madison: Going back to what you were saying about dating here, do you think that... are there gay spaces in Roanoke that still exist where you know you can go and there will be members of the LGBTQ community there, beside The Park?

35:06

Garland: I'm thinking the Roanoke Diversity Center and then Macado's is another place we go. Well Macado's downtown. You know, if you go there, there's a part called Cuba Pete's. That's where a lot of gay people hang out in that part of it. So you know if you go to Macado's downtown, you're pretty much gonna see other gay people.

35:26

Madison: Has it always been like that?

35:27

Garland: For as long as I can remember, yes. It's always been an open, welcoming place. There are other places we can go, but that tends to be the one that most of the people from the community will gravitate to.

35:29

Madison: And what do you guys do? Do you just hang out...?

35:41

Garland: Hang out, drinks, dinner.

35:43

Madison: Going back to what you said about the Roanoke Diversity Center. How active, I'm not very familiar with it, how active is the Diversity Center in the area?

35:52

Garland: I mean they are very active now. They are actually a full fledged community center so they offer workshops and seminars and all type of support groups that people can get involved with.

36:00

Madison: Do you go to any of those?

36:02

Garland: When I can, well, with my schedule and everything, I mean I'm not as involved as... I just don't have the time. I mean I'll volunteer for things if I have the time and they know that. They know if they need a volunteer, they can call me. If I can do it, I'll do it.

36:17

Madison: Do you like volunteering?

36:18

Garland: Yes, when I can.

36:21

Madison: What have you volunteered at?

36:22

Garland: Well, when they would have a booth at a festival and they need someone to come and work the booth to give out information, I can do that. We've done a couple fashion shows for them as fundraisers so I'm willing to do that as well.

36:32

Madison: Are there any people within Fashionista Roanoke that I guess work under you that are openly gay?

36:41

Garland: There's a couple people that I know of. I don't know of any women that are. There's a couple of guys in the past that were. I knew they were openly gay, you know. I had two male models who were openly gay at the time. We have a transgender model, but that's about it.

36:55

Madison: Do you think that there is a big transgender population in Roanoke?



36:59

Garland: I think it's more of an open one now. I think they are becoming more visible thanks to Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox. That's really helped out a lot, too.

37:07

Madison: Do you think the African American gay community is visible here?

37:09

Garland: Not as much as I would like for it to be. I wish it was more visible. I still think there is a lot of us that are still living in the closet.

37:17

Madison: How do you think you get to that point of increased visibility?

37:20

Garland: Well, people loving and accepting themselves, and for the straight African American community to be more open-minded and more accepting. I think that would help too, because like I said the church is the center of the African American community so if the churches would become more open-minded and more accepting then the rest of the community I believe would follow suit.

37:42

Madison: You do think it has improved though?

37:44

Garland: Somewhat, yeah. I think it's gotten better.

37:46

Madison: What's different from when you were younger within the church?

37:50

Garland: You don't hear as much negativity as you did before. I guess, like I said, with LGBTQ issues being so mainstream now, and more LGBTQ people being more mainstream, that's affected a lot of people.

38:05

Madison: Throughout your life have you ever been a confidante for anyone regarding their sexuality if they didn't feel comfortable coming out or anything?

38:11

Garland: Oh yeah. So over the years, yeah. Pretty much in every place I've lived and meeting one or two people who are just like, you know, who come out of the closet and need someone to share things with in that way.

38:21

Madison: I guess, how were you supportive for them? What kind of things would you do?

38:26

Garland: Spending time with them, listening to them if they had an issue or problem, or just being a sounding board if they needed someone they wanted to talk to, and just being a good friend.

38:34

Madison: Have you ever had someone in your life that was there to do that for you?

38:38

Garland: Different people throughout my life, yeah. I mean even now I still have people that I know that truly love and care about me and they want to see me be the best that I can be.

38:46

Madison: Do you ever, I guess, feel any struggles that you still have to go to them about?

38:52

Garland: Yes. They come to me; I come to them. We share pleasure, pain, all kinds of things; what's going on their lives. Someone to talk to and to love and support.

39:02

Madison: Do you think that social media has affected your experience as a gay man of color?

39:08

Garland: Yes, I mean it's definitely become a way of meeting more people. You really don't have to go to the clubs anymore.

39:14

Madison: How do you meet people on social media?

39:16

Garland: You know, there are gay sites, gay meeting sites, just like the straight community. Same thing.

39:24

Madison: Do you, are you active on a lot of these sites?

39:27

Garland: A couple of them. I'm not on all of them.

39:29

Madison: Do you...

39:35

Garland: I don't want to be *[laughs]*!

39:36

Madison: When you connect with people on the sites, are you inclined to meet up with them or do you mostly just stay in contact through social media?

