

Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project
Oral History Initiative
The QTPOC Project: Representation Matters

Interview with Miss Grace Kelly
February 24, 2018

Interviewer: Ashleigh Griffin

Interviewee: Miss Grace Kelly

Date: February 24, 2018

Location: Downtown Roanoke Public Library Meeting Room, Roanoke, VA

Transcribed by: Ashleigh Griffin

Total: 1:41:40

[0:22] - introduction and family

[0:56] - High school in Martinsville, VA; trying out for drum majorette

[2:28] – Dolls and gender; childhood

[4:02] - Bullying and cub scouts

[5:15] - High school prom; moving out of parents' house; first experience with drag in Martinsville; discovering The Horoscope, a gay dance club in Roanoke [c. 1976?]; meeting a female impersonator

[8:39] - Moving to Roanoke [c. 1976-1977]; performing drag at The Trade Winds, a gay bar in Roanoke; running in first drag pageant; performing at The Horoscope; the sex work scene around the City Market building; downtown bars that allowed drag queens as customers

[12:57] - The opening of The Park [1978]

[13:35] - Murphy's; The Last Straw; The Trade Winds and the Miss Gay Roanoke Pageant; movement of the pageant to different bars in the late 1970s

[15:53] - Miss Roanoke at Large (first runner up 1992 and crowned 1994 Miss Roanoke at Large)

[16:24] - Miss Gay Roanoke; issues with younger queens in shows/pageants

[18:59] - Performing at the Jefferson Center; how drag has changed over the years; technologies of female impersonation (hips, breasts, etc.); cliques within the drag community

[22:12] – Sexuality; first encounter with a woman; bullying and fighting with boys in high school; first relationship with a man; lack of interest in romantic relationships and having children

[28:39] - hunting trip with father; bonding with other gay cousins

[31:00] - family's reaction to drag; death of his mother and relationship with father

[34:16] - relationship with the church (baptised in 1979); attending a drag queen's funeral in Martinsville

[36:09] - relationships between older queens; the struggle trying to perform drag again at an older age

[37:43] –

[41:48] - Issues between plus size drag queens and the skinny drag queens

[44:48] - encounters with the police and criminal justice system in Roanoke; the struggles of sex workers on Salem Avenue

[48:34] -

[51:38] - Changes in the gay bar scene in Southwest Virginia and surrounding states

[53:10] - experience with the AIDS crisis

[54:22] - safer sex and a recent encounter with a damaged condom; ignorance on STD transmission from younger generations; learning about HIV+ diagnosis (1985)

[59:59] - stigmas about getting tested for STDs; less than professional or non-effective medical care for HIV

[1:02:13] - AIDS benefits and groups to help people with HIV/AIDS; the cruelty and callousness of people against those with an HIV diagnosis

[1:06:45] - support groups for people with HIV; dealing with losing friends to HIV/AIDS; effect on the gay and drag community

[1:10:36] - female illusionist identification; helping a friend do drag for Halloween; performing at a predominantly Black club in Charlotte, NC; first time running for Miss Roanoke at Large; befriending Neely O'Hara and winning 1994 Miss Roanoke at Large; "the name of the game is respect"

[1:20:09] - drug use (or lack thereof) in drag community

[1:20:39] - takeaways from doing drag

[1:21:44] - diversity in the drag community; cliques and their effect on diversity

[1:24:59] - catering to the younger crowd; RuPaul's Drag Race queens performing; Lady Bunny appearances

[1:27:00] - famous queen from Roanoke; disconnect between younger and older generations

[1:30:14] - reminiscing with Carolyn Sue Wilson

[1:31:43] - flamboyance of the younger gay community (especially during Pride in the Park); issues with Pride being close to churches

[1:33:46] - the black church and acceptance

[1:35:11] - Meeting and mentoring drag daughter, Kristina; earning vs. paying for titles/awards

[1:39:40] - how cliques make it hard for queens to succeed; rude reactions from the public

[1:41:08] - getting the word out [on drag history] is important

[0:00] AG: This is Ashleigh Griffin with the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project. I am at the Roanoke Public Library on February 24th, 2018 and I am interviewing Miss Grace Kelly.

So, if you'd like to start with some background, your age, name, and where you grew up?

[0:22] MGK: My name is Michael Kelly. I'm originally from Martinsville [Virginia] but I moved to Roanoke in '76 [1976].

[0:32] AG: So, what was your family dynamics like, your parents, did you have any siblings?

[0:36] MGK: Yes.

[0:37] AG: How many siblings did you have?

[0:40] MGK: I have four brothers and one sister.

[0:45] AG: That's a lot of boys.

[0:47] MGK: Yes, one of them died.

[0:50] AG: So, what was your early childhood like? You said you were from Martinsville, so what was it like growing up there?

[0:56] MGK: It was okay. You know, it had its moments... as in high school. A lot of the boys made fun and plus I hung with a lot of girls; but it was okay, I dealt with things that went on. I used to hang with a bunch of girls, and the boys knew what time it was and they would say little words and things, but it didn't affect me at all. Then later on, when I got round to about my sophomore year, I was more accepted. I tried out for drum majorette in high school, and it was five people and *[laughs]* they were laughing because I was the only boy that really came out to try and there was about four girls. Everybody had their turn at twirling and when I came out the door the band was standing there with their instruments and I stepped out the door and they said, "Here she comes," and I said "Oh my god!" So I went out and twirled, threw the baton up in the air, twirled and then blew the whistle and led the boys out onto the field, the band onto the field. And it was okay, they had lived. But the girls were a tint jade but they got over it.

[2:20] AG: So, I don't know what you would define your sexuality as, but is that something you knew from a young age, that you were more feminine?

[2:28] MGK: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm. You know how they say in the old days, "mama's baby and daddy's maybe." *[laughs]*

[2:40] AG: So is that something that your family was comfortable with? Did they encourage that or...?

[2:46] MGK: They accepted it. My one brother didn't like it too well. My childhood, you know how it is at Christmas you're expecting a doll and you get something, a green army truck. You get your face cracked up in the Christmas tree and things like that. So, I think I was round about ten years old or eight and my mom had bought me a G.I. Joe doll and I was very disappointed because I was expecting Barbie. So I took and did the ordinary thing and I took and shaved, got some sandpaper and sanded G.I. Joe's beard off, and cut one of my mama's wigs and glued him some hair and took his khakis and turned them into an evening gown. My brother actually played with G.I. Joe and I had him covered up because I didn't want him to see what I had created; and he pulled the cover back and saw G.I. Joe, and he was not a happy camper, and

we got to knocking. He didn't try me anymore because I gave him several gorilla knocks
[laughs].

[3:58] AG: Is that something you found that you had to deal with more when you were younger,
a lot of teasing and stuff?

[4:02] MGK: Yeah, a lot of it. I mean, when I tried to be a cub scout... wrong! That was a big
disaster.

[4:14] AG: You wanted to be a cub scout?

[4:16] MGK: Yeah I did, and I was not happy with that.

[4:19] AG: Really?

[4:20] MGK: Oh, no.

[4:21] AG: Was it a difficult...dealing with them?

[4:21] MGK: The boys didn't...[laughs] The boys were not prepared. Well I had another friend
who was just in the same boat I was but I had on my school uniform and we picked him up at
his house and everybody had their little blue uniforms on and they're ready to go and follow us
behind the wheel wagon. And we waited, and waited, and the child came out and there was too
many "hee-ma hee-mas." He came out and he had a garbage bag on for a dress and tied two
pieces of rope to his head for hair and jumped right up in the car with us just like that [laughs].
They were not prepared for that madness. Then as I got older things changed; and then the
prom was a big disaster. I should've never volunteered to do that one.

[5:14] AG: Well, what happened with that?

[5:15] MGK: Oh, well the girl used me to get with a another person. So, I went on ahead to
impress everybody and I went ahead and took her to the prom and everytime you turned around
she was getting up getting punch. And I kept saying, "why is she drinking all this punch?"
knowing she was going to the other room to meet a piece of whatever it was. So I said when the
fifth cup of punch comes through I'm going to let her have it! So she came back and sat down
and I said "did you have enough punch?" and she said "Mm-hmm." I said "okay." She said "well
we're going to the after prom party," and I said "really?" and she said "Yes, we're going." So I
left her standing and left with a guy. And when she got to the prom party we was over there in
the corner sitting there having a good time and she walks up to me and starts growling, "Why
you do this?" I said, "Well why you kept getting up for punch?" I said "I'm not stupid honey. I
didn't put my head on the green apple truck. I knew what you was up to." So she didn't speak to
me for a couple of years, but then I didn't care. We ended up being best friends after all.

