

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project**

**Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Martha**

**February 22, 2017**

Interviewer: Avery Kirkendall (and Marcus Stewart)

Interviewee: Martha

Date: February 22, 2017

Location: Roanoke College Fintel Library, 221 College Lane, Salem, VA

Transcription prepared by: Alexa Doiron, Lorien Santos, Emma Fenton, and Marcus Stewart

Total: 1:03:56

0:00= discussing family background; childhood (1950s-1960s)

2:05= relationships with siblings; reactions to Supreme Court marriage equality ruling and to Martha and Robin's upcoming wedding

5:41= explains reasons for getting married now and not earlier; having an open relationship; health, aging, and mortality

10:07= on having been with her partner since 1972; on atheism and religious discrimination in Virginia

13:37= recalls how she and her partner began their relationship, while both in college (early 1970s)

15:16= Writing a research paper about “homosexuality” at Bridgewater College (early 1970s)

18:00= helpful support from her professor; attending gay student union meetings at the University of Virginia (UVA); reading literature published by political organizations in the early 1970s: women’s movement, gay rights, lesbian feminism, etc.

20:18= reading movement literature and discovering that she and Robin were “lesbians”; the way people talked about homosexuality in the 1960s and 1970s

22:29= talks about the paper she wrote and sent to her parents to come out; her father’s reaction

24:51= getting a job at the Lynchburg Public Library through the CETA program; moving into her parents’ basement after a bad breakup; arguing with her mother about homosexuality

30:08= her parents’ relationships with Robin; relationship with her mother

33:29= her relationship with Robin’s siblings; evangelical Christianity, views on homosexuality

38:35= relatives finding out about her wedding and her not wanting them to attend

40:25= college experiences at Bridgewater College (early 1970s); experiencing homophobia; encounter with the Dean of Students

48:22= Robin’s time at JMU and rules re: gender-segregated dormitories

49:06= going back to Bridgewater for a Pride Week celebration (mid-2010s)

52:36= talking about how things have changed for the better in terms of mainstream acceptance of race, gender, sexuality

54:57= returning to the topic of getting married; getting a marriage license; planning the party

1:00:39= Robin coming “out” to her parents

1:01:55= closing remarks; looking at Martha and Robin’s wedding invitations

0:00

AK: The following interview was conducted with Martha on behalf of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project and oral history initiative. It took place on February 22, 2017 at Fintel Library at Roanoke College. The interviewer is Avery Kirkendall.

0:25

AK: So how about we start off with you stating your name and where you grew up?

0:30

M: Okay, I'm Martha. I grew up around Virginia. We moved every two years when I was a kid, always in Virginia but just different places. I kind of remember where I was when by how old I was by where I lived. But anyway, yeah.

0:49

AK: What can you tell me about your parents, like what kind of work they did?

0:53

M: My father was an electrical engineer for Appalachian Power Company. That's why we moved every two years because in the fifties and sixties they promoted people and moved them around to promote them, that's why we moved every two years.

My mother... my father grew up around Roanoke, my mother, her parents are from Italy. She's Italian, she was Italian, but anyway... she worked before, when she met my father, she was like a—I don't know what she did—but she did secretarial type work. That's generally what women did back then when my mother was growing up. When I was in high school, we were living in

Lynchburg and she wanted to go back to work and went to Phillips Business College and picked up some skills and went to work for Grand [Home] Furnishing, it was Grand Piano back then, but anyway she went to work for them and eventually became their credit manager and loved it. But anyway, that was my parents.

2:03

AK: Do you have any siblings?

2:05

M: I have two brothers. One is two years younger than me and one is four years younger than me. The one that's four years younger than me, he and I have always been friends. I don't know if it is just sibling rivalry, the one that's two years younger than me, we just sort of like fought all the time, and we get along now because we are adults, not because we really have anything in common. But, my brother who is four years younger than me, he called me up when the Supreme Court ruling came down four years ago on same-sex marriage and he was all excited. The day it happened he called me, 'Did you hear about the Supreme Court ruling?' and I said 'Yeah, I did' and he said 'Well, what do y'all...', he said "I just wanted to tell you, I'm so excited," he said, "I want to be in your wedding," and I said "Well, Bob, I don't think we're having a wedding." And he said "Oh, well," and he sounded real disappointed. "If you do, let me know, I want to be in it." So now we're getting married and he's going to be Robin—my partner's—best man.

3:07

AK: Oh, that's so exciting.

3:10

M: And he's real excited about it.

3:12

AK: Very exciting. Yeah, being the oldest is always interesting... Interesting dynamic there.

3:16

M: Yeah, it is. It's weird. But it's, you know, the one who's two years younger than me, I don't know, he knows we're getting married. He says he wants to come to the wedding. I don't want him there and I don't want his wife there. She's Jehovah's Witness, and a year ago she informed me, she just brought it up, and she said "I think gay people can get married in Virginia now" and I said "Yeah, they can" and I said "The supreme court just ruled they can get married" and she said "Well I just want you to know, I'm not coming to your gay wedding." And I wanted to say, "Well I didn't, in the first place, I'm not having a gay wedding, in the second place, nobody asked you." But I didn't say any of that, I just said, "Oh, okay," and then she started telling me about why she couldn't because Jehovah would be mad at her and all the shit about what is, you know, that Robin and I are going to Hell and all this kind of stuff, and I'm like, "Okay, okay." And, so that was my conversation with her. I haven't really spoken to her since then. I sort of like had it, I'm done, I'm through, I'm not... cause she did that kind of thing to me all the time and I'm just done. But when my brother found out I was getting married he said his wife wanted to come and I'm like "Oh no, please no," but, I decided I'm gonna call [him], I didn't tell them no on the phone, I was too chicken. But I'm going to call them and tell them, "We decided to elope," and just get them out of it, I don't want them to be there. I really don't. I just do not want it. And if they find out later that I got married and get mad, I'm sorry. I don't really [care], it's fine.

I haven't seen my brother in over a year. And, I don't care. I just, at this point, I just don't care. He's...your family, I think your family is the people who support you, who are there for you, no matter who they are. My brother just happens to be, he just happened to have the same parents

that I do and that's how I feel about it. My other brother is my brother but he supports me. He's like "yay, I'm so happy for you," he's always supported me. We've always been friends, but the other one, I don't care. So, anyway.

