

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

**Interview with Robin Jordan
February 22, 2017**

Interviewer: Nick Dillon

Interviewee: Robin Jordan

Date: February 22, 2017

Location: Fintel Library, 221 College Lane, Salem, Virginia

Present: Robin Jordan, Nick Dillon, and Hannah Kolcz

Total: 01:06:29

Transcribed by: Yvonne Gravely, Hannah Kolcz, and Nick Dillon

0:00:00 Living in Lynchburg in the 1970s; moving away, then eventually moving to Roanoke in 1989; Roanoke's gay scene

0:05:39 Discrimination (or lack thereof) against gay people in Roanoke; workplace issues; involvement in LGBTQ community

0:12:27 Living in South Carolina; racial issues; tenant issues involving a slumlord

0:21:15 Moving to Roanoke; loving the mountains, the outdoors;

0:28:37 Meeting Martha in high school (1960s), in Lynchburg; attending James Madison University, while Martha attended Bridgewater College; discovering her identity as a "lesbian"

0:40:00 General topics related to gay identity and community; coming out now versus back then

0:46:57 Advice for young LGBTQ people

0:49:07 Exploring her gender identity as a child (1950s-1960s); learning about transgender people (mid-1960s); sexism and patriarchy

0:55:20 Experiencing homophobia; sexism in the workplace and hiring; wage discrimination

1:03:11 Making long-term relationships work

1:05:25 Conclusion

Nick Dillon - (ND)
Robin Jordan - (RJ)

0.00 ND: This is Nick Dillon, interviewing Robin Jordan. It is February 22, approximately 5:30 p.m. And we will be discussing her life in regards to the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project.
How are you doing today Robin?

0.24 RJ: I am doing fine, thank you. How are you today?

0.26 ND: I'm pretty well, thank you.

0.27 RJ: Good.

0.28 ND: So can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Your history here, and your place in the LGBTQ+ community?

0.41 RJ: Well, I didn't grow up here. I actually grew up in Lynchburg. And Martha and I moved to South Carolina for her to go to graduate school, and then to Memphis, Tennessee, where she worked for a while before she got sick. And, I finished getting my degree, and we moved here to Roanoke. I heard a lot about Roanoke growing up. And, when we were still living in Lynchburg, in the [19]70s, we did use to occasionally come up to The Park. It would usually be a group of us that would get in a car and all drive up together and spend an evening at The Park because there wasn't any place else back then. So, as far as a place in the community when we first moved here, there wasn't a whole lot going on except for the Metropolitan Community Church and bar life.

Even though we were both atheists, we decided to go to the church because we are definitely not bar people [*laughter*]. I can't stand being around smoke, and at that time, you know, we didn't have smoking laws for indoors. So, it was just [so] you couldn't bear to be around places like bars back then. So, we got connected with the Metropolitan Community Church. We don't still go, but we still have friends that we met in the church. We still don't know a whole lot of people, but, like I said, we are still friends with some people we met a long time ago. And, periodically, we do meet some new people.

2.28 ND: So would you say that Martha, and then the Metropolitan Community Church, were your ties to Roanoke? I mean, you weren't from here?

2.36 RJ: No, I wasn't from here. But, we did move back here when I got a job here in Roanoke. We wanted to leave Memphis, and we were pretty far away from our parents. At that time, both of our parents still lived in Lynchburg. Although, right

- before we moved back Martha's mother died. And, my father had cancer. And, I did not like being so far away and didn't want to keep working where I was working, because we didn't want to stay there forever. So, I applied for jobs here, and got a position here in Roanoke. And we've been here since 1989.
- 3.24 ND: That is amazing. So, you got here. You got the job, and then you came back and you've been here since 1989?
- 3.34 RJ: Yeah.
- 3.34 ND: About when did you arrive in Roanoke? For the first time?
- 3.41 RJ: It was August 1, 1989 was when I drove up. Martha was already here because her mother had just died. And, she was with her father in Lynchburg. And spending some time with him. And, so my brother-in-law, actually my parents, flew him down to Memphis, and he helped me load up the truck after I was successful with my interview. He helped me load up the truck and drive it up, and actually it was my birthday [when] we drove up. I started my first day of work on August 1st. So it was birthday we drove up before that. It was quite a way to spend a birthday, I tell you [*laughter*]. Driving everything you own up from Memphis to Roanoke.
- 4.29 ND: It has to be an experience.
- 4.30 RJ: Yeah. We didn't get to move into the apartment right away. Because the tenants—the landlord who owned the apartment lived next door to the house. We rented a house in Salem. And, as a matter of fact, if you are on West 4th Street, it is the only house on West 4th Street. So it was quite interesting. But, we rented this house, and he found out after the tenants had moved out, that he a very bad bug problem and didn't want us to move in until he finished treating for bugs and everything. My parents were on a trip, and I used to commute back and forth from Lynchburg every day for a couple of weeks until we... because I had to wait for weekends to have time to try to get the house so we could live in it. And, so it was kind of odd that we did that. We moved kind of slowly, it took a little time, to be able to move into the house. So, for the first few weeks, probably three weeks, I commuted every day from Lynchburg to Roanoke, and then back again.
- 5.39 ND: Oh, wow. That is a really long commute.
- 5.41 RJ: Yeah. That made for a long day.
- 5.44 ND: Did you ever feel... I mean you and Martha were living together and Martha...
- 5.50 RJ: Um, hm.