I moved out of my parents' house and moved over to the city and that's when I really got into, they was talking about "drag" and I kept saying "Drag? Drag what?" and then that night I met some friends and they were dressed like women and I said, "ooh, that's good." And I thought "well, I think I'll try that madness." I tried it and liked it. Then one weekend we decided to come to Roanoke. So we went to Roanoke to The Horoscope, and I didn't know about The Horoscope being a gay bar. And I went down there and went in. The music was booming outside and I said "ooh, this is going to be cute." And I got up in there and I saw terrible amounts of madness. I was truly cracked, my face was cracked like a chinese soup bowl [*laughs*]. So I went in and it was just amazing, me and Desmond, we came right out on the dance floor, folded my arms, and looked around like this [*looks around in disbelief*], and I said "Ooh!" So, and then there was this female impersonator doing the show named Wilson, and came out on stage and I thought it was a real woman, and she entertained the crowd and everything and I was amazed at how she performed and everything and I liked what I saw. So the next day... we had stayed in a motel and we went by her house to see her and knocked on her door early that morning and ooh, the illusion had turned into a puff of smoke! She opened the door in butch, and I said "well, where is 'you know who' at?" and she said "that's me right here." So, I went back to Martinsville, and later on came down one weekend and I've been here ever since.

[8:21] AG: So you moved here around the [19]70s?

[8:24] MGK: Uh huh, I moved here round about '77 [1977].

[8:30] AG: So, would you say that that night was the defining night for you? You just knew that that was what you wanted to do?

[8:39] MGK: I knew when I saw that me and Desmond and... and I said "I can't believe this place." And so I moved here, stayed at a boarding house. There was [*counts quietly*] eight of us in the boarding house and the woman that took care of us she was an older woman; and she taught us a lot about drag and all that. I live for living here, and I got with Wilson and one night we was going to The Horoscope, and I said "I want to try one of those." So, I went to another bar called... it was another bar called Trade Winds, and this was when I first got into drag and it was a gay bar and there were straights and gays there. It was nice, you know, everybody was getting along with each other. And I got in drag and I tried it and I liked it so I started doing shows there. Then back to The Horoscope I started getting into shows and stuff and I saw my first drag pageant. And it was amazing and a couple of years later I decided to run for the pageant and it was a big disaster. And I ran and it was okay but the outfit that I had made [for] me, this child told us that she could sew beautiful gowns, which she didn't know what she was doing. She took pieces of blue satin material, she took and cut it down the sides, sewed and hemmed it at the bottom, put lace up at the top and took a disco shawl and wrapped it around my neck with a big brooch right here and said "swoop!" So I stood out in front of the audience looking like a country bumpkin, blowed up, cracked; and it was okay until it got to talent. I did pretty good and it just got to the point that I just got angry. So when all the contestants came out to line up, while they was lined up I came through there with my suitcase and out the door I went! I started doing shows at The Horoscope and then later on they was talking about The

Market. I said, "The market?" So I went down to The Market and there were cars that were there and there were drag queens on every corner and I was like "What kind of madness is this?" and this is where everybody was prostituting. We don't call it that, we call it selling after hours produce [*laughter*]. So I got into that for years and they had a lot of redneck bars and things downtown, a lot of people didn't like us because of the way we were. Some people accepted us for what we were. They had a restaurant called Billy's Ritz and we used to stand right across the street from there and the people would come there for dinner and it stayed packed and we wondered why and they was coming down to see us stand there and carry on. Several years that went on, and then they had a lot of places. It was New Market; The Manhattan was redneck, we finally... somehow, we knew the woman who owned it and they started accepting us in those kinds of places. There was The New Market, The Manhattan, The Capital, and there was Tony's, Miss Tony's. They accepted us pretty well, everybody got along and things. And then still performing at The Horoscope, and then I turned around and when The Horoscope closed down there was The Park. And, ugh... they didn't care for us when we started going there. The guys didn't like the drag queens, and then we started fighting every time we'd go up in there so they started giving us our respect and we started doing shows there.

[12:54] AG: So do you remember around when The Horoscope closed?

[12:57] MGK: The Horoscope closed in '77 [1977]. The Park opened up in '77 [1977].¹

[13:02] AG: So you found a lot of difficulties when The Park first opened?

[13:07] MGK: At first, I guess they weren't prepared, but you know it was some people that was accepting and some that wasn't, you know. And like I said they would say little nasty comments and then you gotta reach out and touch in a rough way and we gained our respect. We started doing shows there and it was okay.

[13:26] AG: Did that surprise you in any way, since you had performed at The Horoscope and everything. Did it surprise you that The Park opened and was not as accepting when it first opened? [*MGK addition to transcript: It was not that The Park was not accepting; it was some of the gay people that were there.*]

[13:35] MGK: I wasn't surprised. I knew that, you know, some places didn't like drag queens. [*Material removed from transcript at MGK's request.*] And then The Last Straw was another gay bar, but it was totally butch. You couldn't go in drag, and then at The Park it was okay.

Back then before I came here there was the Trade Winds, they started the Miss Gay Roanoke Pageant, and that's when it was Carolyn Sue Wilson, Lee Cruise, Roger Hartberger, and some more; and they started a gay pageant, and back then they had crowned Laura Hart, which was the first Miss Gay Roanoke. Then from there they moved it to The Horoscope, and that's when Carolyn Sue Wilson was crowned Miss Gay Roanoke in... I think she was crowned in '75 [1975]

¹ Documentary evidence shows that The Horoscope actually closed sometime in 1978. The Park opened in December 1978.

if I'm not mistaken. Then later on there was another queen, her name was Stephanie Grant, she was crowned Miss Gay Roanoke there. Then later on there was another one crowned Miss Gay Roanoke there, Jennifer Jones. Then they moved up to The Park, they started up there in, oh, when Stephanie Grant was giving up her title.

[15:49] AG: Did you ever participate in Miss Gay Roanoke or...?

[15:53] MGK: I'm a former Miss Roanoke At Large. We have our own big girl pageant. I ran for Miss Roanoke At Large in 1992, my first time running, and '93 [1993] I didn't run so I sat out a year, so I was Miss Roanoke at Large '94 [1994]. It was okay, you know still today we have our big girl pageants here in Roanoke.

[16:16] AG: Did you have that pageant because you didn't feel as accepted in the other one or was it just easier?

[16:24] Well, once we got to The Park and everything went okay we decided since they were having Miss Gay Roanoke we decided to get together and have our own big girl pageant; and back then it was fun. *[MGK addition to transcript: Me and (some others) wanted to have a Miss Roanoke at Large pageant.]* Back then in the old days girls pulled together and they weren't in their little cliques, but these days the younger children they made it into a competition. Back in our days we didn't do that, everybody pulled together and they had fun getting in drag, they helped each other. But they have some snobbish people honey, the younger ones are very disrespectful to the older girls, and sometimes you have to put them in their place. Because I had read one so bad she started crying, because she had come for me. She says "Oh, you're the fat, black, mean one." I said "Excuse you," I said, "Come here and let me give you some education honey." I said "I paved the way for you to have your you-know-what in here. As you must understand..." ... You can't cuss in here can you?

[momentary pause while AG confers with assistant]

[17:29] AG: It's up to you.

17:29 MGK: Okay, well I sat down and told them the whole gay history about this madness. I told them, I said something like this, "I paved the way for you to bring your monkey-fied ass in here. I was doing drag when you was in your daddy's *[whispers]* nutsack. So don't come for me." So, the child went out there and cried and everybody was asking her what happened they said that she got nasty with Miss Grace and she put her in her place. But you know, it's a shame at how things done changed over the years because acceptance for us older queens, like at The Park up here now, there's no acceptance to the older queens. The young queens came and they done took over, and they're rude, and we don't perform there no more. It's awful the way things are; they have two sets of Miss Gay Roanoke. The original, that Tim Clark owns, at The Park when it first opened, that still goes on, they have that at the Jefferson Center. Then the girl that runs the show at The Park she has her Miss Gay Roanoke, but it's the newer kind of Miss

Gay Roanoke, so they have that at The Park. We don't go there. We just go to the Jefferson Center where Tim Clark sets everything up for us to come in and do what we gotta do.

