

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

**Interview with Don Muse
February 19, 2017**

Interviewer: Sasha Roberts

Interviewee: Don Muse

Date: February 19, 2017

Location: Home of Don Muse in Old Southwest, Roanoke, Virginia

Transcribed by: Victoria Preston, Brooke Thacker, and Sasha Roberts

Duration: 1:01:18

00:00= Childhood (1958 – 1960s)

01:28= Impact of television on LGBT awareness in the early 1970s

02:44= Roanoke in the 1970s; visible presence of gay people

03:41= Experiences at Jefferson High School (c. 1972-1974), then Patrick Henry High School (c. 1974-1976); gay people in high school

04:44= Coming out; responses of black families to homosexuality versus white families

06:34= Experiences in high school (mid-1970s)

07:37= Bullies and homophobia; the role of family in the African American community

09:05= Having female friends; gay and straight women

11:16= Downtown Roanoke in the 1970s; transvestite sex workers; red light district; dive bars with a gay clientele; gentrification of downtown

13:12= Attending Ferrum College (late 1970s)

13:34= Career in the music industry; songwriting and playwriting

15:26= Leaving Roanoke

16:07= Life in New York in the 1980s

17:45= Impact of HIV & AIDS

20:09= Friends affected by HIV and AIDS

21:36= Cruising at gay bars; forming relationships; the role of bars for meeting other gay people

26:02= Interracial dating in the gay community; thoughts on marriage equality

32:28= Pride festivals

36:01= Coming back to Roanoke and the changes in the city; local politics in Roanoke

38:49= Segregation in Roanoke; racism

44:14= Future plans

44:49= Challenging the status quo; on being black, gay, and male; police brutality; racism and sexism; reproductive rights and abortion

50:17= Transgender issues, specifically HB2 in North Carolina; aging and dating, as a black gay man; racism

55:44= Backstreet Café shooting (2000); violence against LGBT people
57:12= Backstreet and Orlando shootings

00:00

[Checking sound levels ~ 5 seconds]

00:05

SR: My name is Sasha Roberts interviewing Don Muse on February 19th, at his home in Roanoke, Virginia.

Okay, so, to start, just tell me your name, like where you're from, and where you grew up.

00:19

DM: My name is Donald C. Muse. I'm originally from Roanoke, Virginia. I was born September 1st, 1958. And Roanoke is home.

00:29

SR: Okay. Okay, so, can you describe your childhood? If you had any siblings were you close with them? Or were you close with your parents?

00:38

DM: My founding years, my parents and I and my siblings lived in the Lincoln Terrace housing project. I went to school at Lincoln Terrace Elementary. I had three other siblings. It was a good life. But it was the sixties. Growing up in the sixties, it was a different time of day than it is today. A young person who is Afro-American and gay at 2017 has no idea what it was to be, what it would be like in the sixties. Sixties or the seventies. It's a whole other world now.

01:18

SR: Yeah. Okay, what age did you figure out you were different? Or just not like everyone else.

01:28

DM: Probably 12 or 13. 12 or 13, for sure. But the seventies brought about an impact for gay people because on television you were seeing all kinds of television shows and made-for-T.V. specials about gay teenagers, gay men and women, transsexuals, and people having operations and stuff like sex changes. Which were really groundbreaking television shows, that were being presented, and if you're an inquisitive person you watched those TV shows and you'd wonder "what the hell is going on" because you don't really hear that spoken around, you know, the family table. But once you see it on TV you know there are other people out there just like you. And today you have a lot of things with the transgender and the sex changes, but it's common

place now and it was just unheard of by the sixties and the seventies. It wasn't spoken about or anything. So when you did see something like that, that was groundbreaking.

02:36

SR: Did that impact you in any way? Did that make you feel more comfortable?

02:41

DM: Well I knew there were other people out there like myself.

02:43

SR: Yeah.

02:44

DM: I wasn't alone. And I never thought I was isolated because, you know, you constantly would hear people joke about living in Roanoke. But Roanoke was the third largest city in the state. There was Norfolk, Richmond, and Roanoke. Outside of that you were living in bodock. I mean, you were living in the hills. And I always have that to be thankful for because at that time even as being in a population of a hundred thousand people, this was a major place. And truly there were gay people in Roanoke. Lots of gay people in Roanoke. So I wasn't isolated. I wasn't living out in some farm community. Roanoke was the city. And you saw gay people even though they were very low key.

03:32

SR: What age did you decide to come out? Or did it just like happen? Like, you didn't have to tell?

03:41

DM: Well, I was definitely in high school. And I actually went to Jefferson High School but I didn't finish because they closed the school in '74 and it became Patrick Henry [High School]. But everyone stayed at the school because they didn't have enough room to, you know, force to occupy the campus, but I ended up graduating from Patrick Henry High. But I was at what they called the Jefferson Hall campus, and I had lots of gay friends at Jefferson Hall. Especially my lesbian friends. Gay men didn't actually come out and really be vocal about it, but I swear the lesbians didn't care. I'm telling you. I love them and [*chuckles*] I just absolutely love them. Because they just, they had found out. Oh, they'd found that meaning for their lives, I'm not kidding. And I had a lot of lesbian friends.