39:41

Garland: I like to meet up with them if possible to meet for a coffee or tea or whatever. It's different here in Roanoke. In other cities, it's been a lot easier because you still have those people that seem to be afraid to still come out or to be seen or whatever. So it's a little bit tougher here; not difficult or impossible, but it's just a little bit tougher than it is in other places.

40:05

Madison: Oh, wow, so you've connected with people on social media that are not even publicly out?

40:09

Garland: Yes, absolutely.

40:12

Madison: Have you I guess not necessarily pursued a relationship but a friendship with these people like try to be a guiding light or is there just...?

40:19

Garland: If they want. I have not, but I'm open to that if they want to have someone to say "hey, I'm not out but I am looking for friends and you seem like a nice guy. I'd like to get to know you whether it be a dating relationship or just as friends" so that they can have someone who is gay like them that they can actually talk to.

40:39

Madison: So interesting. With dating and relationships, when you do date, do you find it... not, do you go out in public, but is it easy to date in public?

40:52

Garland: I mean for me it is. People figure out that we're two gay guys, whether we're dating or friends. That's totally up to them if they want to assume. It doesn't bother me.

41:02

Madison: Do you think that in Roanoke City it is more acceptable to be gay than it is necessarily in the County... are you active in the County at all?

41:10

Garland: I mean, I have friends in the County and I've done events and stuff but I think it's more in Roanoke maybe it's a little more easier than it is in some of the smaller towns that surround Roanoke.

41:24

Madison: Is there a neighborhood in Roanoke currently that is known as the gay neighborhood?

41:27

Garland: Old Southwest.

41:30

Madison: Do you go there a lot?

41:31

Garland: I have friends that live over there, but normally I don't go there too often because normally we just meet at a restaurant or out to eat or whatever. So not necessarily.

41:42

Madison: When you were living in Miami and you guys would go out, would you go to mostly gay clubs?

41:51

Garland: Yes, only went to gay clubs when I lived in Miami.

41:53

Madison: When you went to these gay clubs, a big thing that's kinda been discussed about gay clubs is straight people or heterosexuals sort of invading them. Do you think that in Miami that there was a good population of straight people at the gay clubs?

42:08

Garland: Yes, because you know gay clubs have always been known for the music and the freedom of dancing. Because everybody is there to have a good time. I mean, you rarely saw a fight at a gay club or anything like that. The main thing is a lot of straight people love going to the gay clubs because of the music and they can be free and nobody bothers them.

42:28

Madison: Do you think when you go to Macado's, and places around here, are there many straight people or is it mostly just a gay space?

42:35

Garland: In the Cuba Pete's side of it, it's more of a gay space. I mean straight people are there of course, but it's still more of a gay space.

42:41

Madison: Do you find it easy to identify members of the LGBTQ community in Roanoke?

42:46

Garland: Sometimes. It depends.

42:48

Madison: When you were going to the Park, when you were younger... well, do you still go to The Park?

42:55

Garland: Only when my organization will do a show there. But that's about it.

43:01

Madison: When you were going there when you were younger, did you notice a lot of straight people?

43:05

Garland: Yes, yes, it's always been straight people going to The Park for years.

43:09

Madison: When you were younger, were there other gay bars and clubs in the area that you ever went to?

43:14

Garland: There was, at the time, it was Backstreet Café and then it was The Park. That was all I knew of.

43:19

Madison: What was Backstreet Café like?

43:21

Garland: It was a small little dive bar basically.

43:25

Madison: Where you able to go to all these places when you were in high school or...?

43:28

Garland: The Park?

43:29

Madison: Yeah.

43:30

Garland: Umm, not legally [*Laughing*]. Well, I didn't drink at the time, so they were like, "yeah, just don't drink."

43:40

Madison: [*Laughing*] When you were younger did you ever date when you were in high school? Did you ever pursue a relationship?

43:46

Garland: [*Disagrees*]

43:47

Madison: What about in Boston?

43:49

Garland: Here and there but nothing really serious.

43:51

Madison: Was it easy to start dating when you came out or when you moved to Boston? I mean you had recently come out...

43:56

Garland: Yeah, yeah, because you are meeting people, you know, your own age. So if you wanted to, I was always attracted to more older men anyway. I never dated people my age. It was always, you know, someone within a ten maybe even twenty-year range.

44:11

Madison: Do you think that you were attracted to older men because you were looking for a role model?

44:16

Garland: When I look back on it now, I think I was looking for a role model and actually a father figure. Because I don't have a close relationship with my own father. So when I look back on it now and I talk to my best friend, the one that lives in Fort Lauderdale, and he said the same thing. That we both looked—we are the same age and we have known each other for over twenty years—and we both have talked about it a lot, and he said "you know what? I think the reason why we both were attracted to older men is because we were looking for a father figure." I mean at the time I didn't realize that, but as I have gotten older when you look back on it you realize that's probably why you were attracted to older men. Because you were looking for that mentor even that father figure...