[18:48] AG: So, do y'all not perform anymore or is there somewhere else that y'all do your drag shows at?

[18:59] MGK: Well every once in a while Tim Clark will rent the Jefferson Center for the girls to come in and entertain. They just recently had one, it was January the 27th. It was a big turnout, it was 300 people there but I didn't get to perform because I had problems with my sister and her diabetes so I didn't show. So, in June they're getting ready to have another big bash at the Jefferson Center, so I'm going to go ahead, come out, and entertain that. See I do big girl stuff because there's no need to be up there doing a small song when you're built like a mountain. Then you got some girls that just coming out, and you try to help them, them little young little girls. You try to carve that pumpkin and it just doesn't work. If you a basement beast, you a basement beast. So, it's like that, and some of them don't like to be told how to do this and stuff. A lot of us back in the day, we know about hip pads, used to give you that coke [figure], a lot of girls don't understand that either. And plus they don't understand about the milk factory situation either. A lot of girls back in the day we would take and get surgical gloves, and you tie the fingers in a knot, turn the glove wrong side out, and you fill it up with lotion, then you tie it up with a rubber band. And then back in the old days, back then, you know they move and, you know, and back in the old days the girls used to take the pantyhose and tie it in a knot and fill it up with birdseed [laughs].

[20:37] AG: So I know you said drag has changed over the years, what's the biggest change you've seen? Is it just the the personalities between the older queens and the younger queens?

[20:49] MGK: Yeah, the personalities, I mean, the older girls have always been respectful to the young ones but the young ones they're not like us at all. They don't give you respect. So, I decided—I have performed in different states, I've been to Florida, North Carolina, I've been to Savannah, Georgia, back in the day in '94 [1994] when I was miss Roanoke at Large I traveled a lot and entertained a lot—but just that Roanoke has changed because of all the different cliques. If you don't belong in this clique, you ain't this and that, and it's one big mess and they're always talking about "gay pride." I don't go to gay pride [Roanoke's Pride in the Park festival] because it's, to me, I know about the gayness about gay pride but to me, it's one day of everybody being phony. You've got people you ain't seen in twenty years knowing they gon' be two-facing when you met them years ago and they ain't gon' change a bit! And you go, "well how you doing girl, you sure do look good." "Mm-hmm, tell that to somebody else who cares!" because you know they lying through their teeth. How I'm going to look good and I'm weighing about 300-something pounds, child please.

[22:04] AG: So how would you say that you define your sexuality? Would you lean more towards straight or gay or more like fluid?

[22:12] MGK: Well to me I'm just a big ole female impersonator and I'm more gay. I have been in the situation where the female thing, you know that madness, and I didn't like that at all. I had girls approach me when I was in school that wanted to cut up and throw down and I was not all about that. One girl was talking about "I can change you, you just let me go to bed with you" and got in my face. So she tricked me. Her parents weren't home and I decided to... she called me up to her house and when I got there she was naked. I go in the bedroom and she's standing there naked and she comes to approach me and I said "Don't com there. Uh-uh. This parade is not gonna march." So she kept coming, so I balled up my fist and punched her in the bread basket and ran [*laughs*]. Because you know, I had never heard of that madness with what they call it, the clitoris or whatever, I wasn't about that. And back then in high school the boys, I'll never forget when I was in the ninth grade and, you know, they boys knew you were gay and you had to have P.E. [physical education class] and you had to go out in the field and play baseball and that was a big disaster. They put me over in the center field, the boy knocked up a pop up, had my glove on but instead of throwing the glove like this [*demonstrates how to catch a ball*] I held it up like this [*demonstrates how not to hold a glove*] and the ball came down through the glove and hit me in the face. So I took the glove, threw it down, and blowed up and walked back in the locker room.

But back then there was so much wildness going on. The boys used to pick, they used to pick. I know one boy, he didn't like me and I didn't like him, I think I was in the 11th grade. This boy had called and told him in homeroom that I called him something, which I didn't. So I come in, you know how back then everyone held their books up to their chest and switching and I came in and he knocked me back out the room, across the hall, and I fell and my lunch and everything went everywhere and he was a bully. So I said "okay you wanna play this, we gon' play it good." So, I came out and there was a bunch of steps, when the bell rung I was at the top of the steps with my arms folded so the boys said "get him," and he said "I'm going to get this faggot." So he came at the top of the steps and I met him halfway and honey we battled back and I picked him up and threw him down the steps and before he even got to the bottom of the steps I was on him. I beat him like a sunday B-I-T-C-H [*spelled out*] on a monday morning and back then when you let them you know you didn't take no mess they wouldn't bother you no more. So you had to do what you had to do.

And then the relationships. I learned at an early age... ugh, I got my feelings hurt when I was twenty years old and I haven't had a relationship since. I thought he loved me but he didn't and we broke up and he hurt me real bad. We got to fighting in The Park and the same person that got us together, the same one broke us up. So I came up in The Park one night and I told him I was going home and I guess he thought since I was in Martinsville he was gon' cut up. So I didn't go home; I got a phone call from a friend from the bar and they told me to come down, they were together. Went up in The Park and there they was, he had her lipstick on his cheek and I walked up to him and I said "what's going on?" and she gon' turn around to me and laugh. "Oh you think this funny, I'll show you funny." We got to knocking. I picked her up and threw her behind the bar and while we was fighting he decided to sneak out, the girls had him in a circle and then when I got through with her I went out there and was ready to remodel him and I said "I was good to you, and I loved you and you're going to play with my feelings like this." We got

to knocking and I beat him down, of course, and I asked him, “who you gonna’ leave tonight with, me or her?” He pulled off with her in front of The Park building and I was truly crushed, and cracked, and embarrassed, and humiliated. But, that was something else.

[27:05] AG: So you had no relationships after that? That was just it for you?

[27:08] MGK: Ohhh no honey I had a few that wanted to but I could not be bothered. Not getting bit by the same dog twice. I learned that at an early age. No ma’am, I would not jump up that trail again.

[27:28] AG: So, would you ever consider maybe a few years from now maybe going into relationships again or is it just not even an option?

[27:28] MGK: Never. Not even an option honey.

[27:48] AG: So did you ever think about having children?

[27:50] MGK: Oh no. My grandmother embarrassed me at our family reunion. I was so embarrassed, I could have crawled up underground and thrown extra grass on top of me. We had our reunion, my grandmother comes up, now I have four other brothers, and she gon’ come up in front of all these people, especially the ones that knew I was gay and she hasn’t seen me in many, many moons. So she comes up and she says, “Oh you a big boy now, you gon’ have me a whole batch of grandbabies,” and I lost it. I was very evil. My mama said go outside and cool off. I was really embarrassed because they were whooping and laughing. I said “Oh no.”

[28:34] AG: So did most of your family not know that you were gay or was that just not talked about?

[28:39] MGK: They knew, my father didn't have no understanding. You know, it's always the mother accepts it better than the father because you know, my father knew. He was putting stuff up to, me to try to make me tough, it didn't work. Like I have never went hunting and this man come knocking on the door and told my mother he wanted to take me hunting and I said “take me hunting?” Rabbit hunting. So I got in the truck, got in this big field rabbits jumping all over the field. Here I am a gay dandelion, and he gave me the rifle and he said “shoot the rabbit!” and oh my god that was a disaster. I told him I couldn't kill the rabbit because it looked like Bugs Bunny [*laughs*]. So he brought me back and told my daddy there was something wrong. But my daddy was something else, he knew but he accepted it. [*Material removed from transcript at MGK's request.*] And plus my daddy's nephew was gay. He had a lot of gay people on his side and so did my mother but he always threw it up in your face about my mother's side being gay but he never did mention his. And his nieces and nephews, they were a trip.

[30:10] AG: So was that something you ever talked about with your cousins that were gay? Did you all sort of bond together over that?