04:36

SR: Were your parents, family, and friends accepting? Or did you have a hard time?

04:44

DM: In the community you grow up in Roanoke, especially [the] Afro-American community, it's very hard for them to understand that one of their children is a homosexual, or lesbian. It's really hard. But, I will say this, and I don't want to offend anyone. They do tolerate their children to where they, at most parts, they will let them stay with them or stay home even though that's the situation. Compared to my white counterparts who many of families threw them out. They all got thrown out of their homes. And it was a common place thing. They got kicked out. And we didn't. And it's still like that today in some places.

05:41

SR: Right.

05:42

DM: Their family members throw them out and I don't know if that's because of a generational or cultural thing. Or is it just that when you sometimes, they find out one of their children are different and everything else, or because of religious beliefs or whatever, they've got to go. But I can say for the Afro-American community pretty much, they seldom ever throw their children in the street simply because of being gay. Seldom. I'm not saying there isn't any, but it's seldom done. Seldom. They just sort of like keep it quiet and just don't make a lot of attention to yourself, but hell, you're gay. What do you want... what attention do you not want to bring to yourself? You're not like your brothers and sisters, and they can egg you on about all kinds of things. But you know, siblings are siblings.

06:34

SR: Okay, so going off of when you were talking about your high school life. So, what was it like? Did you have a good time? Was it fun? Was it hard?

06:44

DM: No. I'm a very outgoing person.

06:46

SR: Oh good.

06:47

DM: I really am. I'm the same person I am now today as I was in high school. I didn't give a damn if you liked me or not. *[Laughs]* And I didn't care if I sat at the right table. You know there's this thing about kids sitting at the right table with the right group. I sit my ass at your table and I didn't care if you liked it or not *[Laughs]*. I was really a hated person. People didn't want to be around a lot of gay guys. Think about it.

07:09

SR: Yeah.

07:10

DM: I'm sitting there andm you know, you're a guy, you're the jock of... and you and your buddies are sitting there and then all of a sudden I sit my fat ass down next to you and start talking to you. That brings a whole lot of tension but I just wanna be friendly. I'm not necessarily trying to hit on you or anything like that. I just want to see what's going on with everybody. But I wasn't trying to hide anything. Everybody knew who I was. And...

07:33

SR: Were you bullied?

07:33

DM: It was relaxed.

07:34

SR: Were you bullied in anyway?

07:37

DM: I had a couple of fights. I had several fights. But you don't run from your bully. Not from where I come from. It's just not done. You just take the ass-whooping or not. It's just what you do, I'm serious. You just take it or you give one. But one or the other. You don't run home. Because you're gonna have your family send you right back outside and find the guy or guys that was gonna beat you up. You better come home with some scars and some missing teeth.

08:15

SR: [*laughter and inaudible sound*]

08:16

DM: There is no running from your bully. I'm not saying that gay men and gay women aren't bullied, you know sometimes to the point where there is nobody to help them. But I'm in a family where I've got brothers and sisters and I've got cousins. Were comin' for yo ass [*laughter*]. You can believe it, Frank. It's not gonna happen like that. And it didn't happen like that for me. I wasn't isolated. I had an insulated family and if you've peaked on it, it's just like living in, you know, rural Virginia and these people who live out in the country, you pick on one, you pick on them all. So, and that's the truth. I wasn't worried about anything like that. There'd be retaliation from my family and my friends. So I was one of the lucky ones.

09:05

SR: Okay. Moving on. When you were in high school did you have any romantic relationships or did you date any girls? Or you never even went by any girls?

09:17

DM: No I had lots of female friends.

09:18

SR: Okay.

09:19

DM: And I don't consider them my dates. I just had lots of female friends. We had a ball. We had an absolute ball together. Even to this day I have lots of female friends. They don't live with me or anything like that. They just drink and pass out here and, you know, take their bras off or whatever and fall asleep and I just put them to bed. I don't care. Now their husband calls me asks me "is my wife there?" and I go "yes." Still to this day, just like in high school. "Your girlfriend is over here passed the hell out." Because gay women—not gay women—but women per se, usually want to have a gay male friend. But not necessarily an effeminate gay friend. I'm talking about somebody that says something to you in a bar, imma punch his ass out. And you know that limp wrist thing, that's all a myth for a lot of gay men. No, we'll take you out. We'll take you out. But gay women love having a gay male friend. Their boyfriends and husband don't usually care for it, and the problem with me is that my women friends who I had through high school and college, I lost a great many of them once they married. Because once they became Mrs. Somebody, their husbands doesn't always see it, you know, for their wives to be coming over here and hanging out with me while I'm partying and I'm single and their married and trying to start families and stuff like that. You don't want to be partying with Don 24/7, you're married now. You know what I'm saying? That's the only heartbreak for me as far as my women friends came. They got married and started families and I just didn't see them anymore except for the few that I see now.

11:06

SR: Did you party or go out downtown in high school? Downtown Roanoke?

11:12

DM: [*Talking over interviewer*] Oh god yes. People said..,

11:13

SR: What was it like? [*laughter*]

11:16

DM: In the sixties and late sixties and all through the seventies, downtown Roanoke was the red light district. We're talking hoers [*prostitutes*].