5:35

AK: Well, please tell me more about the wedding, when you guys decided to get married?

5:41

M: Oh well, I'm on disability, and this is something I shouldn't be saying but it won't matter. But, for a long time it didn't make any difference that Robin and I were together. I was, you know, that just gave me, I'm on SSI [Supplemental Security Income], and they gave me money for, you know, they gave me money. I had to give so much to Robin, like we were roommates or something. But, I just want to get out from under them, for one thing. And we are getting older and we don't want something to happen where there's some question about, you know, one of us dies and there's a problem with it. So, anyway, so we decided to get married. We went to see a financial advisor and talked to him about what we can do, and it turned out we could get married and she could support me like pay for my insurance and all that. It's not going to be a problem, she has a pretty good... I can't think of the word. She has a good pension from work and everything and it's not going to be a problem. So that's why we decided to get married at this time and did not four years ago. She retires in five months.

6:53

AK: Oh, that's exciting.

6:55

M: Yeah, and, we're really excited about getting married and all that. Cause I don't really believe in marriage, I think it's a patriarchal institution, and I never really wanted to. But part of

not wanting to was I think I couldn't anyway. Although I do think what I think about patriarchal institutions and stuff, but I want to get married now. Robin and I have always had an open relationship; we've never said "you have to be only with me." I feel like Robin's my partner, she's first, but whoever else I want to sleep with or hang around with or whatever, that has nothing to do with her, it's to do with me, and we've always been that way. When we got together, I said "I do not want a closed, I do not want a monogamous relationship." "Well, that's fine. I don't want one either." So, that's the way it always was and I feel like marriage isn't going to now change that. But you know, I want to get married for financial benefits more than anything else, especially now that I'm getting older.

And I feel like either of us could die any day, and any of us could, but we are older and we're thinking, "Gee, we're not really young anymore. We could drop dead." And my brother—the one who is two years younger than me, that I never got along with—he had triple bypass surgery two years ago. And there was all this stuff going on with my brother who is four years younger than me, when he was forty-four, he had two heart attacks. And that kind of made me think, "wow, I'm not going to live forever." Here's my brothers, you know, having heart problems and stuff, and I really started thinking about my future, you know what I mean? Like, I started believing I was going to die. I think everybody thinks, "I'm going to live forever." I mean you know you're not, but you still don't think about your own mortality. But when you get older, you do. You suddenly think, "Oh, maybe people who are friends of mine have died," you know all of this stuff and it's just, you start thinking about it, thinking sort of "Well, what would happen if Robin died before me and I was...?" You know, I would be like, "well, what would I have without her?" Because she really supports me. And cause I haven't worked for a long time and [I'm] obviously not going to go back to work now, because who's going to hire me in the first

place and I'm just not. And I think, you think, you start thinking about it and that's really one of the major reasons I want to get married is that I want some security if something happens to Robin and she with me. Like her family can come in and take everything or something like that. I don't want anything like that to happen. So, anyway.

10:04

AK: Yeah, well. Weddings are very exciting.

10:07

M: But it's cool that we're getting married. Because, you know, it's going to be a party. I feel like I'm planning a party. I told people "We're having a wedding, with a marriage. We're having a party—having a relatively fun party—with a wedding attached to it." And we've been together forty-four years, since [19]72. I've known her since 1966. In the tenth grade we met, and I just feel like, you know, a wedding is a little bit of an *[laughs]* afterthought, of a letdown almost. "Ah, we're getting married." "Okay, well you've been together all the time." But, it's the legality of it, you know, and the benefits that accrue from that relationship and you make the relationship your own anyway.

So, we're writing the ceremony and we're both atheists and that's, we had a hard time. In Virginia, when you get married you have to have some kind of religious person do your wedding. I don't know how they do that because it seems like that's kind of like a violation of your constitutional rights, but whatever. They do. And we did find somebody to do the wedding. A minister who said, "I'll do a secular wedding, I got no problem." And I'm not exactly okay with that, but I have to be okay with that. I don't have a choice. But, you know, I kind of feel like I shouldn't have to do that. I shouldn't have to find somebody who says "I'm okay with doing a secular wedding. You all write the ceremony. I'll do whatever you want." Because, what if



everybody said “No, I’m not going to do that.” Like, I’m not going to bake cakes for gay people or whatever. You, I don’t know, it just seems like if you set up this thing where you have a minister, that’s not right. There’s a lot of people—I have two friends who just got married and one of them was an atheist. That’s when I found out you had to have a minister. And I’m like, “What? I didn’t know that.” But yeah, you do in Virginia. I even wrote to a lawyer with a secular humanist society and asked him, you know, “Do we really have to have a minister? Because I don’t want to have anything to do with religion.” And he said, “Well, yeah you do in Virginia.” and he said “Virginia is also odd, because each state has rules and then each locality, or city or county or wherever you are, can have their own rules about it.” So, um... *[laughing]*. It’s worse than I thought, but anyway.

12:46

AK: Yeah, that sounds like a lot of loopholes.

12:48

M: Yeah and there’s loopholes in the thing so you can find somebody to do it, but still the fact that that is required in the first place doesn’t seem like that would... like if you challenged it constitutionally, seems like you would lose. But, I don’t know. I can’t do it. I want to get married in March. I don’t have time to go to the Supreme Court and challenge this. I’m not going to. But somebody should. If you want a project, there you go *[laughter from Avery and Martha]*. Stand up for atheists.

13:23

AK: Yes, well you were saying you met your current partner back in... when you were ten or in the tenth grade?

13:29

M: [19]66. Tenth grade.

13:31

AK: Tenth grade. So, that leads me to wonder, when did you realize that your sexual orientation was different from the heteronormative?

13:37

M: That's a funny story. We didn't realize it. We were living together. Ever since the tenth grade we were friends. When we went to college we started sleeping together. I was going to Bridgewater College; she was going to James Madison. She went to a community college for two years and then her junior year she went to James Madison so she could be near me and Bridgewater.

