

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

**Interview with Gail Burruss  
February 18, 2019**

Interviewer: Michelle Eimen

Interviewee: Gail Burruss

Date: February 18, 2019

Location: Roanoke College Fintel Library, 220 High Street, Salem, Virginia

Transcribed by: Katie Thaxton, Michelle Eimen, Christian Delaney, Marley Gonzalez

Duration: 59:20

Index:

00:23 = Childhood in eastern Virginia (c. 1954 – 1972); graduating from college in 1976 and moving to Roanoke

02:13 = finding a lesbian community in Roanoke in the 1980s

03:22 = first lesbian relationship (c. 1976), while at college

06:12 = getting involved with First Friday

07:19 = the Roanoke Valley Women's Retreats (1980s)

10:16 = activities of First Friday: concerts, parties, formal dances, newsletter, etc.

18:59 = First Friday demographics

19:43 = First Friday's involvement with the gay male community

20:23 = Conflicts within First Friday over alcohol

24:01 = Gail's Involvement with First Friday; dissolution of the group (late 1980s)

26:30 = Gail's Involvement with Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of the Blue Ridge (early 2000s)

35:17 = First Friday relation with other organizations; responses to the AIDS crisis

38:27 = conflicts at the Roanoke Valley Women's Retreats

41:08 = current events: First Friday reunions; Denim Day commemoration

46:04 = more reflections on MCC

48:08 = retirement; and current activities and health condition

51:57 = involvement in Salem Museum & Historical Society

53:48 = reflections on LGBTQ spaces in the 1980s: The Park; Hugo's

56:55 = Closing thoughts/Talk about upcoming First Friday film

00:05

ME: This is Michelle Eimen. I am interviewing Gail Burruss and we are in the basement of Fintel Library at Roanoke College. The date is February 18th, 2019 at 3:56pm. So Gail, tell me a little bit about your childhood.

00:23

GB: Sure, my childhood was somewhat challenging. I grew up on a farm in eastern Virginia, about halfway between Richmond and Fredericksburg, so it was very isolated. Didn't have nearby friends but everybody who lived near us were relatives. Funny, for years, the first day after school was out, I read the *Swiss Family Robinson*. Wasn't somewhere until later in life I was like "oh gee, stranded on a desert island," yeah that is kind of what it felt like. My mother was an alcoholic and that was the other big challenge. She was a very difficult alcoholic. My father was a farmer, good guy, but really didn't know how to manage that or handle that. I guess he just sort of left it up to ourselves. They argued a lot, some very hideous arguments. She would do all kinds of things to provoke him and that kind of thing. So yeah, it was difficult.

01:20

ME: And how long did you stay there in Eastern Virginia did you say?

01:27

GB: When I first heard of mountains, I wanted to live in them. I wanted to live in the mountains. I was just enchanted by pictures I saw and thought it would be wonderful to live in the mountains. So, I went to college in Lynchburg at what is now known as Randolph College. Then afterwards, I was offered a job in Roanoke and came here and been here ever since.

01:54

ME: So what would be the time frame for that? What years or if you can remember.

01:58

GB: Sure, I was born in 1954. Graduated from High School in 1972. Graduated from college 1976 and been in Roanoke ever since then.

02:13

ME: So, if you don't mind me asking, why did you first get involved with the LGBTQ community here? Were you involved beforehand before you moved?

02:28

GB: No, well I got involved because I am a lesbian. I mean it's a simple short answer, but I think especially in the [19]80s, '70s and '80s, there was really a need for community and for connection and a means to find each other. So, we kind of created our own lesbian community. In later years, I found out, that there were some women who thought that we were separatists but that wasn't the case at all it was just a group of lesbians who did a lot of stuff.

03:01

ME: Was there any reason why they thought that you were separatists?

03:06

GB: I think they just didn't know. No, not at all. They certainly would have been welcome to joined us but no reason at all that I am aware of.

03:22

ME: If there is any questions that you don't want to answer, please let me know. So you coming out, did you come out after you moved here?

03:37

GB: Well, no, not exactly. My senior year at college, a college faculty member slash administrative person became very attracted to me and we ended up having a relationship. Sort of an odd way, cause talk about being closeted on multiple fronts. That of course was destined not to last. And it didn't. It was devastating to me when we broke up. It affirmed that I just... I had really tried to enjoy dating men as a kid, tried to pretend I was fantasizing about guys. It just didn't work. You know, I just knew that it wasn't what was real for me. Even before I knew that there was a name for it.

04:33

ME: So, that first relationship, how old would you say you were?

04:41

GB: I would've been 21, 22 when it started. She was I'm thinking probably about 33, 34?

04:49

ME: Did that relationship maybe cause any problems or was it just smooth sailing?