Guys dressed up in women's clothing. Making a living, or trying to make a living, if you want to use the term "drag queens." Which was really funny because the statute of the law back then, the police would arrest you if you were in women's clothing. You never seen so many drag queens jump over a car like Elly May Clampett from the Beverly Hillbillies trying to run from the police. Because they would arrest you even if you weren't soliciting sexual favors or whatever. Downtown—the City Market—was just dive bars and prostitutes and drag queens and the businesses that were down there, but it was a gritty place after business hours. And it became a whole other world. I loved it. I spent most of my time downtown. At bars like The Manhattan,

The Capitol, Miss Tonies, the Ole Belmont, the Last Straw, these places are all gone. But they were full of gay people. And lesbians and gays and people who just didn't care. They just didn't care. Roanoke was like Dodge City downtown at night. It's not like that today. It's been what you call regenterfied [gentrified] or something. They've cleaned it up. I hate it. Absolutely hate downtown Roanoke. [*Laughter*] It's just not any fun.

13:19

SR: So, after high school did you go onto college?

13:22

DM: I did. I attended Ferrum college.

13:24

SR: Okay. What did you major in or did you have any...?

13:28

DM: I majored in paralegal studies. I didn't finish but I majored in it.

13:33

SR: [*Laughter*]

13:34

DM: I thought I wanted to work in a law office, but then I got the creative bug in me and I went on to start writing and singing and doing demos and backup singing and that kind of thing. Worked with that to see what happened with that.

13:52

SR: Tell me a little bit about that. I wanna know.

13:56

DM: It worked out for me with some people. Trying to make it in the industry is hard but everybody thinks if you're a gay person, you know, that's one of the safe places to go. Is the entertainment industry. You can be who you want to be. So it was just sort of like a logical thing for me to pursue it. Song writing and playwriting or be a playwright or theater. Everybody thinks everybody is gay in theater anyway so, you know, who knows? I don't know. But it was pretty good. It didn't pay a lot. Didn't pay a lot.

14:35

SR: Did you stick with that? Through your twenties and so on?

14:40

DM: I did. I'm still doing it now. Still doing it now.

14:44

SR: Okay.

14:45

DM: I write. I've had some good moments where my songs won quite a few awards and I got recognition for them, even in Roanoke. Most people don't think there is a lot of talented people or men and women in here but there are. Roanoke has a well spring of talented people. They just don't have the push or many of them need to leave this town and go somewhere else to figure out that Roanoke isn't just the only place you can play in a local bar or something like that. You need to get out of here.

15:22

SR: Yeah. Did you plan on moving? Did you go anywhere?

15:26

DM: From Roanoke, I left to go to D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Nashville, L.A., Montreal, and London, England. I got out.

15:39

SR: [*Laughter*]

15:40

DM: I got out.

15:42

SR: What place was your favorite?

15:45

DM: In America, D.C. and New York. Even though Washington is a very political city, it has a great music and arts scene. One of the best. London was overrated. It's nice but it was overrated.

16:04

SR: What'd you like about New York?

16:07

DM: Well, when I lived there it was gritty and it was the murder capital of the world. And you could get an apartment for 300 [dollars] a month. Now, a one bedroom apartment in New York is like 2300 dollars. I liked it when it was just dirty New York. Graffiti on the wall and people throwing, you know, crap in your face every time you go in front of somebody. It was very confrontational, so if you're gonna move to New York, and you're sort of a timid person, you're gonna come out of that real quick. The downside of it was being that I was a gay person, I saw a lot of tragedy for young gay youths, not just Afro-Americans. They come out of the foster care

systems and homes and stuff and they find their way to New York but they have no family and they have no support so they ended up in really, really dangerous [situations], and usually they died: suicide, murder, whatever. But New York was just that way. The city takes you very quickly.

17:10

SR: Did you feel accepted there?

17:12

DM: As far as New York is concerned, God yes. You're talking about gay? Overly gay. I wanted some of them to move to Jersey or something so they can't be so many damn gay people in New York [*laughter*]. It was really gay. Was it safe in the seventies and eighties? No. It was a very unsafe city.

17:33

SR: So we're working with The Drop-In Center and we're talking about the stigma of HIV and AIDS and so, what was that like in the eighties?

17:45

DM: Well most of the people here had no idea about the... I don't know if there was a rise or resurgence of any HIVs to the point where people are dying at a record rate. I'm not sure about that. I could be wrong. But in the point from when I first realized that the gay situation of the AIDS epidemic was happening, it's 1978.¹ I'm in Washington, D.C. Now, I'm saying this from my own point of view. People on the east coast, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, we knew that things were happening. But we were basically pointing towards San Francisco. We thought it was just something happening in the Golden Gate area and around California. We thought that was just where it was happening and it was sort of an isolated thing. It wasn't happening anywhere else. We were wrong. Boy were we wrong.