[30:17] MGK: Oh we bonded real close. I mean every time I would go to their hometown we would get together. All the girls would get up under the tree and start gossiping. My aunt was very accepting and my aunt had a gay son and this woman was talking about him to her, didn't know it was his mama, and they got to knocking. [MGK edit to transcript: They got into a terrible and nasty argument.]

[30:49] AG: Very protective family then.

[30:52] MGK: Oh yes.

[30:55] AG: So did your family know that you were doing drag when you started to do drag? Did you tell them about it?

[31:00] MGK: Mmm. I sneaked and did it. The only time I really liked it was you know back in the day was Halloween was the only time you got to do it, and my brother went asked me always every Halloween why I had to dress up like a pumpkin and we got to fighting. He didn't ask me no more. But, my family accepted me well. My father, finally, he didn't know how to come up. No, he wanted to come and talk to you about the situation but he always said something weird and I'd get annoyed. And when he saw me in drag for the first time he didn't know who I was. He was in a store and I went past him down the sidewalk and I was in drag in broad daylight and he did not even have a clue. Then when my momma first saw me, oh she was shocked. I decided to go ahead and come out right then and there and it was a disaster; but I painted the grapes and went on with my life.

[32:10] AG: So, now that you're older does your family now know that you do drag?

[32:15] MGK: My mother accepted me well. I mean, before she died she knew I was a drag queen and she knew I performed a lot. I even showed her video tapes and everything, and she was proud. I mean, when she was on her deathbed she had my drag pictures right in her room, where all her friends could see it and everything, and she told me she was proud of me, that I should keep doing what I was doing, if I liked it go ahead and do it. So, you know my mother said that to me. Well my father, he had to accept it at the end, and ugh my mama passed and I was here in Roanoke and they called and told me that she was not doing well so I moved back to Martinsville in 2004 and she passed, and after she passed my brother, the oldest brother, he was a trip. After the funeral and everything was over with, a week later me and my sister were sitting in the house, my daddy told us to come outside he wanted to talk to us and he told us we had to vacate the premises. We didn't have nowhere to go. Luckily a friend had a house for rent, and we moved over in town, and I hated my father and I still hate him today because he had another woman on the side, which was very disrespectful. She would come up to the house when my mama was on her deathbed, but he called himself a Christian. We don't have much to do with the other family members. I don't have nothing to do with my brothers, nothing. I haven't been home. My mama died in 2004 and I haven't been home since.

[34:08] AG: So you say your dad said that he was a Christian, did you grow up in a Christian church household?

[34:16] MGK: Yes, I was a Baptist. I took and got baptised on May 10, in '77, no '79 [1979]. I sung in the church choir and all that and I just went ahead and did what I had to do, went on somewhere else and lived.

[34:38] AG: Did you ever have any difficulties with the church and the drag side of you clashing in any way?

[34:49] MGK: Well the church knew, but you know back then a lot of people they didn't speak on it. I had a friend that moved here from Martinsville, she was a real close friend, she passed so we had to come to Martinsville to her funeral and her mother was very accepting because her mother knew she was doing drag and they was real close. So half of us went to the funeral in drag and half of us went as boys. So we went all of us and we stepped in there and it was seven girls in drag and seven of us in butch and we went to her memorial service. They had a great huge portrait of her in drag on the obituary, on her obituary she was in full flaming drag, her name was Michael "Missy" Martin, and we started coming up in there and everybody's mouth flew wide open and the preacher he was real nice, he got up and he said "you cannot judge." So after the memorial service was over the queen's mother told us to come over to the house and everything, so, we went and we all had a nice time.

[36:02] AG: So would you say that the drag queens almost formed their own little, the older drag queens, formed their own little family here in Roanoke?

[36:09] MGK: Well most of us don't, you know we stay in touch but as far as visiting, back in the day we used to visit people. You know, everybody would go to everybody's houses. We don't do that no more. We talk on the phone, like I talked to a few before I was going visiting. I don't visit, I don't go to gay functions, no. I don't know. I haven't done drag since, I did drag two years ago [2016] and I have been out of circulation since 2004 and it was not cute because drag constantly changes. When you haven't done it in a long time and you try to get back into it, it doesn't work because I had got into it and the makeup was horrible, the hair was horrible, I haven't worn my shoes in many years, so trying to squeeze an elephant into a mouse hole. Because when you're uncomfortable and you've got on heels you uncomfortable all over. So I came out and I did Jennifer Holliday and everything was cute and then got on stage and my feet started hurting. Honey, when your feet start hurting you get uncomfortable, so, I mean it was real painful and I'm saying the tears flowing and they thought that I was into the song but I was in pain so when I came off the stage I said, "Uh uh, this is enough," and they said "well, why?" I said, "Because my feet was hurting," and then I didn't go on for the second half. I told them, I'm through with this situation. No, no, no.

[37:37] AG: So have you noticed a big change in the way that drag makeup and drag dress has been over the years?

[37:43] [Material removed from transcript at MGK's request.]

[41:17] AG: So what would you say that your gimmick or your shows were based on?

[41:22] MGK: Well mostly I does music that matchs my build. I do Aretha Franklin, Jennifer Holliday. I does something that's going to match my build because there ain't no reason to go out there looking like a bear and trying to be a tweety bird. That don't work.

[41:40] AG: So have you found that the way that younger drag queens perform now is vastly different from the way older drag queens perform?

[41:48] MGK: Good lord, they be doing acrobats and stuff on stage, flipping like monkeys. I mean it constantly changes, but some girls I guess they think it's funny but I think it's embarrassing. I remember one queen that came out and was doing a slow number and she took her breasts, her rubber breasts, out and touched up her face with it. I have a daughter, her name is Christina Kelly, and she came out on stage and she's a big girl, too. She was up there doing her number so this person decided to embarrass her on stage. She's up there doing her slow number and guess what they tipped her with? A loaf of bread and a pack of bologna. And you know what she did? Grabbed a chair up on stage and made sandwiches and at the end of her number she plucked them right back [laughs]. And then it was one queen, her name was Jon Snow, she was a big girl and this skinny queen did not like her because she was big; and she was up there doing her number and the queen had tipped her with a can of Slim Fast on stage. And she said, "Miss Grace, you know, you can't be nice to nobody," I said, "Do what you have to do." So, after the show was over she took the Slim Fast, went and tapped the child on the shoulder, and poured it on her head. And she says, "I'm not through with that yet." She said, "that B-I-T-C-H [spelled out] worked me. I'm going to get her." So guess what she did? She made up with the queen, ended up being her best friend. This queen has been doing drag for many, many years. Has built up her whole costumes, flawless. So they decided to be real best friends. So the queen moved her in with her and one day the queen had to go to work and she told the queen she was sick. So the queen took and went to work, she took every stitch of drag, and I mean it was real expensive drag, put it in garbage bags and set it on the corner for the garbage man to pick up [laughs].

[44:00] AG: So it was a long term...

[44:03] MGK: Oh, back in the day... I mean you'd be shocked at just how vicious people can be. Oh yes honey, I remember one queen came out and the queen didn't like her and she put vaseline on her shoes. And miss thing loved to dance fast and that night she went into a spin and went flying through the air and when she landed it was not a cute situation. People can be extra, extra shady.

[44:38] AG: I'm trying to phrase this in the right way. So with the shadiness and getting back at each other did you ever have issues with the police in Roanoke in downtown or anything?