So anyway, we were together all of the time and in 1972, which was the end of my junior year, the beginning of my senior year of college, we moved in together. Robin quit—it was my senior year because Robin quit college—she dropped out second semester senior year. [I] forgot about that. And we moved in together right before that and then she decided to drop out. And so we were living together in Bridgewater. At the college you were not allowed to live off campus. I think it is still that way, unless you were married. You had to live on campus. And I was obviously living off campus. I had a single room in a dorm. But I just sort of took everything out of it and locked the door. And I used it for like when I didn't want to walk back to the apartment, I'd go to the dorm room and study or whatever. But then I would leave, lock the door, and walk away. I just sort of thought that I was invisible. I thought, "nobody pays any attention to me, nobody knows what I'm doing." But then, several things happened.

15:16

M: One, I was taking a class called Minority Group Relations and for the class I always studied different minorities. We talked about minorities; we talked about all this stuff. But then we had to write a big paper on a minority and I thought, “hmm, I think I’ll do homosexuals because nobody will do that.” Robin and I were living together, sleeping together, but we didn’t think that we were... we sort of thought that this is... I don’t know what we thought. I can’t exactly get in my head then. Robin said we thought we made it up. I’m not sure I thought we made it up, the way she says it, but I didn’t think about, “I’m a lesbian, I’m gay and whatever.” I wasn’t thinking that. I was just thinking, “Robin and I love each other.” We were sexual but I told some friends the other day, I said, “Maybe it’s different for men.” I don’t know.

Men are allowed to be—I don’t know [about] now, but then, this was in ‘72 when we moved in together—men were allowed to be sexual from the time they’re kids. They’re twelve and they can be sexual. Women were sort of thought of, especially then, they weren’t sexual beings. Sex wasn’t even enjoyable to women. They kind of laid there and got screwed. And so, literally and figuratively.

But anyway, so [*laughter*]... that wasn’t something I considered. I didn’t think “Oh, I’m a homosexual. I’m taking this course and I’m in this category.” I didn’t think it. But I went to the library—and this is before the internet or computers—I went to the library, looked it up in the card catalog, went to the shelf, and all the books that I had on my list were gone. Were missing. So, I went to the reference library and I said, “I need these books for a class, where are they?” She said, she looked at the list and she said, “Oh, the books are back there.” And she pointed behind her. And she said “You can’t have them.” And I said “What do you mean back there?” And she said “They’re in a vault, they’re locked in a vault.” And I said, “And I can’t have them? I need them for a class.” And she said, “The only way you can get those books is to get the

professor who you have for that class to come over and check out the books him or herself and then you can take them from them, from the professor. You can't have them." And I'm like "What the Hell...?" And so I went and I told my professor, I said "I need these books and I can't get them," and so he said "Let's go over there." So we went to the library, he asked for the books, he had my list, handed it to them, "I want these books," she got them for him, gave them to me and he gave them to me right and checked them out. Then he handed them to me in front of her, who didn't say anything. I said "Thank you." And I gave her a dirty look and walked out.

18:00

M: But the books were no good. They were like books from the forties and thirties, like "Homosexuality's Deviant Behavior." I mean titles like that. And when I looked at them I said, "Now, this isn't what I want. This isn't right." Cause, these were old stuff. I didn't know what new stuff was but I didn't think it was that. So, I found out somehow that the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, not far from Bridgewater, had a gay student union. But Robin and I didn't have a car. So I went to Professor Barnett and I said "I need, I can't...I don't know how I'm going to do this paper, I don't have any books. I want to go... UVA has a gay student union, and I would like to go up there and talk to people but I don't have a way to get there." And I was just telling him to say I don't know what I'm going to do now, I may have to change my topic. And he said, "Oh, I'll take you and Robin to the gay student union up in Charlottesville. I'll take you."

So, Professor Barnett, my really nice professor, drove us to the meetings and we got to know people there and stuff. And I remember people saying, "Who's that man over there, that old man over there?" And I said, "That's my professor." And people went, "Oh, man! Your professor came to the meeting with you?" and I said, "Yeah, he drove us here," and he's like, "Wow! Our

professors would never do that.” But, remember, this was, like ‘72 and it just wasn’t... it was like underground almost. Stonewall happened in [19]69 so it wasn’t far from there.<sup>1</sup> But, anyway... so I started asking people, “I need to do this paper,” and people would tell me, “Write to so and so in Washington D.C.” and I would write to them and they would send me all these papers. There were a lot of... since the women’s movement, the lesbian-feminist movement, the gay movement—LGBT movement—gay rights movement back then...was just starting to pick up and there were a lots of small presses like this one, small magazines, newspapers, all kinds of stuff that people had all over the country. Independent bookstores. I mean lots of stuff out there, not on the shelves of the library.

20:18

M: I started writing to people, one person in Oregon would say “well, write to this person” and they would send me information. I’d write to them, they would send me information, and they would say “write to this person also.” I was writing to people and groups all over the country. Some of them who were pretty big names in the movement... in all these different movements... that I didn’t even know. I was getting letters from them... these people... all kinds of people. One day Robin and I had all the papers spread out on the floor in our apartment and we are looking at stuff, and I was getting ready to make an outline for the paper and take notes. And Robin said “I think this is talking about us!” And I said “Yeah, you know, I was thinking that too, I think so too!” And that’s how we realized we were lesbians. That was like the moment where we went “Oh wow!” It was like an epiphany, we went “Oh! It’s us!” And that sounds stupid to people today but back then... you can be... I wasn’t the only person—I’ve read this in

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<sup>1</sup> The Stonewall Riots occurred in June 1969 in New York City, setting off a nationwide gay liberation movement.

coming out stories—I wasn't the only person. And these are all women, but still I wasn't the only person who was like “Wow, this is me!” It just wasn't talked about. You didn't know anything. I mean I remember growing up, my mother had a cousin, who was apparently gay because my mother used to say “Well, Peter is coming with his *friend*,” and the way she said it... I remember being in high school my mother would say... People would talk at the table—this is at my grandmother's house; everybody was Italian and yacking all at once—and people would say “Peter and his *friend*,” and the way they said “friend,” and I said, “Peter and his *friend*?” and I knew his friend was a man and I'm thinking why are they saying friend like that? But nobody said the word “gay,” “homosexual,” “lesbian”; nobody talked about it back then. It was just like it didn't exist. Even if people knew it existed they didn't acknowledge it; so you could be that, as dumb as we were. It was perfectly possible.