Because by the mid-eighties, it had taken everybody, and as I said I was in D.C. People don't realize what it was like to have a friend who was at that time diagnosed and dying, because you would have to have a friend, a very good friend, to come to the hospital sometime to even feed you and dress you. Because the dietary staff would not come into your room and feed you. You seldom got a doctor to come in to see you. Because it was so new and it was so, people were so afraid. By the time you end up dying and have to go home, you have lost your job, you don't have anywhere to go, and if you're one of the kids who came here whose family had thrown them out and that kind of thing, you are really up shit creek. So, you're out in the street, nowhere to go, there is no medicines for you, and you're gonna die. One of your friends have got to take you in. Cause you're not going home. And normally, that's just the way it was. And I lost so many friends between where I was living in D.C. and New York that these kids today, or I

¹ N.B.: the first AIDS cases were reported in the media in New York City in 1981.

should say a population of the gay America today, they can't fathom it. You don't know what it was like to lose three, four, five hundred people in less than a year or two. They're all dead.

20:09

SR: Did you have any like special friend that passed away?

20:13

DM: I took care of at least a dozen friends in the past 25 years. But they all died. They were gonna die. There was no... At those times there was no medicines like they have now. Those cocktails didn't exist then and many medications that they were on, the side effects were as bad as dying. So they died.

20:36

SR: Did it affect you in any way?

20:41

DM: In ways that I think about it now, yes. Because you don't have any friends that you had in the '70s. Let's say the 70s. Here it is 2017 and ninety percent of your friends are dead. But you have to keep living on. You have to make new friends. Younger friends even, because all your old friends are dead. So you can't just sit around looking through scrapbooks and thinking about what he or she was like. They're gone, and they've been gone 35, 40 years. They're not coming back. And you had a good time with them for a small period, a small window in time, you had a really good time with these people, but then you wake up one morning and you look at one of the gay papers, let's say *The Blade*, in the obituary columns, and you know ten people in there. So it was hard.

21:36

SR: How did you make new friends after this all happened?

21:46

DM: Gay bars. You meet men. You drink. They find you attractive and if they don't, you buy them another drink. At some point they will find you attractive [*laughter*]. That's the secret to that, and even that sometimes you play a shell game. You get one of your friends to front for you and you talk to the guy and you'll see what happens. New York was very strange. If you wanna talk about clean bars and safe bars, where you're just gonna come in and have a drink and maybe some hors d'oeuvres or something and you trying to meet a professional guy, that's a total different setting. Most of the bars in New York were gritty bars. They were very gritty bars and I'm not gonna say it in this interview because you'd have to cancel out everything I'm about to say.

22:39

SR: Okay. Did you have any like serious relationships?

22:44

DM: I did. My first lover was an entertainment columnist for *Billboard* magazine. I met him in Las Vegas and that's one reason I don't have a big thing about the people in the entertainment industry. We had a very good ten years together and being that he was a writer for *Billboard* magazine, there was nowhere we didn't go in the entertainment world. We were invited to a lot of things. I will say one thing. You know there's a song, there was a very famous woman. Her name was Ethel Merman and she did this song called, I think it was "No Business Like Show Business." But the reality is, in the song, I tell people not everything about them is appealing. Some of them are just real dogs, you'd wish you never met them because sometimes you idealize people in the industry and then you get to meet them. You go home and tear all that stuff up about them that you love so much because they are the biggest asses. But you find that out once you get up and close with them. But I was glad that Timothy and I were ten years together and I got to be exposed in the industry, like I said earlier in this interview, I wanted to do something in the entertainment world. It put me directly there. Right in it. But I was just at the right place at the right time. I had moved to Las Vegas and he was working for a newspaper doing a weekly column when I met him.

24:23

SR: Okay, so I guess moving on, what was life like in your thirties? Was it completely different in your twenties? Was it more fun?

24:37

DM: You party in your twenties. And you're almost dead in your thirties. Especially if you're gay, in the sense that gay men who like to party, and women who like to party, and if you're living in a major city, going out is a lifeblood thing. There are people who say "we don't go out; I've got a lover now or I've never been that kind of person who wanted to go to bars." There are lots of gay men who will tell you "I'm not a bar person and I don't want to go to a bar to meet a guy." Those guys are fine; they just are not bar entities. On the other hand, part of that corn, it's your lifeblood, you're not going to meet anybody if you don't go to the bars. If you don't go to their cocktail parties and you don't go to their brunches, you're out of the loop. You've got to go. And Washington [D.C.] was a very strange place because, being that it's a political city, every four years the people who you knew that were Republicans got thrown out if the Democrats came in, and vice versa. The Democrats came in, the Republicans came in, they lost their jobs. So you said "tootaloo" to them, "bye, I loved you a lot," but that's a different administration in there. They all leave. They go back to wherever they came from because they don't stay in the city once the new administration comes in.

26:02

SR: Were you ever married or close to being married?

26:06

DM: I was married three times...and that's all I'm going to say pretty much about that [laughter].

26:14

SR: That's fine. So I guess we will transition to your forties. Was it better or worse?

26:27

DM: I came into my own in my forties. I came into my own. I really started pushing myself with my writing and my playwriting. And I sort of calmed down. I was single. I was alone. I was still dating. I'm a pretty attractive guy [laughter]. Pretty interesting. So I wasn't lacking in the dating situation. It was just that I just didn't want to settle down with just any guy. And I'll bring this up, even though this hasn't been said. If you are in a relationship, outside of dating another Afro-American guy, if you are in an interracial [relationship], like my lover Timothy was from *Billboard*, there's a whole lot you have to deal with. A lot.