04:57

GB: Well, given her role and my role, also she was married, too. And I really liked her husband and felt tremendously guilty about that, but my gosh, you know, super guy. There were problems, yeah, sure. Her role, my role, her being married, my genuinely liking him, feeling badly about that. She was very much the person who kind of established things going. Getting things going with us. So, you know, I am not saying I wasn't a willing participant, because I certainly was, but she facilitated it happening let's just put it that way.

05:49

ME: Yeah, and you said you were [in your] early twenties when that happened. So, that would've been probably around either after you graduated college or before?

06:04

GB: No, it started my senior year so about 1976 thereabouts.

06:12

ME: When did you start getting involved in the LGBTQ community? Like you know, maybe heavy handedly.

06:20

GB: Here in Roanoke, probably in the late no early '80s, forget the late part. The early '80s. Yeah, I lived in Old Southwest at the time. A lot of other lesbians lived in Old Southwest and we met and connected. I remember one day somebody said "we had dinner at this restaurant in Salem called the Taylor House." Two women owned it and we kinda got to talking and they said "hey if ya'll ever want to have an event here, or just a social gathering not an event, then let me know and I can stay open later or make some special arrangements for you." So, I was like "wow! Yeah! Sure!" It was great. So, we started getting together on the first friday of every month and henceforth this group came to be known as First Friday. We did a lot of really good stuff.

07:19

ME: Yeah, could you tell me more about that? About First Friday?

07:23

GB: Sure! It was never a formalized group in any way. Never had officers for example. We had a treasurer, that was the closest we had. Somebody who tended very carefully to our finances. We had some very energetic people who said.... The first thing was, you know, we should all get away and have a weekend retreat. So, we did. We publicized it some. Went off to a girl scouts camp in Riner, Virginia. Which is between Christiansburg and Floyd. Camp Carysbrook, it was called. Had a fabulous time. Absolutely wonderful. I think that first year there was maybe 40 people. It was just so fabulous and it was just wonderful. And word of that got out like you wouldn't believe. We started getting all kinds of requests to put them on our mailing list. So, "oh, okay, we'll start a mailing list." This is before any kind of technology existed. It was all paper [and] pencil back then. So, the next year... Oh, the girl scout camp kicked us out. They wouldn't let us come back. They realized somewhere along the way that we were lesbians and nope, [we] couldn't come back. So we found another place, I think the second year was when we went up to Camp Rim Rod, it's called, up near Clifton Forge. Beautiful area. We had to do a lot of cleaning up up there because it was pretty rugged, but we did. It rained a lot that weekend. There was lots of mud. That was okay too, but I think we may have had 100 people that weekend. I can't remember. But, we had lots of structured things, you know, obviously meals but also we did these silly games called the Lesbian Olympics. And I mean silly, really silly. There was always a dance at night. There was always some musicians and some time available to just hang out with musicians. They would play. Had a campfire. There was time when people did what they wanted to do, but a lot of connectedness time, too. And we did that for, I can't remember how many years. Maybe eight or nine?

09:42

ME: Yeah, I am going to backtrack a little bit there, Lesbian Olympics caught my attention. Can you explain that one?

09:49

GB: Well sure, again it was just, you know, trying to be light hearted and to get people to engage with each other and to be silly and laugh. And so, it was crazy things like potato sack

racers, I mean we are talking about women you know [in their] twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, maybe sixties. Potato sacks and just silly stuff. I mean truly silly stuff just to... Again, but what a great way to connect.

10:16

ME: That's great. I really like that. Can you tell me more about the other events that you guys did during first friday?

10:27

GB: We enjoyed our success so much that somewhere along the way, we decided to produce a concert. The '80s was a very rich time for lesbian musicians culturally. There were a lot of musicians. The first one we produced it was June Millington and I can't remember who her backup person was. But anyway, we had that at The Park. The bar downtown, they let us do it there. We had a huge crowd. That was really dance music and so it was really robust. Once the concert was over, the regular bar folks came in and it was okay it was great energy with all of that. We produced a fabulous soloist named Linda Tillery. She actually stayed at my house. Back in those days, musicians were so accustomed to living in modest means, shall i say, that they were quite comfortable with staying in people's houses. Now, we would go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that we were incredibly hospitable. We had little chocolates on the pillows at night, the best linens, that kind of thing. We ended up doing probably about four or five concerts. We did one here on this campus in the chapel, Cris Williamson. So it was just really neat. We also, we produced a play once. Always we had the monthly gatherings on the first friday of every month. After the Taylor House restaurant closed, which closed pretty early on after we started doing this, we just started doing it in people's homes. People would volunteer their houses and it worked out great. We also did formal dances. This all started when a woman who is highly esteemed in our community was having her 50th birthday coming up and one of her friends knew that she had always wanted a big formal dance for her 50th birthday. So it was like "okay! Let's do it!" So, there is a place called, used to be called, the Roanoke County Women's Club building. It's right on the line between Salem and Roanoke. Across from where, oh what do you call it, what used to be where [Lakeside was]. Anyway, there's a Kroger, there's a Goodwill, it's kind of up the hill over there, kind of hidden back. Beautiful old building. At that point it was very well cared for. They had live-in caretakers. Beautiful venue for something like that and so we had it there. So folks rented a tux for her and rented a limousine to go pick her up. She lived out in Craig County. We were all just in awe of this. I mean there were women there in formal women's gowns and other women in tuxes. Goodwill had quite a run on tuxes. Some people rented ones, but anyway it was so much fun. There were women that came together as a band and they were pretty good and we danced and danced and danced. It was funny, the caretakers, the caretakers of course were responsible for the care of this place and they would occasionally come down and kind of look around. It was a couple probably in their seventies I am going to say. And they kind of look around and look around, then they would look at each other and kinda shake their head and go on back upstairs because we weren't doing anything that was contrary to the contract we had signed with them. Then they would come on back down later. Well, at one point, the musicians blew the electrical system. So, one of our women was an electrician so we had to go and get the caretaker and he's down and she's flying