22:29

M: Anyway, so I wrote this paper and in the first paragraph I came out. I said, “I was going to write this academic paper, dah dah dah dah dah, and then I realized it was talking about me.” And I just wrote the paper. I came out on the first paragraph. I ended up sending it to my parents, that's how I came out to my parents. I sent them the paper that I wrote for sociology. I think it was sociology...for some class I took in college. I sent it to them, and I was really scared. I didn't know what they were going to say, what was going to... and I was like real nervous but then I got the paper back with a letter from my father saying “I love my children. I love them no matter what, and I just want you to be happy.” And I never... my father always said that nobody should tell anybody else—the government, not him, not anybody—if you're not hurting anybody or not hurting yourself, who cares what you do. It's nobody's business. That was his thing, that was a big thing. Since I was little I remember my father saying stuff like that. That's how sorta

we were raised; not by my mother, who thought she should get in all of our business. But my father was very hands off, you know, whatever you do, not my business. So he wrote me this letter “I love you and I don’t care” and stuff... and he told me if you have anything else for me to read, send me and I’ll read it. I sent him some books. I sent him *Lesbian Woman* by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, which was a book back then. I don’t think anybody reads it anymore but it was an old book on lesbianism, on lesbian women, on lesbian feminism. I sent it to him, and he read it and sent it back and wrote a note about it. So that’s how I came out to my parents [*laughter*], and that’s how Robin and I discovered that we were gay. I’m sorry that was a long story for that, but it kinda needed all those prefaces to it or I don’t think people today really would understand what was going on in the seventies because it’s different today. I think you pretty much hear about, you know, gay rights, feminism, and stuff, and you didn’t hear that back then.

24:51

AK: That was a spectacular story. Would you mind telling us how your mother reacted?

24:55

M: My mother, she didn’t say anything to me, she told my brothers and they told me this later. Mom told them that she was upset that I was gay, it was her fault, because she quote-unquote [said] “she should have made me wear dresses when I was little.” That’s exactly what she said. I laughed, but later on... I had had a relationship with somebody—not Robin, somebody else—and I was working in the library in Lynchburg in a CETA program, C-E-T-A. Comprehensive Education and Training Act. I think that was the name of it. Comprehensive... I think it was Education but it was something... Employment and Training Act, I think.<sup>2</sup> It was a program under, I don’t remember who was president, but there were a lot of people out of work, like now, but the government back then set up programs like CETA, and there were other programs that

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<sup>2</sup> The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was passed by Congress in 1973.

put people to work. What CETA did is they took people who were underemployed or unemployed, got them into positions, and the government paid part of the salary and the business or whatever it was paid the other part. It was a win-win for everybody. They would never do that now. These used to take care of people, more or less—some people—back then. I got a CETA grant because I was an English major in college and got out and found out that you can't do much with English unless you want to teach and I don't want to teach. So, I was kind of hanging out. I worked for an electrician. I worked here. I just did different odd jobs and I stumbled on the CETA job and I got a job as an aide in the public library in the children's department, which is what made me want to go into library science because I loved it. I was with this woman also. Anyway, I was with this other woman at the time and we broke up and I was really upset and I decided to move into my parents' basement and pay them very little money. They said I could live in their basement for fifty dollars a month and live there, and I saved my CETA money. I decided like the day that we broke up, I called my mother "Mom can I come home and live in the basement?" I decided right then, I said, "I want to go to graduate school and go into library science and I want to save my money so can I come home and live in the basement? I'll pay you some rent." She said I could, and moved out and moved in our basement, payed them fifty dollars a month and lived there, to save money for graduate school. But anyway my mother and I were one of those evenings sitting at the kitchen table talking and my mother started crying. We were just talking. We weren't talking about... I don't even know what we were talking about. Nothing in particular, it was just like "oh, it's a nice day," stuff like that, and my mother suddenly burst out crying and I said "Mom, what's wrong?" and she said "Oh, you're a... I'm upset, you're a..." and I said "I'm a what?" and she said "you're... you know, you know" and I said "What mom?" "You know!" And I said "You mean a lesbian?" "Don't say that word!" and I



said “Mom, there’s nothing wrong with that word.” “Don’t say that word!” she kept saying. I kept saying it, and it was upsetting her. I said “Mom, you could say it. Try. Say ‘lesbian.’” “No, don’t say that!” And so I finally shut up about that, and she’s said “Well, you’re unhappy because you’re a... you’re a...” the word she wouldn’t say. And I said “Mom, I’m unhappy because I just broke up with my girlfriend. Anybody would be. I’m not unhappy because I’m a lesbian. I’m unhappy because I broke up with my girlfriend. I will be happy again, don’t worry. I’ll get over it. I’ll be OK.” She said, “I know you’re unhappy.” She’s sniffing and crying and saying “I would be unhappy if I were you.” I said “Mom! you’re not me and I’m not you,” and I thought I can’t believe we’re having this stupid conversation about who is what because I said to her “If I were you I would be unhappy too because I wouldn’t want to live your life, but I am not you and you are not me. And can I explain this existential thing to you, mom, that we are different people?” But I don’t think she ever understood cause she was really upset about it and it was the first and only time I ever talked to my mother about, you know, being lesbian, and I never said that to her before and only because she started crying and saying “you’re a... you’re a...” and wouldn’t say the word. I still feel bad that my mother thought I was unhappy and miserable and I think both my parents felt that I was going to have a hard life. Which I did. Because I was gay, which was true. It was hard to be gay then. It’s hard to be gay now, but it was even harder then. They were right there about that, but it didn’t mean that I was unhappy or anything else. It just... that was the way it was. That was my life.