[44:48] MGK: Many issues with them. Yes, me and this queen had got to fighting and I went to jail. And then one night I was on the corner of Salem Avenue, it [there] was snow... real, real deep. This queen rode by and called me an abominable snow beast, and we were living together and she called me that in the snow! So she was strung out on crack and I said "I know exactly how I'm gon' get her," and I got her good, too. She was in her room doing crack and I said, the door was cracked, and I said "I'm gon' wait until she's down to her last piece of crack," and when she went to go outside I blew in the door and whooped her you-know-what. So, we had to go downtown in front of the judge, he was the only black judge that they had in Roanoke, and we go to court. It was embarrassing. The judge asked me what happened and I told him, and he said, "Mr. Kelly, what did you say?" I said, "I was on Salem Avenue in the snow and she rolled by and called me an abominable snow beast," and the people in the courtroom laid in the floor whooping and laughing. So she decided to come to court in drag, she [was] trying to impress. He says, "Where is Mr. P----?" I said, "It's out there in the hall." So she comes up in drag and he says, "Mr. P----, why are you looking like this?" He says, "You don't come in my courtroom looking like this." I said, "Oh, she's 100% real." So she says something and he says, "Look at Mr. Kelly. Mr. Kelly is a big man." He said, "Mr. Kelly could've did some serious damage to you." He said, "Mr. Kelly I got a question to ask you, do you play football?" and I said, "I have," and he says, "Mr. Kelly could've really hurt you," and the case was dismissed. Because back in the day you know you're always gonna have people that run by and throw stuff at you and pick at you and sometimes you just get tired. So one night I was out on Salem Avenue and a bunch of redneck boys rolled by and you know how you can have a can of beer with it not being open, they threw it and they hit me in the back with it and they called me a faggot. So I did what I had to do. They came up and came back around. Well, when they came back around there was a car in front of them and a car behind them, so they couldn't go nowhere. So I go behind the building and I got a big huge cinder block and honey, I came around that corner and stepped out with that cinder block, threw it over my head. I had threw it so hard that the windshield fell in their lap and I had to go to court for that, too. The judge asked me, he said "what happened?" and I told him what happened and he said, "Well Mr. Kelly you had to protect yourself." He said, "they was wrong for doing that to you, they didn't know you, they had no business doing it," and he said, "I'm sure they learned a good lesson after that." I mean, the younger crowd came in and they're rude and they're nasty and they done got to the point now where they don't want no acceptance into the older drag queens. Which is a big mess. We got one queen that performs every friday night at The Park; she's ten times bigger than me and she thinks she's a star. So, I had to put her in her place. I said, "you sitting up here thinking you grand, you're not all that honey," I said, "that's why we call you Cowzilla" *[laughs]*.

[48:33] AG: So, a lot of the younger drag queens they do a lot of their own music now, is that something that the older drag queens did or is that more of a new age thing?

[48:34] *[Material removed from transcript at MGK's request.]*

[51:34] AG: So do you think that Roanoke has really changed since you first moved here?

[51:38] MGK: It has really, really changed. I mean, back then when drag was fun but the younger generation has come in and they just took it to a whole different kind of level and it's not fun anymore. It's a mess. Go to The Park some nights and you'll be shocked what you see.

[52:05] AG: Is it surprising to you that there are not as many gay bars in downtown Roanoke?

[52:12] MGK: Yes, I mean, I guess it changes over the years. I mean we have one bar that was in Bluefield, West Virginia that has been open for forty-some years and they closed about ten years ago, The Shamrock. We used to go to a club in Greensboro called Warehouse, it has been open for I think 34 or 43 years, it closed down. Places that you really felt comfortable doing shows and stuff, and everything changes. It really does. But we do need another bar.

[52:57] AG: I know you said you moved here in '77? So did you ever have any experience knowing anyone during the AIDS crisis around then, any friends or anything that were affected by that?

[53:10] MGK: Yes, I had a friend that passed. One of the first, well not the first, gay person that passed, but the first gay person that passed that I knew and he was real nice. He treated you well and he was very accepting and everybody was close to him, went to his funeral and everything. The AIDS benefits has changed over the years; everybody wants to be a star. I mean, you're there for a cause but don't turn it into a sideshow or a circus, that's not the point of stuff. You would never see none of the old girls come in and perform at the AIDS benefits because they don't want them there. You got the younger crowd that comes in and they're doing monkey flips and it's just a big mess. I think my last AIDS benefit at The Park was in [19]94.

[54:08] AG: Do you think that crisis, the outbreak here in Roanoke, sort of change the way that the drag scene and the gay scene was? Did it make it a little more closed in, wanting to be safer?

[54:22] MGK: Well you can, you know, I talk to a lot of people about being safe, I mean because these days you never know what you're getting into. I was with a person last year, two years ago, and it was something strange about the situation and I picked up on it and thank God I did. What it was, we had went out and come time to do what you had to do, he was insistant that I use his condom and I kept wondering why he kept insisting, and I said "well, I have some right over here," and he said "no, just use this one." So when he went to take his clothes off, and when he went to turn, I took and switched condoms on him, thank God I did, because he had punched five holes in it through the package. He sure had, and after he left I took and tore it off and went in there and ran the water in it and it had five holes in it, because when you unwrap a condom and when it's in the package the tip is right in the middle and the only thing you got to do is punch that a couple of times and... ugh.

That's why I told the girl, if you're going out on a date with somebody you use your own condoms. There's some people that's extra, extra ignorant when it comes to safety and stuff. I got one friend, I sat and I talked to them for two hours, I told them, "Honey, it's not fun

like you think it is. It's a dangerous world out there. You have to be on your j-o-b twenty four seven, on alert about what's going on." Talked to them for two whole hours [*emphasizes the point by emphatically tapping the table*], she gon' try to educate me! You know what she told me to my face? "Well I ain't gotta worry about that because that AIDS stuff is in y'all's generation." That's exactly what she said out of her face, and she said "Fine, but my boyfriend has a low sperm count." She thought she couldn't get it because he had a low sperm count and she was barebacking him and about a month later she came to me and sat down and told me she said, "Miss Grace, I don't understand why I did that." See a lot of young people don't like to listen to the old crowd of people. I don't understand that. An older person can tell you things you need to know, a young person can't tell you nothing because they just out there. You know, you talk about the people about safety and it goes in one ear and comes out the other one.

I have one friend, her T-count was zero, and I told her, let me tell you this, one of the doctors—I'm not going to say which one—told her something and her T-cell count was zero. I got with her, took her to my doctor and she got back on the meds and hon', her T-cell count was almost undetectable. You know, I'll sit down and talk to people about it because in some cases a person that's HIV [positive] cannot talk to a stranger about it because they don't know what's up but they can talk more comfortable to a person that's in the same situation. They're more at ease with it, they can talk, but a lot of people they just don't listen. I like being safe. But in the younger years you didn't know, back in the '70s there was no such thing, so a lot of people didn't use condoms back in them days. I have been HIV [positive] since [19]85, and I do my meds, I stay up on my meds and everything, and i'm down to non-detectable, because I listen. Because when they first told me at the health department I had prepared myself. I think if I hadn't prepared myself I think it would've been a disaster for me, but I had prepared myself for years in advance and when I went in and checked, me and this friend of mine went in the health department at the same time. She went in one room, I went in the other one. When they told her I heard her hit the floor, I heard her scream and holler, but when they told me, when they talked to me, they said "Michael, we hate to tell you this," it didn't phase me. I knew what I had to do. So what I took and did was I got material on it and I studied this and studied that and I got a friend that helped me get situated and get my HIV doctor. But, you know, it's shocking because really I did not know what it was. I was having night sweats and my whole bed would be soaked and I didn't understand why, but when they told me I got my literature on it, I got this friend of mine, she taught me a lot about it and thank God that she did because I had to do what I had to do. A lot of people didn't, a lot of people think it was embarrassing to go to the health department and all this, to me it wasn't. That was my life. You don't play with your life. So I went, and I'm glad I did. That's why I'm here today.

[59:50] AG: Do you think that's still a problem today, is that fear of embarrassment sort of preventing people from going?

[59:59] MGK: Mhmm, yeah. Like I said, some people they'll come in and I'll educate them on things they should know. Go get tested, do what you have to do, go get tested, and once you get the test get into the literature and read about it, and then go find you a specialist that's a doctor that's good for that. They have a few doctors here that are not, how can I put this?

They're not helpful at all. They're supposed to be helpful for you but they're not. I had one doctor, I had went in her office and I came and I sat down and she was very snobbish. When I first met her she had a nasty attitude, and I told her, I said, "Look, I don't like your attitude." "Do you know how you got it [HIV]?" Before I could answer, "You probably don't know." Excuse me, I think you're very rude and very ugly. Let me get you straight right here. I don't need that. There's other people that will help me. I had one doctor, I can't say the name, that gave me wrong medication. Took me off of my medicine for almost a year and then I knew something wasn't right so I got me this other doctor. The other doctor educated me well about it, she took me and got on the computer, she looked at the meds I was taking and all of them had red dots beside them, and she said, "Do you know what these red dots are Michael?" I said "no." "These red dots are indicating your medicine is not doing nothing for you." I got with her and everything's nice and that's why I'm non-detectable. This woman had me on medicine that I didn't even need, but yet you in there practicing in your field and you're not doing it right.