- 5.50 ND: ...is your wife, well...
- 5.52 RJ: Partner.
- 5.53 ND: Partner.
- 5.54 RJ: Yeah.
- 5.54 ND: So, do you ever feel that, when you came to Roanoke, that any opportunities or jobs passed you by because y'all were living together? I mean did you feel any sense of discrimination?
- 6.13 RJ: Probably not so much here. I kind of didn't know how much I could say to co-workers and stuff. I remember, when I very first started, one of my co-workers asked me what my relationship with Martha was. And, I didn't really know what to say because I didn't know him, and Martha was really sick at the time. It was not really like having a partner per se at the time. She didn't ever know what was going on. And, so, I told him that we were like sisters, which we were kind of by that time. Kind of like sisters in a way. When you're a lesbian feminist, you think of other women as your sisters, so it seemed like not a totally dishonest answer at the time. But it didn't—I didn't have any problems exactly at work. And, I work for the State of Virginia, and they came out with a policy as far as discrimination and harassment and stuff like that, included they don't allow you to harass people for their sexual orientation, so actually for work it didn't seem to be a problem. And, we've probably had less trouble here than anywhere else that we've lived. I think partly [it] is because time has gone by, and when we first lived together it was a whole lot more trouble than it seems like it's been here.
- 8.07 ND: So, you would consider Roanoke one of the more friendly places?
- 8.10 RJ: Yeah, I've been really glad that this is where we ended up.
- 8.16 ND: So, when you have been here, you have mentioned The Park, or it was either The Park or the Metropolitan Community Church.
- 8.25 RJ: Well there were a couple of bars in town, The Park being one of them, or the Metropolitan Community Church. We just didn't find any other groups, but then later we found out about PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays]. And, we were associated with PFLAG for a while and even gave a presentation one time. We were guest speakers at one of the PFLAG meetings as a long-term lesbian couple. And so we did go to those meetings some.
- 8.59 ND: So, it seems to me that your identity here in Roanoke is not really

- specifically the fact that you're a lesbian or however you identify. I don't want to make an assumption. But so do you think here it is that you could be like any other couple, right?
- 9.20 RJ: Well, we've always been at least somewhat "out." And yeah, we have identified ourselves as a lesbian couple.
- 9.35 ND: I mean, labels—
- 9.36 RJ: Yeah.
- 9.37 ND: I just, I think it's interesting that... I would just like to hear more about your time in Roanoke. So, you got your job here?
- 9.47 RJ: Um, hm.
- 9.47 ND: And, can you tell us what you do?
- 9.52 RJ: Well, I'd rather not disclose the department that I work for. But, I do—trying to think of how to put it [*laughter*] that won't disclose it—I tried to think of this ahead of time actually, and I thought I came up with something that I could say. I do a job that's involved with science. And I really love it. So, it involves a lot of math and a lot of science.
- 10.33 ND: Okay, that's a good answer, there's no wrong way to answer.
- 10.36 RJ: Yeah.
- 10.38 ND: Now, you said that you have a few LGBTQ+ friends. And people you associate with. Do you see them in similar positions? Do you notice any kind of niches that form in the community that you might identify with?
- 11.02 RJ: Well, we have one of our friends has actually worked at the Council of Community Services. And they serve a lot of the LGBTQ community. They do AIDS testing, and they are open to people working there that are LGBTQ [*laughter*]. So, and we've visited there, and I think that he definitely has a positive experience working in Roanoke. His partner doesn't work in Roanoke. But works in another close-by city. And I don't really know what it's like at work, but it tends to be manufacturing jobs, and I don't know really what his experience is. When he's away from work, I think when he's home, he is just not at work. And that's a good thing.
- 12.15 ND: I think we all think that, don't we?

- 12.16 RJ: Yeah.
- 12.16 ND: So, I mean, in the Southwest Virginia community, it is not just Roanoke...
- 12.27 RJ: Um, hm.
- 12.28 ND: ...but did y'all ever get to travel any other places besides Roanoke? I mean, in college, for example?
- 12.34 RJ: Um, hm.
- 12.34 ND: Did you have any interactions here for college or anything else?
- 12.44 RJ: Well, we went, the both of us... I started off at community college. My parents didn't have money to send me to a four-year school. My mother put me through community college and the rest of my schooling on her cafeteria job. *[laughter]*. But it's kind of funny, I ended up working with people who had the same kind of job as people who went to, you know, Ivy League schools. So, it really ended up not making any difference in the end as far as that went. I got just as good a job for my education... but I am trying to remember exactly what the question was *[laughter]*!
- 13.31 ND: I am sorry. I probably did not make it clear.
- 13.34 RJ: No, you did, but I kind of wandered off *[laughter]*. You were asking maybe about other places that we've lived? What the experience has been like?
- 13.45 ND: So, I mean, you said that Roanoke was the most open?
- 13.50 RJ: Yeah I think it was. In a lot of ways, I think when we lived in Memphis, we knew people who were gay in Memphis. It wasn't bad there. We were pretty out there as well. South Carolina is a little bit of a different story. But, we lived there, I mean *[laughter]* I remember when we first moved there, we drove down to look at the Capitol. There was this flag flying on the top of the Capitol building, and it's a rebel flag. And, we were like, "what the hell have we've gotten into," you know? But it was sort of... it was strange living there. I mean, it was so different from anything else we'd ever experienced. It was the first time we'd actually gotten out of Lynchburg, you know. We were so happy to get out of Lynchburg. But, it was strange, because, at that time in South Carolina, it was like there were a lot of racial issues going on but nobody really discussed them or anything. So, being kind of that backward as far as racial issues, you can imagine how backward it was as far as any other kind of issues. You know, I don't remember specifically having problems except for a landlord we had. Our first landlord *[laughter]* turned out that he was somewhat of a crook. He had a bunch of different housing, and he would—he had