30:08

M: But my parents loved Robin. That was the saving grace. Both of them loved Robin. My mother came up to me one time—we were living in Memphis, and my parents were visiting—my mother came up, she grabbed my arm and she whispered in my ear “You’re lucky to have

somebody like Robin to put up with you.” I said “Mom!” [*laughter*] She also told me that she knew that I made Robin a lesbian, because Robin wasn’t really a lesbian, she said. “Robin’s not really a lesbian, I know she isn’t! You made her a lesbian.” I went, “Mom!” She said “You also made your brother ...” this is my brother who is four years younger than me “You also made your brother an atheist. You gave him those books to read.” And I said “Oh mom, you have given me amazing powers that I can actually control and change people. That’s just amazing mom, you can’t mean that.” She’s like [*growls*] she got all frustrated because I was teasing her. She kinda just [*growls*] and walked away. You all be careful because I have these eyes that can just convert people into whatever I want, according to my mother. But they did love Robin. My mother called Robin... like, we were in my parent’s house one time, and my mother called Robin in the kitchen. She said “Robin come here!” She said, “I want to teach you how to make my spaghetti and my meatballs...” and all this stuff. She didn’t teach me, she taught Robin. [*laughter*] She loved Robin. They really liked Robin but Robin is just really nice. My brother that’s four years younger said to me one time, he said, “Robin is just the nicest person I’ve ever met. She’s just really nice. She’s nice to everybody, she can hate you and she’s still nice. She can still be nice to you.” I never looked at it that way before but I said “Bob, you know, you’re right. She is nice and she’s exactly that way, you’re exactly right.” Sometimes she’s too nice because I’m not nice. I’m not a nice girl. I’m nasty to people. I say what I think, I don’t care. But Robin is like “I’m not going to say that because I don’t want to hurt their feelings,” and I, “Look! They are hurting your feelings. Tell them what you think!” “No, I’m not going to do that.” She’d just rather walk away. I’d rather fight. So we are different.

32:30

M: Anyway, that's my mother and that was kind of, my relationship. My mother... I was the only girl and my mother and I were always very close. I don't think that that stopped us from being close but I don't think my mother understood that part at all, [that] part of me, and I mostly just didn't talk about it with her. So that was kind of... I didn't talk about it with my father either but I knew he was okay with it. He was fine, I guess. He never said anything other than the letters he wrote me, so I think he was alright. His attitude would have made him alright. My mother not so much.

33:19

AK: You were saying your brother's wife, being a Jehovah's Witness, had issues. Did you have any other problems with Jehovah's witnesses or other groups like that?

33:29

M: Well... yeah. Like just a week ago, Robin's brother said—and Robin sister's the same way, they're both very evangelical religious sort of people—but Robin's brother has always been really nice to us. We have stayed at his house, all the stuff. He's always been really nice. So we called him when we found out we could get married and all that stuff. Robin said "Let's call my brother and tell him." She has a brother and a sister. She's the middle child; her brother is the oldest. She said "Let's call my brother and tell him." So we called him, and he answered the phone, "Hi Martha!" He's real excited and I said "Hi! Guess what?" He said "What?" I said "Guess what we did today?" and he said "What?" I said "We were out looking at rings today; we're going to get married." And he had this nervous kind of [*laughs nervously*] laugh. And I said "We were out looking at her rings" and Robin said "we're going to get married." He had that nervous laugh and I said something like "what do you think?" or something like that and he said "Well if that's what you want to do..." Like we were going to go jump off a cliff or

something and I said “David, what do you mean, if that’s what you want to do? That’s a weird thing to say to somebody who just told you... most people say congratulations.” And he sort of laughed funny again and I said “No, really what do you mean?” You see that’s me, I push people. I said “What do you mean if that what we want to do?” and Robin poked me and said “Quit. Don’t badger him.”

And I didn’t say anything else. We got off the phone and half an hour later he called her and said “I just wanted to tell you that we can’t come to your wedding because we’re Christian,” and Robin said “So?” and he said “Well, I believe what Jesus said about homosexuality,” and Robin said, “Jesus didn’t saying anything about homosexuality” and he said “Yes he did!” and Robin said “What?” And David said “well, I don’t know exactly but I know he did.” Robin is like “No, he didn’t say anything. There’s nothing as far as what Jesus said in the Bible about homosexuality.” He said “No, I think there is.” and Robin said “I think if you look it up you’ll find that.” He finally said “well, I’ll have to look into that but it says in the Old Testament...” So Robin said, “Well, yeah, it says a lot of stuff in the Old Testament, like you can’t eat shellfish, you can’t eat pork, you shouldn’t stone people, disrespect their parents. You can’t wear cloth with the same kind of, you know... different fabrics. It says a lot of stuff in the Old Testament, so what? You don’t do those... you don’t follow any of those other things but you are picking that one thing out and saying this is what it says and so this is wrong.” And he said “Well actually...” he said “I don’t follow the Old Testament. I believe what Jesus said.” So then that was a whole circular argument and ended up [with] she just got off the phone, but she did say to him, “I wish you just said you couldn’t come. You didn’t have to be hurtful about it,” and she said “I just wish you hadn’t felt like you had to be hurtful to me. You could’ve just said we can’t come. You don’t have to give me your reason.” And I don’t know what he said, they got off the

phone. So, yeah, her brother.

37:06

M: And her sister when DOMA happened, the Defense of Marriage Act, not just in Virginia but all over. Her sister told me that she didn't think gay people should be able to get married because... It was okay if they had civil unions but they shouldn't have weddings—not weddings but marriage. That was only for straight people and I said "So you mean like separate but equal?" and she said "No!" And I said "Well, that's what you are saying." Then she said "No, no, no, I just don't think our church shouldn't have to marry gay people" I said "Look, your church doesn't have to marry *anybody* it doesn't want to. Anybody. If two people of different races come in and want to get married and your church is against that and some more, you don't have to do that if you don't want to. This is your church; this isn't the state and those are two separate things." And she kept saying "Well, I don't think they should." I think she kept saying that. I just gave up. Some people you just can't talk to them. They're not reasonable and there's no point going on and on. It's like David... Robin arguing with her brother, it's... after a while you just go "Ugh, forget it." Or me arguing with my sister in law, the Jehovah's witness, who actually told me that we, she and I, could not talk about religion, not talk...that was forbidden, although she talked to me about all the time. So, okay, fine.