[1:01:57] AG: Do you think that, I mean I know back in the '70s and '80s there wasn't a lot of awareness about AIDS and HIV and stuff like that. Do you think that that's still a problem now, that there's not enough information being talked about? The community's not really pushing like: this is a problem, this is something you need to be aware of?

[1:02:13] MGK: To some extent yes. But a lot of people still don't take it seriously because they're on this kick about "it can't happen to me," but until you end up in that person's shoes you learn. I used to support AIDS benefits, but... I figure like this, if you're doing an AIDS benefit and the people are there to collect the money for that, I think it's wrong if you go ahead and collect the money. Give them the check in their hand on stage so you know where it's going because you don't know where it's going to. I mean, you're going out of your way to do the AIDS benefit and then when it comes to the end of the night with the money, the persons are there. Why don't you give them the money right then and there in front of people? They didn't. [*Material removed from transcript at MGK's request.*]

People just, I don't understand them, because you get with people like I have been with, I've seen a lot of friends of mine pass. I have been by their side. I have been there for their support, but other friends that claim they're so close to them. I had a friend, now let me tell you how vicious people can be. I had a friend that knew that I was sick, she came in here from California and I was out on the corner sitting down with a friend, we just come out of the club and we was sitting there talking. She walks to me, you know what she said to me to my face? She said, "girl I heard you had the virus, girl. Well it's like this girl, may I sing at your funeral?" Right out of the blue and you know what I told her, "you may sing at mine but don't let me yodel at yours first." I mean she was that kind of rude. I had a friend that was gay, that was sick, and you could see that, she would kick that person, pick them up, and take them to different people's houses and go in the other room and make fun of them. That's how bad people can be. That child came to me crying. I said, "that's alright," and I told her, "you have your fun now, but I bet I outlive you and I bet I'll be walking behind you." See, we have gay families like we have gay sons, gay daughters. Like my gay son had passed away. she comes to stay and comes to the funeral, they were doing his funeral and each person was supposed to get up and say a reflection on the

person that had passed. She gets up there and makes it all about herself. Oh she come in with this big dashiki on and little African cap and she, "I was HIV [positive] and God did this," and a couple weeks later she passed. You can't do stuff like that. I mean people can be very, very, very vicious. I have been in the situation where I have been around friends I been knowing my whole life since I been here and as soon as they found out I was sick they could not be bothered. I mean, that hurts. But, you know, I'm a strong person because like I said I'm doing fine, what about them? Some of them ain't even here. But it's just, ugh, it's just amazing how vicious and nasty people can be, and I learned that doing my many years about AIDS and all that and people can be very nasty. It's just a mess.

[1:06:45] AG: Were there any groups that, other than the one you mentioned before, were there any groups that were helping people with AIDS and HIV and spreading that awareness? Were you in any of those groups?

[1:06:58] MGK: Oh, yes. I was in some of the groups. Okay, they had Council of Community Service; they had another group that they would come and pick you up and everybody would go to and have the meeting. It was one thing I didn't like about it, they would pick you up in this van, there were people that come there that was not HIV [positive]. They just came to see who had it and go back and repeat [report] it. That should have never happened.

[1:07:30] AG: So was it almost in a way somewhat like Alcoholics Anonymous, where you're not supposed to say names and things, it's more of a...

[1:07:39] MGK: Yeah, it was a private thing, and then you had people there that would sit there in secret and go out in the street and spread what you had. Like I had a friend one night, I knew she was acting strange towards me and I said, "Why you acting strange?" She said, "well I heard something." "Well, what did you hear?" "Well, I heard that you was sick." "Okay, yes I am." I sat down and I told them about it and I said [MGK edit to transcript: I said that they should go to get checked.] Never did, and one said they didn't want to know, and them the ones that have passed on. It's just something else. I mean, I have a lot of close friends that have went on before me and I mean a lot, because everytime you'd turn around you was going to funerals and one child just came out of the blue and asked me, "Miss Grace, you go to all these friends' funerals that died of AIDS and stuff, how do you feel?" I said, "What do you mean how do I feel?" She says, "How do you feel about going to funerals thinking you know, one of these days that's going to be you?" I said, "I'm a strong person. Because when I go up to visit, to view that person's body, I reverse it on myself because I knew one of these days my day gon' come. I'm prepared for all of that. It makes me stronger, it does not make me weak. It makes me stronger."

[1:09:24] AG: Do you think that during that time the amount of people that were being lost, do you think that really shook the gay community, the drag community, did it make them grow closer at all? Or did the stigma almost make them come apart?

[1:09:41] MGK: Well, the older crowd got close together. When we started doing AIDS benefits at The Park we was there for support, we did our drag numbers and everything was fine.

Everybody pulled together, I mean, but this younger generation they have no respect because it can't happen to them.

[1:10:04] AG: Do you think that that stigma of 'you have the virus' and things like that, do you think that that's still true today, or is it less today? That almost-like fear that if you touch someone's hand you're going to catch the virus mindset that used to be around.

[1:10:24] MGK: Oh, you're always going to have people like that. It's always ignorance. Some people are just downright rude.

[1:10:36] AG: So I know with a lot of times, with drag, I know you said that your friends were men and when you were first introduced they were men who were dressed as women, and you were sort of like, oh, what is this? Would you say that the majority of the people you knew identified as gay men who just dressed as women, or was it more they identified as transvestites or transgender?

[1:11:01] MGK: Yeah, transvestites.

[1:11:02] AG: So what would you say that you identified as?

[1:11:05] MGK: I identify myself as a female illusionist.

[1:11:12] AG: So do you feel like today there's a lot of almost controversy with the way that drag is, the distinction between men who dress as women, and then men who want to be women?

[1:11:24] MGK: You got a lot friends that were... you see we call ourselves "drag queens" and we call the butch boys "bunnies," and a lot of boys wanted to try but never did. I had one friend that, we'd been close for many, many years, and he always wanted to do it but he just didn't act on it, so one Halloween night he says "I need you to do something for me," and I said, "what is that?" He said, "we gotta go shopping," so we went and got all of the drag stuff, beat his face, and he looked lovely. I mean, he was shocked at the way he looked in drag and he was just happy as hell. Happy as a pumpkin boy's town as they say in the old days. And he liked it, and he does support drag real well. I mean every show that I have he was there and he liked it a lot but it was just on a Halloween thing, but I think he wanted to explore it more but his pride wouldn't let him.

You've got a lot of people that want to [but] they can't, just like you know you're always going to have people criticize you when you in drag. Okay, I was in Charlotte, North Carolina, a club called Mythos. I was not told that it was all black. I didn't know it was almost all black until I got there and I said "this is not going to be cute." So me, I decided to change up a little. I made a big ruffle coat, great big huge ruffle coat, made the gown to match, and I had ordered a Diana Ross lioness wig. And the child said "are you good?" and I said, "Of course, I might not look like Diana Ross. I might be Dinosaur Ross, but I'm gonna do her." So I came out on stage and the music was "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" was booming. So I'm backstage as the music playing I'm

getting psyched up to hit the stage, got psyched up honey, the music starts booming and I hit the stage, busted through the curtain, people's mouths flew wide open. I came up on this table, a table on this side, a table across there and there, and I came on down and got in the middle of the floor and performed and I went ahead and went towards where they were sitting at and was doing "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," and you cannot believe what somebody hollered. "Look at Diana Ross, she done ate the Supremes!" [laughter] I was cracked but I went on. So I said, "oh we gon' play this like this." So I said okay for my second number I'm going to let them know that big girls can do whatever they want. I had did, they got a song by Jennifer Holiday called "No Frills Love" and it's fast. So I put on that straight fringe outfit, boots, got me a wig that comes to my shoulders and I came back out and I tore the house down. You talk about shaking up some chicken grease, I shook it up that night honey [laughter]. I got right there in front of where all of them was and I had did the dance where you do a kick and you kick back and I went into a spin and I came out with a split. They were through! I said "this is what happens when you're a big girl We can twirl, too."