this thing, and we did not know this until—what he did was, he had a thing called “insta-rent,” and we just got this the regular way answering an ad in the newspaper but he did have this promise that he would give to people that if you would pay him a certain amount of money, he would have you in one of his rental properties within a very short period of time.

And what he did was: he had papers sitting in the courthouse, with renters’ names on it for eviction notices, and that all he had to do was go and sign them and he’d get people evicted like that. And then he could move other people into the rental property. Well, we fortunately only had a three-month lease, but when we moved in we found out there were odd things there like you could not get the water or the electricity—it was all one, all of the utilities were in a public utility, not like a private thing. You know, it was all a public utility, and if the previous tenant didn’t pay their bill, you could not get your utilities cut on until you covered their bill. So, we had to pay all of this money just to get our electricity cut on. And then, it turned out, part of the house didn’t even have electricity. It was just... and so we never could get a hold of him again. The number we had called in to answer the ad and to meet him and sign the lease was disconnected. He had no other way to get in touch with him. He did not have an address, when you sent the rent in, everybody that deposited the rent deposited it in somebody else’s mailbox. And he’d come around and pick them up. So you couldn’t find him, you couldn’t ever find him again.

So, when we went to move, we found one of the people I worked with had a rental house. Nice rental house. And somebody was moving out and he was looking for somebody to move in. It worked out great for us. So we tried to get a hold of the landlord to get our deposit money back, and being at the University of South Carolina, Martha was able to use the legal department there. You know, they’d have law students who would work on problems as practice, and so we were telling them we couldn’t find our landlord to talk to him about getting our deposit back. And you know all this sort of stuff, and we were moving out before the last month. And, you know, we thought maybe we could pay the last month’s rent and get our deposit and get out.

He had the hardest [time], and he used to be an investigative reporter before he went to law school. He had the hardest time finding this guy. And when he did, he found out about all of this “insta-rent” stuff. And he found that he had our names ready to evict at any moment, and all this kind of stuff. But when he was able to speak—he found out who this guy’s lawyer was. And so he spoke to this guy through the guy’s lawyer, and that guy said if you—at this time, I with working water plants at this time, which involved having a state license to be a water plant operator. And if you have a state license, you could lose it if you were not in compliance with every state law there was, including the law against homosexuals. So, he could have, if he wanted to, he could have—and he threatened this—he could have reported us and had my state license taken away and made me lose my job. So, he was threatening to

do that.

19.55 ND: And is that part of the reason why you all left South Carolina?

19.59 RJ: Well, no. We left when Martha found a job.

20.08 ND: That's so just...

20.09 RJ: Yeah, I know. It was amazing. South Carolina had odd laws. Their court system doesn't include a—what do you call it—small claims. They don't have small claims court. So if we wanted to try to get our money back from him later, we would have to wait until it came up on the circuit court docket, which, to the best of this guy's knowledge, we would have had to come back to South Carolina probably in about a year and a half or so. And everything was stacked in favor of the landlords. Different states are different like that.

20.55 ND: That is insane.

20.55 RJ: I know.

20.56 ND: So, y'all came back to Roanoke when Martha found a job?

21.03 RJ: We moved... I found the job in Roanoke. We moved to Memphis when Martha found a job.

21.08 ND: OK. So, y'all moved to Roanoke when *you* found the job?

21.12 RJ: Yeah. Yes.

21.15 ND: Now, I guess comparing that to South Carolina, did you ever feel like the environment, the laws, just the places in Roanoke were not really accepting or—what is the word?

21.33 RJ: I can't remember having any specific problems in Roanoke. Maybe Martha will remember some that I haven't thought of. But, we did kind of worry when we moved out where we are now because it's very rural, and we live in an extremely redneck neighborhood. And so we were a little bit worried when we first moved out there what might happen to us. When we used to go to the church there were two women in the church who had problems in their neighborhood. A country neighborhood. And so we were a little bit worried that maybe we would have problems. But, our next-door neighbor was just really nice, and everybody, you know after a while, we seem to be getting accepted into the community. And our next-door neighbor seen us one day about something and his wife said "I just want y'all to know you don't need to worry about anything. We all know you're gay."