38:35

M: But I'm not... I told her I would not talk about it and I never did, but I just said "Err..." I got off the phone and I haven't spoken. When she calls, I know who it is, I see it on my phone. I know who it is. I don't pick it up. That's why I haven't talked to her or really my brother in the past year and a half or so. I'm not picking it up when they call. I did talk to him the day they found out we were getting married. I don't know how but they did. I was like okay, I did talk to

my brother, but I don't want them there. I don't want them there, I don't... Their attitudes, I don't want them. And my sister in law, who told me I was going to hell and she was not coming to my gay wedding, got on the phone when I was talking to my brother and said "I love you! I wanna be there for you. You came to my wedding, I wanna come to yours." And I'm thinking, and I said "Look, that's not what you said to me, you told me a year ago..." you know, and I repeated what she said, she said "But I still love you." And I'm thinking "yeah right, you don't even know me," and I said "okay, yeah." And I could have called them and tell them... I'm going to lie to them about where we live. I don't know how to get out of this, that they want to come. I don't want to be nasty. "I don't want you to, you are just horrible people" but I will just lie to them and whatever happens happens. I don't care. I don't really think I should have to lie to them. I don't know what else to do; they're kind of my family. Families are a pain in the butt sometimes [*laughs*]. If you had mine you would know [*more laughter*]. You probably have pain-in-the-butt relatives too. Both of you. Everybody has those [*continues laughing*].

40:25

AK: Certainly. Could you tell me a little bit about the college community? You were saying, a lot of people... it wasn't spoken about... what was your college community like? [*both laugh*]

40:43

M: Horrible.

40:45

AK: Yeah?

40:47

M: I mean, I remember friends... "friends," quote-unquote. As Donald Trump says, "so-called friends." They, I mean, I was at a restaurant with a group of people... girls that I was friends

with in college. We were talking. I was not saying anything about lesbianism or being with Robin or anything else. And all of a sudden, one of the women across a table from me just burst out crying and she yelled in the restaurant “Lesbianism! That’s all you ever talk about is Lesbianism!” She was crying, and I just thought, “oh God, people are going to come beat me up in a second.” They’ll probably think I touched her breast or something. I mean, they probably think I’m molesting this woman, but she was screaming that, and I don’t know where that came from. I guess I upset her more than I thought. But it wasn’t happening. I wasn’t talking about it at the restaurant, I was just having a normal conversation. She screamed that and I really remember that because I just wanted to shrink under the table and die about then, because it got quiet and everybody was looking like somebody would have if somebody screamed that at a restaurant. Stuff like that happened. The Dean of Students, I got called into his office because the dorm mother had found out this happened ... and she has gone to the Dean of Women who said “leave me alone” and then she went to the Dean of Students who is, of course, higher than the Dean of Women. And he called me into his office and I went to his office... I didn’t know what it was about, but I went in there.

And he sat behind this big wooden desk in a leather chair, and he has some woman with him. I don’t know who she was. But, and he starts asking me questions like, “What are you doing hanging around with this other girl on campus? What are you doing? She doesn’t belong here. Why are you friends with this woman?” And I never said anything, and then he started saying, “I think that’s pretty weird.” And then he would look at this woman and say, “Don’t you think that’s pretty weird?” And then he would look back at me and say, “I think that’s pretty weird.” And they would laugh. And he was asking me questions about all kinds of stuff, and I just stood there. I was really angry. I was scared. I was angry. But I said, “I’m not going to say anything.

I'm just going to stand here." I just tried to keep a straight face and just stand there. Finally, after this went on for a few minutes, he said, "Well, I'm going to call your father about this." And then I spoke up, and I said, "Okay, call my father. Go ahead." And he looked kind of startled and he said, "I'm going to call your father. I mean it. I'm going to call your father." I said, "Call my father. Go ahead. I don't care." I was hoping he did because I knew my father would say, "Mind your own fucking business," and hang up the phone. Excuse my language. But you know that was my father. And I kind of wanted him to call. "Call dad. Call my father. Go ahead." But that was a threat to him, and it probably worked on a lot of people. To me, it was like, "Throw me in that briar patch. Do not call my dad. I'm fine." So he kept saying he was going to call my father, and I kept saying, "Go ahead. You want his number? I have his number right here. I'll give it to you. Call him right now." But he just sort of started stammering like he didn't know what to say next. And then I was really angry and I said, "Are you finished?" And he didn't say anything. And I said, "Because I'm leaving." And I turned around and I walked out and I shut the door. When I shut the door, I slammed it, and I went, "Oh no! I slammed the door! [laughter] Oh my god, I slammed the door. They're going to really get me now." And then I thought, but I was really angry, but I didn't mean to slam the door. But then I was kind of like, "Okay. I slammed the door. That was good effect. I walked out and slammed the door." But when I got outside of the building, I was so scared. I remember my knees... I remember walking outside, and I was surprised it was light outside, and it wasn't like the apocalypse going on, and my knees were shaking. I was so scared. I thought, "God, they could kick me out of college. You know I'm almost finished." I was terrified that I was going to get thrown out. I was just about finished and I thought, "I'll have to get in another college, and they'll want to know why I got kicked out, and I'll have to go through this explanation." I just... I just was scared. But I don't know if he called



my father. I never heard another word about it; nothing else happened. I went back to the apartment and cried. When Robin came home from work I was crying. I was really scared. It was frightening. But nothing happened. Phew. Dodged a bullet. And I graduated.

45:38

M: But you know, he was...the last day of my senior year—this was my senior year when that happened with the Dean of Students—I had a few things in the dorm and I went to get them. I was on a short hall, it was like half a hall, and I was on the hall with all these freshmen. I had the only single room, with its own bathroom even, on the hall. Everything else was suites. And the girls came up to me when I was in the...I didn't even know them. I didn't know them at all cause I was never there. I didn't live there. But they came up to my door where I was getting stuff out of there and they said, "Um, we know you haven't been here all year." And I looked up and I said, "Oh yeah?" And they said, "The dorm mother," whatever her name was, "has been looking for you." And this is where I realized I wasn't invisible. Not only had the Dean happened, but apparently the dorm mother had been looking for me for a long time. And I said, "She has?" And they said, "Yeah, she went to the Dean of Students, and the Dean of Women told her to leave you alone." And I was kind of surprised. They said, "We know you weren't living here. When she came looking for you, she'd come knock on your door, and she'd come eleven o'clock, eleven-thirty at night. And we'd go out and she'd ask us where you were. We told her we didn't know. You were upstairs studying with a friend. We didn't know exactly where you were." And I said, "Well thank you for covering for me." And they said, "Yeah sure." I didn't even know these girls, they didn't know me, but I remember thinking, "Wow that's really nice that they did that. That they lied for me." They said, "She's upstairs." Why would they cover for me? Why were they covering for me? I mean, it just seemed amazing that somebody would...I didn't even