It's always going to be somebody that's going to criticize you on stage, but I learned when it comes to pageantry, if you don't have yourself together you will be the basement beast of the ball, honey. I learned that lesson hard. The first time I ran for Miss Roanoke At Large, my first year, it was a big disaster because the girls that I had that was helping me with this, half of them was on crack, half of them was drunk. So the day of the pageant they supposed to help me and they been out all night partying. I had to sew my gown by hand, my updo was a mess cause I had a big basketball face, they had snatched my hair back with a little tiny ball on the top of my head so I looked like a dark tan top off a cookie jar. It was awful. My gown was handmade. It was just one disaster but I went ahead and pressed on. I did get first runner up. It was six contestants and I got first runner up. But I saw my mistakes, and I learned from my mistakes so when I ran in 1994 I came for them. Oh I was very clever honey. I took and brought all the old stuff I had used years before and hung it up in the dressing room and you had a little group of queens that would make fun of you, and they sat and seen what I was storing up on the rack. But I had remembered that in this game there is always a person that you don't expect to be close to. When big Neely O'Hara from Greensboro, North Carolina—Neely is 7'1" feet tall and Neely was about 250 pounds, big girl. Didn't nobody speak to her, and I came up to her and I carried on a conversation with her and we ended up being best friends. When she found out I was running for Miss Roanoke At Large she says come to Greensboro I got something for you. She gave me the gown to wear, she put together my talent and stuff, and that night of the pageant I was ready. Oh I came for them, they thought I was gonna be the same old country cowboys, mm-mm. So when it came to talent my talent was flawless. I got a standing ovation. When it came to creative fashion, I mean sportswear, I added dimensions out here at Valley View [shopping mall] and got my little outfit and honey, when it came to evening gown they were shocked. I had a friend that took two wigs, put them on top of each other with freakish curls in it and I won talent, I won best in evening gown, and when they crowned me I said "mm-hmm," the same ones that picked are the same ones that got they face cracked, and the same ones when I came through and set my crown down there on the table to pack my stuff up to leave, here they come. "Well girl you shocked us!" "Really? Oh I can tell you wasn't shocked." "Oh but we was!" "Good, you got a lot to come later on."

Those was the days. I learned a lot doing drag history, I learned about AIDS, I learned about a whole lot of education on myself and things, and I'm doing fine now. You know, I got neighbors over there at where I live at. A lot of them don't care for drag. I don't do drag at home. If I have a show I will take my costumes out but I come out as a boy and when I come back home I come as a boy. Because the name of the game is respect, and you have to learn to respect where you're living. If you ain't got no respect for where you live then it's going to cause a problem. You got other people that want to carry on like that. Like I was sitting at my house a couple of months ago and here come two drag queens to my house in broad daylight and I noticed because I heard, one of them called to say "where you living?" and I gave them my address and I didn't know they were in drag. And believe me the neighbors came out, and they knocked on my door, I said "y'all come in." I said, "you knew better than to come here like that. I said dragging is a place and a time for everything. You don't do that." "We thought we..." "You can't pass." They look like... one woman, queen, rough. I mean real rough. We call her Freida Flintstone because she looks like Fred Flintstone's mama [laughter].

[1:19:54] AG: So I know you had mentioned when you were getting help with your first pageant that people were drinking and doing drugs and things, did Roanoke have a big drug scene? Was that a problem?

[1:20:09] MGK: Back then, back in the old days, it was more like drinking. I mean, as far as pot, it wasn't that much around. It was around but I guess people didn't pay it no mind most of the day what they did was drink.

[1:20:28] AG: So, what would be your biggest takeaway from doing drag? What was the biggest life lesson that you learned?

[1:20:39] MGK: What lesson I learned from it? I learned a lot. I mean, I always wanted to get a crown, I always wanted to get trophies to prove that I have done what I have done and how my career went with me doing drag. It makes me proud to sit there and look up on the shelf and there's a crown, there's your drag picture, and you accomplished all that. A lot of people couldn't do it, because I was scared to death. When they told me about doing it I was through, cause I had seen them do it I just didn't think I would do it. I got the nerve to do it and I'm glad that's over with.

[1:21:31] AG: Did you ever notice a lot of other people of color doing drag in Roanoke? Was that a thing, or was it more Caucasians doing drag?

[1:21:44] MGK: Well, back in the day it was more, it was a lot of white queens doing drag. Then it started being to where it was a lot of black stuff, but the most amazing thing I have learned in my drag career is I have always wanted to see a whole black pageant and up in Atlanta they have all of that, they have Miss Black Universe, they have Miss Black America, they have Miss Black USA, and it's so nice to see that. I mean, you'd be shocked at what you see in those kinds of pageants because a lot of people, they do old school and they have the boy pageants, too.

They had a group of boys that came out dressed like the Jackson 5 and they had the big afros and their outfits were gleaming and they was doing a routine that was cute. They had one queen come out and she was doing Denise Williams' song called "Black Butterfly," and she come out doing that and all of a sudden this great big guy dressed up in a butterfly outfit, real masculine looking. And when she got down near the end of the song the boy turned to the audience and took his mess off and you talking about something that fierce. He was, mmm... I can't say the words I want to express, but he was drop dead, kick yourself in the balls, gorgeous. He was lovely chunky chunk honey.

[1:23:11] AG: So do you think that in Roanoke there's a lot of diversity within the gay community?

[1:23:17] MGK: Yup.

[1:23:19] AG: And do you think that's continued today, that there's still a lot of diversity or has that clique-like culture that you've talked about, do you think that that's influenced how diverse the community has been?

1:23:41: *[Material removed from transcript at MGK's request.]*

1:24:26 AG: So, do you think that Roanoke, today, is accepting?

1:24:31 MGK: I think that back in the, you know, the old days it was a lot of diversity about a lot of people didn't like drag queens. "Fag this" and "fag that," but it's a lot of acceptance and it's changed over the years.

1:24:39 AG: Do you wish that there were more venues for drag shows and things like that to be happening again, like old school shows in Roanoke?

1:24:59 MGK: That's what I like about they have it at the Jefferson Center because it's more for us, the old drag community; and the old drag community brings out the older crowd. Down there at The Park, you've got teenagers. They serve alcohol, but they're not making no money [because] they can't drink. So, they're messing up themselves because older people like to drink and they're gonna support the bar. They don't support the bar, because they're not making money like they're supposed to because they're teenagers. See they figured if they cater to the younger crowd you'll get more money, but it doesn't work that way. Now okay, it's like this. At The Park they would bring in female impersonators from RuPaul's Drag Race and they bring those people in, but how much money you spending? You're spending thousands of dollars to get them here when you got perfect talent here. They have brought in a lot of RuPaul's Drag Race people. They even had brought in Lady Bunny. Lady Bunny is the one that discovered RuPaul. She's been here several times.

1:26:20 AG: Has RuPaul ever been here?

1:26:21 MGK: No, they said she has the nastiest attitude you'll ever see. So, Charlottesville wanted to bring RuPaul to a club, 216, in Charlottesville, and they talked to her and she was kind of snobbish to them so they said "well, we gonna work you." They brought Lady Bunny in, [the one] that created RuPaul.

1:26:46 AG: So do you think that the queens that are on RuPaul's Drag show, those are the types of queens that are sort of changing how it is now and making it more of like a competition type of thing?

1:27:00 MGK: Yeah, they have a queen that lives here from Roanoke that was on RuPaul's Drag Race, and when she got up there she got famous and it went to her head. She did not acknowledge that she was from Virginia and she's a very talented queen. She started drag when she was 14 years old, she sews, and one of the best performers you've ever met in your life. She went on to work for this other drag queen that makes beaded gowns, her name is Coco Vega, she's in Las Vegas now performing. So she done made it up in the big top. But, like they say, you never forget where you come from.

1:26:46 AG: So do you think that there is a disconnect between the younger, teenage gay community and the older community? Is there a reason, do you think, that there is such a big disconnect?

1:27:58 MGK: It's mainly because the younger crowd they don't know about the history, they just out there doing drag. They going out by what they hear but they are the type that don't want you to tell them anything. I mean, if a person needs help I'll go over and help them, but when you go up to a person and you try to be polite and help them, they turn around with a little smart answer like, "I got this. I don't need your help." "Okay, alright." Then when you don't win tonight like they do talent and you don't win, you get your face cracked; and then I say, "Oh what happened girl?" She said, "What?" "You didn't win. Your head was up in the clouds. What happened?" She says, "I think I made several mistakes." I said, "No, you know everything."