- [laughter] Nobody cares.” And she said, “My brother’s gay.”
- 22.48 ND: Well, I’m glad you had a really good time. I mean—
- 22.52 RJ: Yeah.
- 22.52 ND: Is there anything about Roanoke that you believe that made it more accepting than South Carolina or any other places?
- 23.01 RJ: Well, it’s weird, you would expect a university city to be more advanced or more liberal or something but I don’t know. I think Roanoke’s just, I mean, golly, they had a black mayor long before we ever moved here. I don’t know. Roanoke, if you look like after the elections, if you look at the election maps that show what different areas [are and] how they vote. Roanoke is always very liberal. You know, there will be this little blue dot in the middle of all this red stuff. So, you know, not having grown up here, I don’t really know how it exactly started being like that because Lynchburg certainly isn’t like that.
- 23.53 ND: It’s interesting since you are not from Roanoke, I think, then, you come in with a different perspective.
- 24.00 RJ Um, hm.
- 24.01 ND: I mean, even if it wasn’t, I’m glad that there weren’t any problems. But, were there any experiences that made you fall in love with Roanoke, if you have? I would like to just...
- 24.12 RJ: I tell you what, Memphis is as flat as it can be. The river is super cool. I mean going down and seeing the Mississippi is one of the coolest things. If you visit Memphis, there is so much to see and so much of a cultural experience. You know, that’s where the blues were born, and that’s where—we weren’t Elvis fans really but still—you know, there is a lot of that kind of rock and roll history, and music history, and just the culture of the river. Taking riverboat rides, it’s fun to visit there, but it was very odd living there because it wasn’t really like a southern city. Like what we were used to. We’ve never lived outside of the south, and it was almost like it was more of a northern city.

But, the first thing that came into my head every single morning when I would wake up was, you know, I would wake up, it was the beginning of the day, and I would kind of open my eyes and I would stretch and I would think: there are no mountains here. I grew up around the mountains, and that was my favorite thing to do as a little kid, the days my parents would take drives up on the Blue Ridge Parkway. And I just loved the mountains. I used to tell my mother, “oh, when I want to grow up, I want to have a house on the side of the mountain.” You know, that kind of thing. So

- moving here, and there's all of these mountains. It just... there's a hill behind my house, you remember that hill?
- 25.57 ND: Um, hm.
- 25.57 RJ: There's a hill up there, and in the winter—I mean, of course when there's leaves on the trees you can't do it—but, in the winter, if you're up there, you can stand in one place and just turn around and there are mountains everywhere you look. Just, there they are. I'm surrounded with them.
- 26.17 ND: So it's like a dream come true.
- 26.17 RJ: It is. It is.
- 26.18 ND: Were y'all completely surrounded by mountains in where you grew up?
- 26.25 RJ: No, I could see mountains, but I remember sometimes sitting in my bathroom, at home, when I was a little kid, and looking out the window, and wishing I could see mountains out of that window. Because the mountains, you could see them from Lynchburg, but they were not right on top of you. I knew they were close by, and when Martha and I were still living in Lynchburg, I would get off from work, and we would hastily pack a, you know, picnic sandwich you know and take the dog, and in 35 minutes we could be up on the Parkway. And, we'd hike up a trail and stop somewhere and eat our picnic dinner. And, you know, hike back. I remember we used to like to stop at a place on the Parkway and watch the sunset. It was just, being out in the [mountains], we missed it. Because when we lived in Lynchburg, before we moved away, in our twenties when we were still living in Lynchburg, we used to backpack. And we had missed that so much.
- 27.31 ND: Oh, wow.
- 27.32 RJ: We weren't physically—Martha especially wasn't physically able to do that anymore—but still, just being able to get out in them and hike on the trails and that kind of thing. I'm such a nature person [*laughter*]. I like being outside more than anything. One of my first memories when I was a little kid, was—this sounds really silly but you know how little kids are—and I'm an atheist now, but I grew up, you know, in a religious family. And I remember just, you know, being in my bedroom, and I'd hear the doves, and there was a steep hill and woods and everything all around us and the backyard. And it wasn't far from the James River. You could see the river in the winter, through the trees. And I remember the doves calling. And I could hear them out there. They were just [*dove call: coo, coo, coo, coo*]. And I thought, that's God calling me to go into the woods [*laughter*].
- 28.36 ND: So you feel at home here?

- 28.37 RJ: Yeah. Yeah, it felt like I came home here.
- 28.42 ND: That's wonderful. So, that begs the question then, so, you've known Martha for how long now?
- 28.49 RJ: Fifty years.
- 28.49 ND: How did y'all meet?
- 28.51 RJ: In high school [*laughter*].
- 28.53 ND: You were from Lynchburg?
- 28.55 RJ: Yes.
- 28.56 ND: And, Martha was from Roanoke, wasn't she?
- 28.59 RJ: Well, she's lived... Her father worked for Appalachian [Power Company] and traveled around the state. Well, in this kind of region. You know, they lived in Lynchburg, in Roanoke, in Collinsville, so... in this region anyway. He had an opportunity at one time when she was in high school to move to Alaska, and they seriously discussed this as a family. But, I don't know why the decision was made not to take them up on the Alaska move. Maybe, he was just getting older and didn't want to make that big a move anymore. I really don't know. But, so, she lived in Lynchburg when she was small and in Roanoke when she was small.

And then before she went to high school she was in Collinsville. Then they moved back to Lynchburg. So that's where I met her. They moved back I think when she started the 8th grade. But I met her, first day of school in the 10th grade. But that wasn't the first time I saw her. I saw her the year before. She says I stalked her. [*laughter*].