44:51

Madison: Did you find a mentor?

44:53

Garland: There were some who were mentors, some who became friends, and then some, you know, just whatever.

44:59

Madison: Looking back on, I guess, the people who served as mentors, what do you really remember about them that you liked that stood out to you? What were you able to learn from them?

45:10

Garland: I knew they were there if I needed anything. They were really my friends, and they would offer me advice and help me out through, you know, any type of situation. You know, if I needed help or just need someone to talk to. They were there for me.

45:22

Madison: Being a part of BAGLY, do you think that trained you to be a good listener? You seem to be a very supportive friend.

45:28

Garland: Yes, yes, because a lot of the kids there were really, they had a tough time, you know. Imagine living in the suburbs where you have a family that hates gay people. They would just disown you. There were some people who actually their families disowned them when they came out.

45:44

Madison: Did you notice like a big problem I guess, then, with homelessness, of your friends?

45:50

Garland: Not at that time. I know it's a huge problem. It probably was a problem then, but I didn't know anyone really personally that was facing it. Most of them, either they were living on their own or with other friends or relatives or they were just living in the closet while they were with their families.

46:07

Madison: Well, now living in Roanoke, what is the biggest problem, I guess, that you see the LGBTQ community faces here?

46:16

Garland: Still not really accepted in the mainstream as much as we should be accepted in the mainstream.

46:25

Madison: Do you ever travel around, up to New York or Boston or anything?

46:31

Garland: When I get a chance to. Yeah, and DC too.

46:33

Madison: Are you treated differently?

46:35

Garland: [*Agrees*]

46:36

Madison: In what ways?

46:37

Garland: People don't really seem to care. If, you know, sometimes depending on where you are or what race you are, what your sexuality is....

46:47

Madison: Have people ever sought you out here to be your friend because of your sexuality?

46:52

Garland: Possibly, not that I know of. I mean no one has ever come and said to me... [*Laughing*] "I want to be your friend because you are gay." It's just like, I'm an open minded person and I can get along with basically a lot of different types of people, so...

47:04

Madison: Are you friends with a lot of women?

47:07

Garland: Yes.

47:08

Madison: Mostly straight women or any gay women?

47:10

Garland: Mostly straight women, very few lesbian or bisexual women. I have maybe one lesbian friend here. Everyone else, all the other women are heterosexual.

47:20

Madison: Are you friends with any African American members of the LGBTQ community here?

47:24

Garland: Yes, I have a group of friends that are African American.

47:27

Madison: Where, is there a place where members—I know this is a very specific question—but where African American members of the LGBTQ community go here?

47:39

Garland: They would go to The Park, or they would go to Macado's or places like that.



47:46

Madison: Looking back on high school, I guess first of all, was your high school predominantly African American, or was it...?

47:55

Garland: Predominantly Caucasian.

47:58

Madison: Do you think that you struggled more there because of your race or because of your sexuality?

48:02

Garland: I think both. It's hard for me to put one over the other. At that time I think it was just both.

48:06

Madison: Were you bullied?

48:07

Garland: No, I was fortunate enough not to be, you know, physically attacked or bullied. You know, other than just the whole social isolation was the big issue.

48:17

Madison: If you, I guess, I am kind of interested... where do you see yourself in the next five or ten years? What do you see yourself doing?

48:25

Garland: Making Fashionista Roanoke the best that it can be and that's the journey that I am on right now, for this year and God willing beyond. Just to focus on making it a non-profit and turning it into a viable business.

48:36

Madison: What are some of the things that Fashionista Roanoke does?

48:40

Garland: We produce fashion shows and fashion related events for nonprofit organizations to help them raise money, and bringing the community together, too. We are community focused.

48:50

Madison: I really like that. Have any youth come to Fashionista Roanoke, kind of like as an outlet, similar to how you were when you were younger?

49:09

Garland: No, I think most of the ones that do come, they want to get into fashion or they want to model. So it mainly has been that not so much as, you know, I want to come here because I can be more open about my sexuality. Not yet.

49:21

Madison: [*Laughing*]

49:22

Garland: As far as I know. I haven't heard anyone say that to me.

49:25

Madison: If you could have one thing recorded into this oral history that you think everyone should know, whether it's about your race, or sexuality, or queer people of color, any[thing]. What would you want to have kind of encapsulated in...?

49:43

Garland: I just want them to know that you start off loving yourself and accepting yourself. That's where it starts. Once you love and accept yourself, I think that can also bring people to love and accept you. If they don't, don't worry about it. Because you know God loves you, you know other people, focus on the people that do love and care about you and support you. Don't worry about the naysayers or the haters. Focus on the people that do love and care about you and that truly are your friend. That's where your focus needs to be.

50:11

Madison: Okay, I think that's a good place to end. Thank you.

[END]