1:28:50 AG: So do you think a project like this is good to help sort of bridge that gap between the younger and older generations to get those stories out there?

1:28:59 MGK: It will, because it will educate the young ones that don't know better. Which need to be knowing better, I mean, it's just that the younger crowd has just done destroyed drag history. They really have. Like years ago you got paid for doing shows at The Park, we don't get paid at The Park because why should you pay us older girls when you got the young ones doing it for free?

1:29:45 AG: I lost my train of thought... I totally had a question and it just went out of my head because I was listening. So, do you think that in Roanoke there's enough knowledge about the queer, trans, drag black community? Or do you still think that that's almost like a taboo subject that people don't talk about?

1:30:14 MGK: A lot of them don't talk about it. I mean that's why me and Carolyn [Sue Wilson] been friends for many, many years and we talk about the old days. I mean I was at my house and I was going through some pictures and I had ran across a picture that we, a show we had did at The Horoscope and I took a picture of way back when, and I called her up and gave her several pictures of when she used to do shows at The Horoscope. Because Carolyn Wilson was the very first drag queen that they put in *The Roanoker* magazine. And see back then you don't see no other drag queens in there. Back in the day she was a fabulous entertainer, still is today! She still does drag. She was at the Jefferson Center last month [January 2018] that's when she last performed and I mean, a lot of people change over the years, she doesn't. I mean she's got the same body, the same look, and you know some people change over the years and some people don't.

1:31:29 AG: So do you think that over time, say from like the [19]70s to now, 2018, the black community has become a little more accepting of the gay community and the trans community and stuff like that?

1:31:43 MGK: They have, but the main thing is they need to learn how to respect people. If you going up in a public place and you going through there switching and flaming and acting like a fool, you're going to get a response; but if you carry yourself as a gay person and just go. You know, you can tell a person is gay, you don't have to show it, but you've got the young crowds that goes to the malls in drag and stuff and you know, we didn't do stuff like that. A lot of the younger people like to push the issues.

1:32:22 AG: So do you feel like that's where a lot of the disconnect is between the older and younger generation? Where the younger generation is more focused on being more in-your-face and putting the issues, almost branding themselves as this is what I am?

1:32:36 MGK: Yes. Yes.

1:32:38 AG: So the would you say that the older generation, they don't focus as much on labeling themselves?

1:32:44 MGK: mm-mm, and I like gay pride and everything but there's a place and time for everything. When you got gay pride going on, you got the churches right downtown at Elmwood Park and you're right downtown when people coming out the church they don't need to see that. Because when they first started having gay pride over here in Highland Park it was a nice place to have it and when they had it at Wasena it was nice, but you got other people, you know, the gay crowd that overdoes it, flames and flies all around the sidewalks hollering and stuff. You don't have to do that. You don't. We used to do drag shows at gay pride, when we was at Highland Park which was nice, but over the years everything changes.

1:33:38 AG: Do you think that the black church has become more accepting?

1:33:46 MGK: Some have. A lot of people are stuck in their old ways, they'll never change, but you got some that will accept you and some won't.

1:34:00 AG: And I know there's always talk of gay choir directors and there's always choir members, and you can always tell. Do you think that the fact that we don't talk about it as the black community, is that one of the reasons why you see a lack of diversity within not only the gay community but the drag community as well, because there's not that freedom to express how you feel?

1:34:26 MGK: Mm-hmm [yes].

1:34:29 AG: And is that something you ever felt like you struggled with?

1:34:32 MGK: Yeah. I mean when they wanted to have meetings at The Park and stuff and they'd talk about this, they'd talk about that, but the young crowd is still not coming across, and they never ever will. Never ever will.

1:34:55 AG: So do you think that maybe by getting all these different stories out, getting these people of color stories out for people to hear will start making that gap a little smaller? Sort of bring the generations back together a little?

1:35:11 MGK: Yes, mm-hmm. Because, see, back in the day, around The Horoscope days, you had, I mean it was a beautiful club and you had straights and gays going there and everybody got along. I mean you never heard of no fighting at The Horoscope, you never heard nothing like that. The whole community was in there together and everything was fine. The Park was the same way later on.

1:35:42 AG: So is there anything that you would say to maybe like a newer drag queen coming in? Any specific advice you would give someone coming into the scene?

1:35:53 MGK: I gave several of them. You know, I got my daughter Kristina Kelly. When I first met her—I met her when she was, I think I met her when she was 16 or 17—and I was in The Park one night in drag and I noticed every time I would come in the club they'd be sitting somewhere staring. A lot of people would, when we used to come in there we would be about six of us in drag and we'd walk through and the younger queens would sit in the corner and stare. One night, I think Kristina had just turned 17, she was up in the bar and we came in and she was just staring and the other little young queen said, "oh, don't go there, she's mean," and I went over to the snack area. They was telling her about "don't go there, she's mean," and I'm hearing all this through my ear. So Kristina comes up and she tells them, she says, "Look, I don't know her and I'm going to get to know her." So she same up and she introduced herself. She said, "My name is Christopher, I'm from Lexington, Virginia, and I'd just like to meet you." So we sat back and we talked and everything. One night at the bar she decided to put herself in drag, and oh honey, it was a mess. And here I am standing up against the wall watching the

drag show and here she comes through the door, heads turn, and guess who she comes to? Straight to me and I nearly had a conniption.

So I got with her and I taught her very well about drag and everything. I started her and I made costumes, I did everything for her. On her first talent night at The Park, she won. But you know it just starts off like that. You've got some people that wants to be helped, they don't mind and you don't mind helping; but you got those that think they're grand and lovely, I don't help them because they can't be helped. They cannot; they're too rude. I have two friends, one friend has been out doing drag for four years, never accomplished nothing, always a mess. You got this other queen that comes in, that's her cousin, has did drag for two whole years, this child has got titles on top of titles. This other queen she paid for her titles. Like, they had a pageant in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and she paid so much money to win the pageant, that's not good drag to me. You have to learn and you have to earn your working. I mean, some people have it on Easy Street, and this child had been doing drag for four years and still ain't accomplished nothing and the other child came out in two years and she accomplished within the two years she had came out [more than the other queen]. And she's beautiful now. She does drag, she's a former Miss Gay Roanoke, she's got titles on top of titles. I got a daughter that lives in Atlanta, Georgia and I met her when she was 18, she's doing real well, she's got titles on top of titles. And a lot of girls is like this: a lot of girls know how Roanoke is, they leave Roanoke to go out of town and make a name for themselves. Some of them, if you stay in Roanoke, you're not going to make nothing of yourself, and most that have left they have made something of themselves.

1:39:38 AG: So would you say that Roanoke is not a place...

1:39:40 MGK: It's not Roanoke, it's the people. I mean it's the people, the different cliques, and that's what destroyed a lot of the girls because you've got these different cliques of people. Like I was on stage one night performing at The Park and these boys were making fun of me and I was nice, took them outside on the patio, and I put him in his place. I said, "I tell you what, let's see you get up there in a dress." And I have seen this happen in Charlottesville, a queen was up there, she's been doing Patti LaBelle for many, many years, excellent performer. She was on stage doing Patti LaBelle and this guy in the audience was hollering, making fun of her. She looked at the owner of the bar and she said, "I got this." She went out on stage, snatched him up, made him get on stage, she took her wig off and put it on him and you know what she told him, "Now you get your ass out here and do it and you better not miss a word." Now he was embarrassed, because there's always going to be that kind of person that's going to try to bring you down and them the kind you give a hot ignore to.

1:40:59 AG: Well, I think that this will definitely help get the drag history back out there and really open up for the Roanoke community.

1:41:08 MGK: I mean if the cliques and all that, everybody pulled together... but they don't. Until they do it's not going to be like it once is [was].

1:41:21 AG: I this is a great first step and I would like to thank you very much letting me interview you today.

1:41:25 MGK: I thank you all, I was nervous. I said to myself, "Lord they gon' call." But you know I'm comfortable talking about it with you two [Ashleigh and Princess] because like I said, the word needs to get out there. I mean they need to learn and stuff but I'm happy I did it.

1:41:40 AG: We're happy you did it, too. It's great to have this story so thank you.

[END]