I was out in the hall one day from home room, and I saw this girl walking down the hall, and I thought, "I really like her. I'd like to be her friend." And I, let me tell you, I'm like one of the shyest people. It's a good thing you came and visited with me, you know, before we went to do this [oral history], because I would have had a harder time. Because I'm really shy. This isn't normal for me. But I thought, "I'd really like to be her friend." And "whatever it is that's really different about me, I think it's... I think she's like that, too!" I didn't know what it was. We'd never heard of lesbians or anything, you know, back then. We [*laughter*] were totally innocent.

But, the next day, I went out in the hall to see if I could figure out where she came

from, cause she kind of disappeared through the crowds, you know. So I thought, “Well, she didn’t show up. She didn’t show up in that part of the hall.” And, so, I thought, the next day, I thought well maybe she’s coming up the staircase over here. Or, the next day, I thought the staircase over there. You know, when I kept trying to see her again. And I never saw her again that year.

And so the first day of school, in 10th grade, I walked into my English class and there she was. Sitting in a seat, with an empty seat in the front of the row, right in front of her. And I just walked right over and plopped into that seat and I turned around and I said “Hi.” And she was shy, too. Although, she’s not as shy as I am. But she said she just, you know, didn’t know why I was coming up and talking to her. But it made her feel really shy. And she kind of put her head down and went “Hi.” [laughter] And I so I tried to get her to talk. I said, “I like your pocketbook.” [laughter] She said, “Thank you,” and she just did her head down again, like she was just not really sure she should talk, you know. But, I finally got her to talk to me.

And the next thing I knew, she invited me to come over and visit for the day. And I remember my mother, you know, that morning I woke up, and she said, “You are really excited about going to your friend’s house today,” you know. I said, “Yes, I am.” [laughter] So that is... that’s one of our anniversaries that we like to celebrate. Well, I kind of started it, I guess. Cause I’m the romantic of us two.

And so, the first day of school, sometimes Martha will forget. I will always take [work] off. Back then, we didn’t do school before Labor Day. So, I would always—at work—I would often take the day that would be the first school day after Labor Day. Usually it’s like Salem City schools, they do that day, you know, and I would take the day off. And I would say let’s go downtown, and I would surprise her with lunch or breakfast or something with a little gift. And then, she’d say, “Why are you getting me this?” And I’d say, “We met on this day” [laughter]. So anyway, this last day of school—on this last first day of school, this past fall—it was fifty years ago.

33.31 ND: That is incredible. So, this was high school, so, y’all didn’t go to the same college?

33.38 RJ: No, but like I said, I stayed home for two years to go to community college. But, when it was time to—and my parents always told me I was going to have to go to a state school. They couldn’t afford to send me anywhere else—so, I was looking up in catalogs, seeing all the state schools, and I noticed, “Wow, this one is only eight miles from Bridgewater!” So that’s the one I applied to, and that’s the one I got into [laughter].

34.05 ND: Did you apply to that school because Martha was going to Bridgewater?

34.11 RJ: Yeah, yeah, and it seemed like the right size. Larger state schools, like UVA

[The University of Virginia] or [Virginia] Tech, although back then it was called VPI [Virginia Polytechnic Institute], they all seemed kind of big, intimidating to me. Martha went to a very small school. But, this one was... it seemed like it was one that I could, you know, it didn't intimidate me. So, it worked out pretty well; except for the [fact that] I wanted to be a biologist, and I had no idea that this biology department was actually a pre-med biology course that I didn't even realize that until last year [laughter]. It's so weird! I always wondered why biology was so strange there. But, then I was talking to somebody about it last year, and they said, "well, you know that's a pre-med course?" And, I'm going, "oh yeah, that would explain that girl that sat down next to me in class, and looked over at me the first day of school and said, "Do I smell like cadaver?" [laughter]

35.20 ND: That is hilarious. Well, so you were going to a school eight miles from Bridgewater? Were you and Martha talking still?

35.34 RJ: Yeah, and we would spend weekends together; and it was during that period of time that we started sleeping together. We liked each other a lot, you know? We enjoyed being with each other a whole lot. But, we kind of thought we made all this up; we thought we kind of invented it, you know [laughter]?

35.57 ND: How did you like come to understand that—I know that there weren't as many resources available. How did you figure out—well, "figure out" in quotations, that who y'all were... proved to have other people around you that were...

36.19 RJ: Well, Martha was doing a term paper in one of her sociology classes; it was a minority relations class, and she didn't want to do a minority that everybody else was doing, that was a popular minority. There is one, but you know, she knew nobody would pick homosexuals, and so she thought, "Well I'll pick homosexuals, nobody else would pick them, you know? I'll be the only one!" So, it was odd because she had to try to find books in the library and she looked; she found a few books in the card catalog, but they were never on the shelves! And, she figured, "you know, they can't possibly be all checked out for this long!" So she finally went to the librarian and asked, "Why aren't these books ever on the shelves?" And she looked at them and she said, "Well they're locked in a vault; you can't have them" [laughter]. So, Martha's professor ended up having to get them out for her, and they were terrible books! They were from the [19]30s and '40s and '50s and you know the information was very outdated.