27:26

SR: Was it different compared to dating an African American?

27:32

DM: Even in the gay community, they have problems with interracial couples. And I mean even if you're an Asian guy dating a white guy. Or you're Italian and you're dating somebody from Denmark or something. They have a problem with not sticking with Italian-Italian, black and black, white and white. Not all. But you can get some real assholes who just can't see how that's possible that the two of you can be together and you have to confront it. You can't be sly about it. You have to confront it, nip it in its bud right then and there.

28:15

SR: Is that what you did?

28:16

DM: You can believe it.

28:17

SR: I can see it... Okay. Did you feel like you had the most success in your forties? Because you were saying with your playwriting...

28:26

DM: I don't think it has happened yet. I just recently signed a young man who came by Saturday, yesterday, to do a project for me. He is so talented. I hope this is the one that brings it all on the table.

28:44

SR: Okay. I guess we can talk about, again, your fifties. What was it like? Better?

28:53

DM: I outlived everybody. I outlived everybody. Parents became old and died. Siblings died. Really good friends died. But as I said earlier, you can't dwell on that. You've got to make new friends. You have to keep alert. Even if you live alone... I live alone but I'm a pretty happy guy. I live by myself but I'm not without any friends. I've got lots of friends in the city of Roanoke, but not a partner. And if that was to happen I'd be okay with it. I'd be alright with it, if the person who I liked a lot was somebody I thought I wanted to put up with. But now you can marry, you can marry now, and I'm just waiting to see, for those who've given a matrimony, "I dos," how long most of them stay together, because it's too early to say that you know it's a win-win thing, but I know everybody wanted it, as many people wanted to be married and be recognized by it, so we'll see. If somebody reads this article and says "I'm going to go after that guy after I read this article," I'm available. Trust me.

30:29

SR: How did you feel when gay marriage was passed by the law in June 2014?²

30:37

DM: I was happy. I didn't like all the people who started sending me wedding invitations, because I didn't like a lot of them to begin with. But they got married and I sent them something.

30:48

SR: Did you go to them or no?

30:49

DM: Oh no, I've gone to several. Several little private homes in the city. They didn't necessarily have big church weddings, but they rented out a hall and had the reception and got married at Justices of the Peace or got married out in the park or something. It was nice and it was different. But you know you still get them a wedding gift.

31:13

SR: So, do you feel that it's better to be gay now in 2017 compared to like the '70s and the '80s?

31:23

DM: Yeah. It's better to be gay, even a younger gay person now. Because everybody who has gone prior to them have already bit the dust and done the things that really needed to be done to be gay. I mean [they] really took the beating. You can be gay now, I swear to God. You can go to see these kids now out at the clubs and out in school or whatever, they have these organizations for kids. I shouldn't say kids, but the gay youth population. You can really be a

² N.B.: Virginia began to allow same-sex marriages in October 2014. Federal recognition of marriage equality came in June 2015. Both instances were the result of judicial decisions rather than legislation.

gay teenager now, even though you may still get bullying and that kind of a thing. Which is different from what we went through because now everything seems to be on the internet. Everybody wants to kill you on the internet by saying something ugly to you. Before they just said it in your face. Now you have to read it online. I don't get that. Not that I'm some sort of ancient dinosaur. I just don't get it. I don't get it.

32:28

SR: Are you involved with anything in the LGBTQ community?

32:34

DM: Not anymore.

32:37

SR: What did you used to do?

32:38

DM: In the D.C. area, I used to do a lot. When they would have the Gay Pride, I was always at somebody's table, working for an entity of that type, whether it was like the gay defense funds or something like that, lawyers, women lawyers for gay men, and all that kind of stuff, whatever it may be. I would always work that day with some sort of organization to help out. I really don't do that much down here. I can't tell you why I don't. It's just that I haven't. I just haven't.

33:18

SR: You mentioned Gay Pride. Did you like going there? Was it fun?

33:23

DM: Roanoke or DC or New York? Which?

33:25

SR: All of them, any of them.

33:28

DM: Roanoke's Gay Pride has changed a lot and there's more and more people who come out for it, but once again I don't really recognize anybody when I go there. Maybe a handful of people that I can relate to from a day in time that I'm talking about, that come to the Pride organization. Everybody else is 18 to 21. I don't know who they are. But I mean they're gay just like myself. They are just really young, so I just sort of walk around and see what's up with them.

34:09

SR: You were just mentioning the younger people, what would you say to someone that is struggling to come out?

34:20

DM: Closets are for clothes. Just redo your closet. Don't live in your closet... [laughter]. You'll thank me for this.

34:41

SR: In your free time what do you like to do right now?

34:55

DM: Write. Write in my journal. I like going out to dinner with friends. Let's go out tonight. One of my friends is a very good artist, painter here in the city. I go with him a lot to the art galleries and shows. Him and his wife just recently married and I go to dinner. They come here. And I knew him when he was just struggling. We've been together a long time. He's one of the few people that I can relate to, of still being around, and we've known each other for so long. Outside of that, the city has changed. There's a whole lot to do now. There's much more to do here in Roanoke than there used to be. You just have to be open to doing it.

36:01

SR: What made you come back to Roanoke?