know them. I didn't even know their names, and they were really nice. I kind of laughed when they told me that, and I said, "Well thank y'all. I really appreciate it." They said, "Yeah. You know...you don't need to get in trouble. We don't..." I don't know exactly what they said, but we don't care about the dorm mother. They had dorm mothers, back then, not RAs [resident assistants]. But anyway. The girls had dorm mothers. The boys had nobody, and they ran wild. We had to be in at eleven, had all these rules, and on the weekend we got to actually stay out until one. Big time. But the boys could run around all the time and they always did. But we weren't allowed to have boys in the dorm, stuff like that. I mean, it was back then, those days.

48:22

M: Robin, when she was at [James] Madison [University], her parents had to sign a thing to allow boys to be in her dorm, if she wanted them. They refused to sign. They were like, "We're not signing this. We don't think you should have boys in your dorm." And Robin's like, "I don't care. I don't like boys anyway. Don't sign it." But she did think that her parents shouldn't have to sign something for her, her junior year in college, that she could have boys in [her room]. Give me a break. And she tried to argue with them, but she wasn't real convincing cause she didn't really care. But, anyway. At Bridgewater, you couldn't even sign something. That was just against the rules, period. That was that. But that was those days. I know it's different now.

49:06

M: I went back to Bridgewater a year ago. I got a flyer in the mail. It said, it was for alumni, it said, "Come celebrate." I said, "I will never come back to this school," when I left. Don't ever say "never," because I got this thing in the mail last year. It was a flyer, and it said, "Come celebrate Pride Week with us in Bridgewater." And I got the flyer and I kind of glanced at it, but I didn't realize... I don't know, I read it, but I said, "Okay. Bridgewater," so I put it down. I'm

not interested in anything from them. I don't care. But Robin looked at it, and she said, "Martha, look at this." She handed it to me, and I said, "Yeah, I saw it. It's from Bridgewater." She said, "No. Look at it." And I looked, and I went, "What the fuck is going on over there? Pride Week at Bridgewater? What's going on? This isn't Bridgewater." But anyway, we went. We went to Pride week, and it was really amazing. Because one thing we did was we talked to students. They have a gay student union. They have all these diversity... it's called a diversity center, and kind of all the groups are in this one building. Like the Black Student Union—that's not the name of it—but the Black Student Union, the Gay Student Union, the Latino/Hispanic, all those. Any minorities are now in the diversity center. We were over there, and we were with about six students. And we were getting the tour of campus, me and Robin, but what happened is we ended up sitting in the diversity center and talking for three hours with all these students. And it really made me realize how things are really different than they were when I was there. Things have changed a lot, and they talked about bad stuff that happened on campus: people yelled at them or wrote things, stuff like that about, you know, gay people. But, it wasn't like when I was there. I mean, God, they had a Pride Week that the school was putting on. We had a reception at the President's house, and the President came up to me. And I had told my story at lunch—we had lunch with the students—about what had happened when I went there. And the President came up to me, and he said, "Martha, I want to—" He said, "Hi, I'm President blah-blah-blah. I want to apologize to you for what happened when you were at Bridgewater." He said, "Somebody who was at the administration told me what happened." He said, "I'm glad your back." And I kind of laughed, and I said, "Yeah. I said I was never coming back. And here I am." And he said, "Well, I really want to apologize for that." He said, sort of like, "That was then, this is now." It really made me, when I left I felt very... like there's hope. I mean, people are different as a

whole. There are people like her [Robin's] brother, and my sister-in-law, and I mean, a whole bunch of people like that, that obviously voted for Trump. But you know, when I think about it, like when the immigration thing happened.... How many—I mean, now they're deporting people—but how many lawyers, how many people, went to the airport to support people? How much support was that? I mean, that was incredible to me when I saw that. It made me think of Bridgewater, and it made me think of stuff today.

52:36

M: I just feel like, you know, it seems like we're going backwards, but really the majority of people, we're moving forward, moving forward, moving forward. A little teeny bit at a time, but we're going that way. It really does, it really gives me some hope. In spite of what's going on now, I still feel like...I feel like Anne Frank. People are really good after all. I mean I don't, I see that there are mean people in the world, there are bad people in the world, or people that hate other people because they're gay, because the color of their skin, because they're from a certain country. Whatever. But I think those are the minority of people today. I don't think they're a majority in this country or even in the world, probably, today. I think most people have gone beyond that. I mean, I was born in [19]51. I remember "colored" and "white" bathrooms and water fountains and stuff like that. And that's been gone a long time. But I remember it, and so that was when I was small, and now look. Now, [*gesturing toward Marcus*] you're here, and you wouldn't have been here when I was small, you know what I'm saying? And I wouldn't have been here when I was small because I'm gay. I could've hidden that. You can't hide it, sorry, I hate to tell you. But you kind of look dark-skinned [*laughter*]. But anyway, you know what I'm saying? It really is different than even sixty years ago. And that may seem like a long time to y'all, but it doesn't really seem that long to me because I remember it. And anyway, so that's

how I feel about things. And I really started feeling that way because I went back to Bridgewater. Because I saw young people who talked to me, and just, I don't know. You people really—"you people" [*laughter*]... I hate that. "Those people." "You people." But it really gives me hope. I mean, it really makes me feel like.... I mean we're doing this interview, and that wouldn't have happened when I was in college. And it just makes me feel like, "wow, things are getting better." In spite of everything, they are getting better. And it may not seem like it, but they are.

54:57

M: Robin and I are getting married. We went down to the courthouse down here in Salem. We went in—Robin and I were both... Robin told me afterwards, she said, "You know, I was really braced for something bad to go down." I said, "Yeah, me too." Nothing happened. Nothing. It was just like, smooth. We walked in, went through the scanners, asked the sheriff. I said to the sheriff, "We want to get a wedding... a marriage license. Where do we go?" He didn't blink an eye, he just said, "Go here. Go here." I hate the police in there. I was talking to a cop. He was like saying, "Go here. Go here. Go here." Just not... I mean, I was with another woman.