So she had found out there was a gay student union in Charlottesville, and her professor offered to drive us over there for the meetings. So, they gave her some names of people she can write to. And, she began writing and we began collecting a whole lot of information. At that time, there were still some of the really old gay newspapers that were still being published, and some of the old lesbian newspapers that were still being published way back in those, you know, early [19]70s. And, so she was getting all this stuff. I mean, we met people, you know... some of the people who were activists way back in that time. We had phone numbers of people that who were nationally known. We could call them up and talk to them and stuff like that. But, when she was first trying to get all of this information together and we'd been looking at, you know—and

she'd write to one person and they would give her another few names that she could write to, and those people would give her a few more names. So we were beginning to get this collection of information and I remember we were sitting on the floor one night and we had it all spread around us and we were just—we sort of looked at each other and we said, “you know, I think this is about us!” [*laughter*] So that's how we figured it out! [*laughter*]

But, what was good about it was all of this information, instead of like the books that had been in the library, this was all positive information; this was from people who were activists, and people who believed that they should be free to love who and how they wanted. So, it was good, I think, in a way that we ended up with very positive information about ourselves and that's how we started out. And I'd already moved in with Martha and told my parents that I loved Martha and if she was a man I would want to marry her and all this stuff. I still had no clue.

40.00 ND: How do you feel knowing [that] all of this new information at the time changed your relationship with Martha? Do you think that it did?

40.11 RJ: I think... [*pause*]... that's kind of an interesting question. I had never really thought about that. I think it probably did in a way because we began to not feel isolated. We knew there were other people out there. We knew there was a culture out there that we could be a part of. And I think that we didn't feel that way before. We didn't know anybody else like us. Or, that anybody else like us even existed. So, that was a revelation that I think did make a difference.

40.54 ND: Do you think that it helped you—I don't want to say go through life more easily—but, made you less scared? How did you feel?

41.06 RJ: Well, it still was a little scary that people might find out, you know, because there still were—for instance, later when we moved to South Carolina—consequences if someone found out that I had a state license. And yet, I was a homosexual which was against the law. To have a state license, boy, they really had some leverage over hair dressers because they had to have state licenses. I imagine that a lot of hair dressers—because there are a fair representation of homosexuals—gay men—and possibly gay women who are hair dressers. And, I feel like it probably... yeah, they probably felt really worried about their livelihood, as well. It's hard to feel like someone has that much leverage over your life, I think.

42.17 ND: Did you use any of the resources—I mean, you've told me about your relationship with the Metropolitan Community Church and the bars here in Roanoke—do you feel that those, I'm going to say, tools helped you meet new people? Or, just come to accept it and live your life?

42.42 RJ: I think it's important to have other people in your life who are gay and lesbian, I really do. And, as time went on, we began to know some transgender people and I think just having that diversity of acquaintances and knowledge of people out there

is important for a sense of community.

43:15 ND: So, I'm curious after finding out this information and where you are now—if you had to look back on your experiences in Roanoke, in South Carolina, in all of the places that you have been, can you talk to me about how you think it would be different now, if you had to go through it all over again?

43:44 RJ: Like today?

43:44 ND: Yes.

43:48 RJ: Well, I think to begin with, I think that knowing that there is hatred out there might make it harder because, I mean, I've read books by people [*pause*] who grew up later than we did and grew up with a self-loathing that we didn't know when we were younger, and ended up self-mutilating because they felt like they should be punished for the feelings they were having. And we never went through that. And I think that—and yet, I think that also having the more positive resources out there more readily available, I think that that can help overcome it. I think it's a real... I just don't understand why people hate so much. You know why do people want to hate people who don't do anything to them? I don't understand that. And, I don't know exactly... there would be some negative parts to it and some positive parts to it. In a way, it was sort of a blessing being ignorant about the whole thing or naïve about the whole thing to start off with. I think there was a certain bliss in it, almost, that people might not have today. And, I mean, I let my parents know what was going on before my parents realized that there were words for it. What if they had been more prepared with having gotten ideas from preachers and the news media? Or, anything else. And gotten ideas that preconceive them against what I turned out to be. I don't know how that might have made a difference and how they made—my mother, she's English, and the English are a lot more—even being conservative as she is—I think the English have a lot more tolerance for a wide variety of deviance [*laughter*], if you want to say that. I mean, look at English movies, there is a lot more sexually going on in them and a lot more titillation that's more accepted. Society-wise, we seem to be a lot more prudish in America than they are in England, so maybe it would have been the same as far as my parents, I don't know, but...

46.57 ND: Do you ever think that, again, knowing what you have been through, do you think that—I don't want to say that your life would have been easier. Do you think that you would have—I don't want this to seem repetitive—navigated the hoops that you had to go through? ...I mean, not like coming out...

47.22 RJ: Well, I think I know what you are saying. And, I think that, yeah, I think that it would have been easier than it was for us because they're paths that people have already taken that we were... Of course, if you're going through the woods and you have to pick your own trail, it's a lot slower and a lot harder to navigate the underbrush and everything else, than it is to take a hike up on the Appalachian Trail where a lot of people

have walked before you.