36:06

DM: I needed to get myself together and get out of the bigger city because it was going to kill me if I didn't find some time to come home and relax and really depress [decompress]. D.C. and New York will take it all out of you. All out of you. And running 24/7 with friends, trying to be on top of it and be gay at the same time, that's a lot to do. That's a lot to do. I actually found myself in a comfort zone coming back here. Roanoke is one of those cities where it's affordable to live. I tell my friends in D.C. and New York now that I pay \$575 for this thing. You pay 4,000 dollars for a studio, you know? They need to come to Roanoke.

37:02

SR: Has Roanoke changed a lot while you were gone?

37:05

DM: God, yes.

37:07

SR: In what ways?

37:10

DM: The attitudes have changed a lot but it's still a very segregated city. It doesn't want to think of itself like that, but it still very much is. Everybody has their own little plot of land that is theirs in their little enclaves whether you live in Old Southwest, where we are today, or Hunting Hills—not the Hunting Hills but Avenham area—or Southeast, or Northwest, very territorial.

And seldom do they get along unless it's necessary. But you have to give Roanoke one thing, it is a Democratically held city. And that's a good thing if you're a Democrat. If you're Republican here, you need to move! [laughter] Yes, I said it. That ought to make a few people uncomfortable. But it's true. Roanoke is a Democratically held city, but that bothers me too because it's like living in San Diego or something, it's all Republicans, so if you're from another party, you can forget it whether you gay, straight, or whatever. And I don't know what the gay community's political choices are. Are all gays in Roanoke Democrats? Or are some of them Libertarians? I'm not sure.

38:51

SR: Do you think people are more accepting here in Roanoke now or is it little different?

38:57

DM: Well, people die off, you know what I'm saying? The old regime. They die. But their daughters, sons, and grandchildren take some of that with them. They still hold onto a lot of crazy realities. But I don't blame them, I don't. It's something that they still hold on to, and, you know, you have to pick it apart. You have to be very careful of what you want to do with these people and my credo is: pick your battle. Pick your battle, don't tote anyone else's water, and you will live a long life. There's too many gay people who go out and fight all these different battles, even if it's just for the gay causes. Just pick the one that really is something you're interested in, leave the other nineteen problems to somebody else cause you're not going to get it done. Policy in these things are what the problem is and you can't change state legislation and policies overnight. It could take ten, fifteen, twenty years before anything changes. You could be working on that particular thing for years and years and years and years. You get burnt out.

40:29

SR: Do you think that the segregation will ever change in Roanoke? Cause I feel like there is a little bit of a divide in Roanoke from what I can tell, and do you think in the next few years it will be different or no?

40:49

DM: It's not just Roanoke. The internet has brought about a whole new reality of segregation for everybody. You now go online to talk about faggots, lesbians, the Ku Klux Klan, Princess Leia. I don't care. People get online now and say the most hateful things and it's because you can be an anonymous person online, have all kinds of hate speech, tweet it, or whatever, which brings back the old problems that most people didn't want to address to begin with. Now it's in the "wild wild west" of the internet. You can be a complete ass now and just, you know, sign on and sign off, and if the segregation speech is what you're after, you can find it. You can find it even in Roanoke. In Roanoke. But once again you got to stand up to that kind of crap. You have to pick your battle. If you see it coming towards you, you have to nip it in its bud. You really do. Segregation is segregation. I've been in much worse cities than Roanoke where the segregation is just rampant.

42:16

SR: Yeah. Where's that?

42:18

DM: Well, parts of Baltimore that was even like that. Baltimore is a very separated, segregated city, and it's a much larger city. Parts of California is like that. You would think that it would be very progressive. They're not. They're not.

42:52

SR: [*long pause*] Okay. So... Sorry. [*long pause*] I'm sorry. So if there is one thing you could change about Roanoke, what would it be?

43:21

DM: That gay people and really progressive people change what the problems are in your community. Don't just sit there and say well somebody else will do this. Wrong. You need to put your name on a ballot. You know, really get out there and do a grassroots thing if you think something could be changed and made better. And challenge the status quo. Otherwise it will not change. People get very comfortable just watching stuff slowly happen. Just slowly happen. And usually tell you "don't make waves, don't make waves about stuff. Just leave things as they are. People are happy." They're not. They're not.

44:14

SR: Do you have any plans to move somewhere else or do you plan on staying in Roanoke?

44:20

DM: I would stay here. Keep a place in Roanoke regardless if I've decided to move. I'd keep somewhere here. Happiness doesn't matter where you move. Home is where you make it.

44:37

SR: Right.

44:38

DM: If you're unhappy in New York, you'll be unhappy in New York. If you're unhappy in Roanoke, you'll be unhappy in Roanoke. It won't make any difference. It won't make any difference.

44:49

SR: Do you think you've challenged the status quo of being a gay black man?

44:58

DM: Many times. And [I'm] alive.

45:04

SR: Right.

45:05

DM: Because I can encounter a very bad thing quickly and whether its police or anything of that nature, you've got to be on guard. I mean on point, or it could go bad really quickly. But you can't be afraid of it. Being gay and black and in America puts me at the most risk of anybody in this country. I've really had challenges most people have no idea about day in, day out. But I'm not afraid to walk out my door and I'm not afraid of confrontation, even if it comes my way. But when they find out you're gay and black male, you got a double whammy and you got to deal with it cause it's not going to go away. It's never going to go away.