Obviously I wanted a wedding license—a marriage license—for us. He was like, "Okay, go up here and do this." And walked in the room where we were told to go, and a man said, "Can I help you?" And we told him what we wanted. He said, "Go to that window down there." We filled out all the papers. Everything. After the papers and everything was done, she handed us the marriage license with a whole bunch of stuff, and was telling us what to do with it and stuff. When she handed it to us, she said, "Congratulations." And I almost started crying because I thought... I said to Robin when we walked out of the room, I said, "I've never, never, never had anybody say congratulations to me because I love you." Because that's essentially what it was. I said, "I know she wasn't saying it to me and you personally. I know she says that to everybody,

and that's just the thing. She says that to everybody. Even us." She said "congratulations." I was almost crying. And that's when Robin said, "I was braced for something bad to go down." And I said "I was too." And it didn't happen. And it's amazing that it didn't happen, and I'm like, almost crying about it now. Because what I went through then is not what I'm living through now. And it's just amazing to me. And I don't mean to sound like Pollyanna [*laughter*], really cause I'm not, but I just think that is really incredible, that that is my story, but yet this is my story today. But I never thought that this would happen. I never thought any of this—that Robin and I would be getting married, that people would be saying congratulations, anything—would happen. The financial adviser we talked to who decided who looked at all the stuff and said, "You can get married." I gave him an invitation to our wedding, and he said, he opened it up and we were talking, and I've known him for years. And I hugged him and I said, "Thank you so much. You and your partner—his son-in-law works with him—y'all are really the reason we're getting married." And he said, "Martha. Thank you." He said, "But love is the reason you're getting married." And I'm like, "whoa." I don't know, that almost made me cry too. Everything's about making me cry today. I mean, these days. Because it's just... I don't know, it's just different. And I'm glad... cause I have a different story. And it's not about love, except for me and Robin. It's about people hating this. But those people, they never mattered. I mean, I was always out. I was always open. I never hid, except from Social Security [*laughing*]. But I never hid, you know, my gayness from anybody. But...I just...it was a struggle even then. I lost friends. You know a lot of people just got out of my life. And I'm kind of like, well I don't need those people in my life. If they don't like me because of this, they can get out of my life. And I think I got that from my father, who's like it's nobody else's business, and that was kind of my opinion too. And if they wanted to make it their business, then I don't need them. But anyway, so

I've been that way my whole life, but still... it still hurts. Even though you're saying, "I don't care what you think. I don't need to deal with you. I know what I think." It still hurts when people say, you know, nasty things to you and yell "Lesbianism..." in a restaurant. Or any of that stuff, like the Dean. I was scared. And people can hurt you. You can stand up for yourself, but you know that you can be hurt by these people. And even, you know, thrown out of school or put in jail back when I was younger for what I was doing. It never happened. None of those things happened, but it could. And it was scary because I knew it. And now I'm kind of like, "yay, we get married. And it's all gonna be up in the open. You know, friends are coming. It's going to be a big party. It'll be fun. And I'm looking forward to it because it'll be a party. I want a party." I like to party [*laughter*]. I thought it would be fun to have a big party and have the wedding attached to it. The wedding is sort of almost an afterthought because I really want to celebrate, you know, what we've had... What we are, or how we feel about each other. I want to do that, and I want to do it with people who support me. That's why I don't care. I don't want my brother or sister-in-law there. I want people to come who support me. When Robin told her mother we were getting married, her mother said, "Well, it's about time." [*laughter*] But her mother's always been supportive. Always. Robin told her mother, she told her when she dropped out of school, she said... this is how she explained it to her parents. She said, "If Martha were a man, I would want to marry her." And her mother was cooking at the stove, and said, "Oh." And her father was behind her, and he was deaf, and he said, "What did she say?" And her mother said, "She said if Martha was a man, she'd want to marry her." And her father said, "Oh." That was the whole conversation. And it's just kind of funny to me that they reacted just kind of like, "oh." But I think maybe they reacted like that because they never thought about it. It wasn't even... like I said, it wasn't even in your vocabulary, in your line of sight, that there were people like

lesbians and gay men. That wasn't even...you didn't even think about that back then. These people didn't exist. And so I think that when she said that to her parents, they kind of thought, "oh." And I think they really didn't follow the whole thread of the thing. It was like what she said, "oh, okay." But I think that was easy to do then, for some people. To the Dean of Students, not so much [laughter]. But anyway. So that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

1:01:55

AK: [laughter] Well it was an absolute privilege to be able to be here and listen to your stories. We really appreciate you and your contribution.

1:02:03

M: I didn't mean to go on so long.

1:02:05

AK: No, no.

1:02:06

M: I really had all that to say. And then I have to explain all that stuff to get to where I am. I want to show you all something. Let me show you something. This is off the... [Martha pulls out a copy of her and Robin's wedding announcement to show to Avery and Marcus] That's our wedding announcement. That's my copy. Robin gave me a copy. Those are directions.

1:02:28

AK: Aw! That is so cute. With the hearts. [laughter]

1:02:33

M: I found that online, but you can draw it.

1:02:41

AK: Oh, that is wonderful. Congratulations.



1:02:49

M: Thank you. I love the wedding announcements. I really like what we did. Robin had made them up. She said, "I'm going to do this and this and that." I didn't understand what she was telling me. And she made up this mock thing, but it wasn't this. It looked like a regular, somebody's "so-and-so would like the..." What do you say, "the pleasure of your company..." all that shit. I read it, and I said, "Robin, I don't like this. It's too formal, it's stiff. It's not us." And she said, "Well re-write it." I said, "Okay." So I rewrote it, but she designed it. I'm not a...I can't think, well we should do this and put a heart and do this. That's her work. I was the words. [laughter] But I like what I wrote. I'm happy with it.

1:03:32

AK: Yep. It's definitely fantastic.

1:03:34

M: So we're real excited. I had to show you. I had to bring it and show it to you and the book. Nick said to bring the book. I said, "Well okay." But I don't know why, but I did. Didn't even talk about that [laughter].

[END]