48:02 ND: I like that analogy [*laughter*]. So, I mean, you've been on this trail for a while and you've seen a lot of the trees, a lot of the rocks. Now, someone who has just figured out that they are gay or lesbian have just set foot on the path. What kind of advice would you give them, knowing everything you've been through and you have lived in so many different places, I mean, you've seen a lot, you've been part of the MCC, you've seen the clubs—and I'm assuming not just [in] Roanoke either, but...

48.48 RJ: Yeah.

48.48 ND: What would you say to them? What would your advice be?

48.50 RJ: Don't ever ever hate yourself... [*pause*] Don't ever let somebody make you do that to yourself.

49.07 ND: In terms of your own life, do you ever feel like you did that for being gay? Do you ever...

49.17 RJ: I have been different since I was a little kid [*laughter*]. I knew that something was different about me. So, sometimes I'm not real happy with myself, but it's not because of that. It's because of other things. I mean, we probably all go through that. But, I remember when I was a really little kid, I wanted to be mistaken for a boy. Probably about the time I was about four years old. That's when I began to think I would like to be mistaken for a boy. I did not like having to wear dresses, which we had to wear to school. I liked it when someone thought that I was a boy. And I climbed trees. And, although, well I guess it was a little after the time I was four years old because actually in Kindergarten, I promised every boy in my Kindergarten class that I would marry them.

[*laughter*] But, shortly after that, I began to want to wear my brother's leftover clothes. You know, the ones that he outgrew. I would cut off his khakis and wear them around for shorts and stuff like that. And, I remember in the eighth grade, one time, we had a library—we went into the library to do a project with periodicals. We had to write a paper, and I remember looking through the periodicals—this would have been, let's see, maybe [19]65, I can't remember exactly what [year], yeah '64 because '66 was tenth grade, so ninth grade would have been '65; so eighth grade would have been '64—and I remember going into the library. And I was just going through periodicals trying to find something that interested me. And, I came across an article about someone—and I think it was maybe in Sweden or in one of those countries—who had undergone a sex change operation. And I thought this was the most fascinating thing that I had ever read. But, I had enough instinct to know that would not be the article to write about for class [*laughter*]. So, I found something else to write about.

But I read every word in that article. And, I used to go home from school and just talk to

my mother. Just chat. She used to like to fix dinner, and I would just sit there and chat, you know. And so, I remember telling her about this article. And, I remember saying that I found it comforting to actually know that, if when I became an adult, if I felt like I really wanted to be a boy, I could do it. That you could actually go out and do this! And my mother just listened. She never said a word anytime I would talk to her about stuff. Sometimes, she would ask questions, but she never made any judgement on what I said or anything. And, as I got older, I never felt like—you know, now that I know a lot about people who are transgender, they go through something that I've never experienced. I don't believe that I've ever felt the same way they do. So, I don't believe I was ever transgender.

But, I do think that that's a commentary on the way women—females—were treated. I mean, I remember my brother got to do chores outside, and I was expected to dust and clean and do the dishes and all of this sort of stuff, me and my sister. And I mean, there was a definite gender division. In the way I was, when I was mistaken for a boy, I remember a man in the supermarket one time, my mother was—I don't know where my sister was, she normally was always with my mother, but for some reason, that day, she was not—and I was in the supermarket with my mother. And somebody that mom hadn't run into in a long time saw her there—a man—and he said something to her. And then he started talking to me. And it was a perfectly normal conversation, you know, and I was just talking to him. I was still a little kid. I wasn't a preteen or anything—I was still a kid. But I was just talking to him. And he said something to my mother about what a nice son I had, and she said, "Oh, no, that's my oldest daughter." And, he said, "Oh! Of course." And then, he started talking to me very patronizingly, you know, "What a pretty little girl you are!" "Do you like your dresses?" you know, whatever he said. It was just... I wanted to smack him, you know. I really did because he was treating me like a perfectly normal person before he discovered that I was a girl. And then, he began treating me differently. I think that's a real—that I even went through feeling like that—is a real commentary on the way women are treated in this society.

55.15 ND: I mean, it's absolutely true. There is a gendered division of labor.

55.20 RJ: Um, hm.

55.20 ND: Do you ever feel like you got treated differently, not only because you were a woman but because you are a woman who liked women? I know I think that I have already asked this, but...

55.32 RJ: Yeah, um. Well, we've been treated terrible by some friends. We had some real bad experiences with people we have known. We had a friend at our first apartment that we made friends with. She stayed friends with us for quite a few years and visited us in Lynchburg. And stuff like that. But, one day, she moved to Charlottesville, and she asked us to come and see her. I mean, this was an hour drive up [Route] 29, you know, to go to Charlottesville. So, we drove all the way up to Charlottesville, got out of

the car, found her house. Cause we hadn't been there before, she recently moved there. Got out of the car, went up to her house, she opened the door, and we stepped into her house. And, before she did anything else—I mean, we figured we were going to be there for a meal, to visit, this sort of stuff—she said “I just wanted you all to know, I want to live a traditional lifestyle. And I do not want to have you for friends anymore. I would like you to leave my house now.” And, we had to get back in our car and drive all the way back to Lynchburg. So yes, we had experiences like that. People who, sometimes it seems like more from people who knew us for a while than even strangers because most of the time we were really mistaken for sisters, I guess because we're both short. We both had short hair. Some reason, people mistook us for sisters a lot. Strangers would ask us, “Oh! Is that your sister?” and a lot of times, we just go “yeah,” because what are you going to do? It's nobody's business if you don't want it to be. You're not obligated to come out to everybody you meet, or every stranger on the street!