46:06

SR: You mentioned the police, have you ever had anything happen, cause right now police brutality is...

46:12

DM: Police brutality isn't new. You know, I remember the very first time I thought police were crazy and I remember it was in the '60s and we were watching these civil rights people being beat up and dogs biting them and stuff and it was on television. But it's 1962, '63, and America is getting its first view of what this nation really is like. Racism is not something everybody wants to talk about, but I'm not talking about from the standpoint of [the] LGB community and Afro-Americans. I'm talking about no matter what you wanna say. We don't wanna talk about it. We just don't. The system is rigged. The system is rigged. Housing is rigged. Politics is rigged. You've got to challenge everybody. There's no easy way to walk in and say, "well, these people will be okay with this and they won't mind." You're out of your damn mind. What do you think it is, Oz? Listen. It's not like that at all. It's a constant challenge. Even if you are a woman today. Women face the same problems of getting what they want constantly to prove their point. The Planned Parenthood thing now going on. The Roe vs. Wade which has always been one of the big issues. Women in this country don't realize what it was like in the '50s and the '60s. When you would be getting your abortion behind Sunny Side Market.

47:56

SR: Wow.

47:57

DM: No safety nets. No safety nets. Or some woman who was an orderly in a hospital, who had worked, had a little bit of medical knowledge, would be doing your abortion. You may or may not come home. Most women don't realize that or can't remember that. But ask your mother and your grandmother. You'll want to hold onto certain things that are a woman's right. You should fight for it because it's your right. As a woman, who am I to tell you what to do with your [body]? I mean if you let me tell you how you could stop all of this, tell men you're going to get

a vasectomy at fifteen whether you like it or not. That will be the end of that because that's not happening. No man is going to have you tell him how to deal with his sexual life and his reproduction thing. If you had a class action suit that was saying something that men have now got to at a certain age stop reproducing—you can only have one child or two children like you have in China—you'd have a war on your hands here in America. No man would put up with that.

49:16

SR: Right.

49:17

DM: You'd have legislation to have you put in jail. But on the opposite side of the coin they want to tell you how you are supposed to handle your sexual life. Screw them.

49:35

SR: Is that what you live by? Screw them?

49:37

DM: I tell all my friends. When I was in high school, I had several friends of mine—female friends—who terminated their pregnancies because they didn't want a baby and they couldn't bring a baby into the world and they lived in a family situation bringing a child wasn't gonna help anything. We had to go to Richmond. You could go to Richmond before you could go to Roanoke. There was a clinic here. But normally most of them went to Richmond because it was easy to leave Roanoke and get it done in Richmond and come back.

50:17

SR: So, moving on, what do you think about the new bathroom bill in North Carolina?

50:24

DM: I don't get it.

50:26

SR: Why's that?

50:27

DM: No. I'm just saying I don't get it. So if you're transgender... If I transgendered, and I go to North Carolina, that means I can still go into the man's bathroom because I was born a man? Is that what it really means? Instead of going to the bathroom cause now I'm a woman. I want someone to clarify that for me.

50:53

SR: I think so. Yeah. Yeah.

50:58

DM: So, okay. That's confusing for anybody. If I was just coming from a sports event, let's say you're at one of the stadiums and I come in pretty much an effeminate sex-changed guy, but I didn't have it all finished, you're going to get some feedback from that. You just are. Or if you go into the women's bathroom and you used to be a man and there are women sitting there even though some of them are going to be accepting of you. There are going to be women in there who are not so great. So I don't know what to tell you on that one.

51:33

SR: Yeah.

51:34

DM: Cause that confuses even me.

51:36

SR: Mhm.

51:37

DM: So I know why everybody else is fighting what it means. Cause it's just confusing. If you're going to be transgender and you're transgenering to a woman and you pretty much look like that woman and you don't really look anymore different than that, then for me I don't care if you go into the women's bathroom. But if you decide to say "well, I used to be a man, I'm going to go into the man's bathroom now." Why did you want to transgender and be a woman? If you're gonna still use the men's room?

52:04

SR: Yeah.

52:05

DM: I'm not trying to be spark or anything. It's just confusing to me.

52:11

SR: Yeah.

52:12

DM: So I don't know what views other people have on it.

52:27

SR: Do you think your life would have been completely different if you weren't an outgoing person? Because you seem very outgoing and fun.

52:33

DM: Yes it would have been. I never wanted to be one of those gay men or women in the bar, then they became luses and drunks. Because see, they were lonely. The problem with gay society, as far as gay men are concerned, everything is youth-orientated. You have to be a good-looking guy for the longest time where men are concerned. Gay men are concerned. But what gay men don't realize: you will age. So your handsome little ass at twenty-one is hot now but you will be forty soon, really faster than you know. Your life will change. And those same guys that you come into the bar when you're forty, forty-five won't speak to you because you're an older gay person or maybe your looks have changed a great deal. "Boy, you used to be a real hottie." That's the only problem I found in years and years of going into the bars. It's so superficial about looks and body and you had to look a certain way to, you know, get whatever. I never considered myself a good-looking guy. I'm not. I don't consider myself a good-looking man at all. But what I am is charismatic. So I got lots of dates. And I had lots of handsome men who dated me. But it wasn't because of my looks. It was because I was an outgoing and sure of myself person. And the other thing was I was Afro-American and gay. I was really an oddity. I was an oddity. I think I still am an oddity to a lot of men because they're not used to seeing a black man doing but so many things and definitely not thinking about dating him, or me, unless you know you can find some common ground with this guy. Otherwise it's just a date or two or just, you know, one of those one night sexual things. And it's over. It's done. You're not going to have any long-term relationship with this guy.

54:51

SR: Right.

54:52

DM: It's just the way it is.

54:54

SR: Yeah. How did you get so much confidence?

55:01

DM: If you live in America and you're Afro-American, you don't have time to cry about it.
[laughing]

55:07

SR: Yeah.

55:08

DM: You don't have time to have the blues. You don't have time to worry about if something went wrong or what I'm going to do from here. Or is someone going to help me, give me a... what do you call it? A hand up, or whatever.

55:18

SR: Yeah.

55:19

DM: Those are illusions. They are absolutely something that you don't have time to think about. Because lots of times when you leave your parents' home or your community, you got to make it. You got to make it.

55:34

SR: Yeah. Did you ever have a low point? Or were you ever lonely at some point?

55:42

DM: Yes. Probably when several friends of mine came back from New York that was buried here and I would attend their funeral. I would be at some point at a low point, you know, that day or that month thinking about them.

56:02

SR: Yeah.

56:05

DM: That was probably the worst. I've had friends who were murdered here in the city. You know, they found their bodies and they committed suicide and you get a low point at that moment when you know you get a phone call. I was at my lowest I think when the Backstreet shooting happened,³ because someone who I used to date was shot and I remember his mother called me to come to the hospital because she said "I don't think he's going to make it, so you need to come now." So I did. I mean he had another lover at the time. But I came to see him because they just didn't think he would pull through. I'm going to say that was my lowest point when the shooting happened and I knew several people at the bar that night that you know including the guy that died. The Overstreet guy [Danny Overstreet]. That was probably my lowest point here in Roanoke.

57:12

SR: Really? What was the shooting?

57:14

DM: Backstreet.

57:14

SR: Okay.

57:15

³ Backstreet was a shooting that occurred on September 22, 2000 when Ronald Gay walked into Backstreet Café on Salem Avenue with the intention of shooting gay people. He injured six people and killed one.

DM: Backstreet had a shooting in 2000... was it [200]1? You could look online. It says the Backstreet shooting. The guys who killed those people was named Ronald Gay. G-A-Y. But it was September 22nd. I'm gonna tell you exactly when it happened.

57:34

SR: Okay.

57:35

DM: I was at home watching a TV show at the time. It was called "The Commissioner," or something like that, it came on CBS. And one of my best friends, we normally went to Backstreet on Friday night because it was a popular place to go. And we decided not to go. He said "well, let's just do Saturday night." I said "fine, cause I'm tired." By one o'clock in the morning, my phone is ringing off the wall with people telling me that people had been shot and murdered and killed at the bar. And for the next probably several months, Roanoke is the most watched and televised city in the United States. There is news media from around the world that has ascended [descended] on Roanoke because of the Backstreet murder. Prior to what you see today in Atlanta and Orlando, that thing happened here. "Nightline" with Ted Coppel, ABC, NBC, British Press. They ascended on Roanoke. It was like nothing you'd ever seen in your life. And you couldn't be in the closet then. Because the spotlight was on Roanoke. The world was on Roanoke. The City Council, I know I felt sorry for them, because they didn't know what to do. They really didn't. They had to change a lot of things quickly. So, the Orlando shooting just brought back a lot of things about safety and being safe, because I recently attended the Park. The bar called the Park. I had no idea they had that much outside security for you to get into that bar. The world has changed to where it's just crazy to try to get inside of the bar now. Because any fool could have a concealed weapon or something inside of a boot or something or whatever. I don't know. But it's really nutty. I had never seen that much security at a bar locally here in the city. It threw me.

59:49

SR: What are your thoughts on the Orlando shooting?⁴ Did it bring back some memories?

59:53

DM: It did. It brought back the Backstreet shooting.

59:54

SR: Wow.

59:57

DM: And I felt sorry because there were even more people murdered there. He took out 19 or 20 people.⁵ This guy only ended up in Roanoke killing one person and injuring maybe four or five

⁴ The Orlando shooting occurred June 2016 when Omar Seddique Mateen opened fire in Pulse Nightclub killing 49 people.

people—you know, severely injured—but he killed one and that was enough. That was enough. But the Orlando people didn't have the hatred for gays that happened with the funeral here after the shooting because you had that crazy guy from Westboro Baptist Church and all these hate groups that also came to Roanoke. And they picketed the funeral. So they had to have special security and, what do you call it, the State Troopers and all this other thing at the funeral. It was crazy. And it was sorta sad, too.

1:00:54

SR: Yeah. Okay, so we're out of time but is there anything else you want to say?

1:01:06

DM: Tote no one's water. That's it.

1:01:13

SR: That's it. Okay. Thank you so much.

[END]

⁵ Ibid.