57.53 ND: That's absolutely true! It's your own life.

57.54 RJ: Um, hm.

57.54 ND: So, I want to ask. We've asked you about your experiences in the past and how they would have changed, and you've also given us advice. Now, if you were looking at yourself—if you had to have a conversation with your past self—what would you tell yourself? You have told us what you would tell other people. What about you, in particular?

58.23 RJ: Well, I think that women tend to have less earning power, and I missed an opportunity [*laughter*] in my current job that I think it really doesn't have anything except to do with being a woman. When I came here for this job from Memphis—when I was called and was told that I could have this job, my soon-to-be boss asked me at the time, he said, “Are you fine with the salary?” Well, when I went for the interview, I was told that they had something like eighty some people applied for the job. And they were interviewing almost forty of them. So, I certainly didn't want to mess up anything about getting that job. I thought, if I say anything to him, what if he says, “Well, fine, we'll hire somebody else” [*laughter*]. Or, whatever. But, back in those days, I had worked for city governments—you know, local governments—all of which had jobs that it didn't matter if you were male or female. If you had that job, there was a fixed salary for it. But, with the state, your salary was negotiable on hiring. I had no way of knowing that, no way at all. And I had three years of experience specifically doing the same job that I came here to do, plus two years of experience in a similar job that involved interpreting regulations. And so, when I was getting this job, they gave me a higher salary than what I had in Memphis. But, the problem was, in Tennessee, there is no state tax. If you considered the salary that I was going to get, moving to Virginia, and if you took away the fact that there was no state tax in Tennessee, it didn't end up really being a raise. I was really coming for about the same salary.

If I could go back and tell myself anything, I would tell myself “ask for more money” because after I came they had hiring freezes. They had salary freezes for years and years and years and years. And it turned out that my boss had been told, because he went back there, they offered me a senior position for a salary that was way below the other person that I was working with who was a man. And the Richmond office—I mean, he was beside himself because he said, “If I had known this is all the money I could have offered her, I would have hired her as a regular [employee], you know below that, so that she would have a chance to move up.” So, they hired me in the highest position that I could come into with nowhere to go and no way to get any more money. And so, it damaged my hiring, my earning potential for my entire career.

1:02:06 ND: I’m sorry.

1:02:06 RJ: Yeah.

1:02:10 ND: Do you have...

1:02:12 RJ: And they kept saying “well, he has more experience than you. He’s worked here for however long,” four years or three years, which wasn’t really true because I had been doing that job before coming there as long as he had. But, that’s the way they were in Richmond. My current boss went up to Richmond one day—I had no idea he was doing this; we went up there together because I was doing some training—and he went up to the personnel office. And he laid out some stuff in front of him, in front of them. And told them that they needed to give me some more money. And he got me more money. But, when you consider all of those years that I didn’t earn it, it hurt. And that’s hurting us today that I didn’t get that earning power that I would have gotten.

1:03:08 ND: That’s awful.

1:03:08 RJ: It is.

1:03:11 ND: Do you have any other experiences or advice that you would like to give? I mean, in terms of other...

1:03:19 RJ: Well, I’ll tell you, I think one of the things that—we got asked things like that when we did the presentation at the PFLAG meeting. Long-term relationships, people tend to ask you, and I’ve had other people [ask], like at work. There was a woman getting married and a lot of the girls at work went out to take her out to lunch before she got married. And Martha was invited and we were sitting across the table from her. She also asked, “What do you do to stay together? You know, how do you—what advice can you give somebody?” And I think that it’s hard sometimes when you’re going through tough times when you’re in a relationship with somebody to realize that nothing ever stays the same. Your relationship is going to ebb and flow and grow and sometimes seem to fall down. But, if you really love the other person, you’re going to get

through those times that seem like you're going to wring each other's necks, if you don't get away from each other. And I think that that's probably the advice that I would give to somebody is when you are in a relationship, when you find somebody that you really love and who really loves you—and relationships usually work out best, I think for people who somehow are friends before they become lovers. I think having that friendship as a base part of your relationship makes a difference. And just realize that this is a person you've been through everything with. Don't throw it away. If you just hang around for a little while longer, things are gonna change. Whatever is the problem, whatever is going on that's causing it to be a problem, is not going to last forever.

1:05:25 ND: That is wonderful. Thank you so much! We appreciate your time. Do you have any last thoughts or experiences you want to share?

1:05:36 RJ: Well, I just love this project. I love what's going on here as far as... we've gone online and listened to some of the stories. And I think hearing people's stories is one of the greatest things that you can give to another person. I think that's one of the things that will help people who are just realizing this about themselves, to hear stories about what other people have been through.

1:06:08 ND: Absolutely! And that's one of the reasons we're so thankful for your participation. And I don't think I can thank you enough for sharing your story! But I have to say thank you again.

1:06:23 RJ: Thank you. I enjoyed this.

1:06:28 ND: I hope you have a wonderful day.

1:06:29 RJ: You, too.

[THE END]