around, because we wanted the music to go on, you know, their tails are flying behind her, to do whatever she needed to do to be able to get the electricity back on. He, at that point, somewhere in that process, turned to her and said, “some of the men here look an awful lot like women.” But anyway, yeah, it was great. Um, is everything okay? I keep that you’re noticing it [the recording device].

15:11

CD: Just keeping an eye on it.

15:12

GB: Okay. Alright. Good enough. So anyway, we all left that night just beyond elated. Yeah, just, it was incredible. It was beautiful, and we decorated the place nicely. We all looked good. So that being so successful we decided to have a formal dance the next year, too. Same place. Roanoke’s original name was Big Lick, so we called it the Big Lick – I can’t remember [Big Lick Lesbian Centennial Dance]. But it was some sort of anniversary year for Roanoke, too, so we kind of you know did a play on words with those two. Big Lick Lesbian Formal – whatever, I don’t know. But anyway, yeah, it was pretty funny. We had dance cards, and we kept evolving things you know, we did dance cards and you know who can I ask to sign my dance card for dance number four and that sort of thing. It was so much fun, it really was. Oh, we had a newsletter. It was a quarterly, so it was called *Skip Two Periods*, you know [laughter]. We had lots of fun doing just those, but it was a good newsletter. It really was, and again, in a way of keeping people connected, and at that point we had a mailing list of I’m thinking five or six hundred people. So and again we had to do all of this by hand, so we had what we called S&M parties – stamping and mailing. Many of those happened on my porch in Old Southwest [laughter]. There is a woman named Kathryn Beranich, who is working on a film, it’s called *The Unlikely Story of the Lesbians of First Friday*, and the world premiere of this film is going to be on Sunday, April 7<sup>th</sup> at 5 o’clock at the Grandin Theatre. And hope all of you will come. She’s worked incredibly hard on it. She lives in LA [Los Angeles] now. She’s been back several times interviewing a lot of people.<sup>1</sup>

17:14

ME: Have you been interviewed for it?

17:15

GB: Oh yeah, definitely. But gathering memorabilia, you know, pictures of dance cards and pictures of the Lesbian Olympics [laughter]. So you can learn a lot about what we did. But anyway, it was lots of fun. It [First Friday] was a lot of work. We worked really really hard to make it all happen, and grew quite a community from that. Both locally. But towards the end women were coming from North Carolina, West Virginia, you know, all those adjacent states to the events that we did. It was neat.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn L. Beranich has also conducted an oral history for this project; see, Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, “Oral History Interview with Kathryn L. Beranich,” January 17, 2017, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

17:48

ME: And were there any themes for any of these events? You said that there was a formal dance theme, or can you recall any others or which ones were your favorites?

17:57

GB: Big Lick Lesbian Festival I think we maybe called that one. A festival isn't quite the right word. Themes? You know the first one was the big birthday event. After that I think we may have done around Valentine's [Day], around this season. [We called the annual formal dance the Spring Fling.] I can't really remember themes. Good question though. Dig into my cerebral matter. See what I can figure out there.

18:21

ME: So um for the events, did they happen over maybe a week, a few days, generally just a night, or...?

18:29

GB: The retreats were always weekend retreats. Starting to gather Friday afternoons and very sadly concluding Sunday afternoon. Everybody kind of hated the reentry of going back into other life. Whereas that felt like real life and going back to other life. Everything else was just, you know, a dance was for the evening. But the energy from it really spilled over to the following days I think. It was neat.

18:59

ME: And you said that there was a big age group for these events. Is there any other, you know, demographics for First Friday?

19:13

GB: It was not very racially or ethnically diverse. [*clears throat*] Excuse me. I can think of a few African American women and a few women of Mexican or Central American or Asian background, a few women with evident physical disabilities, but mostly we were white bread.

19:43

ME: And did First Friday ever have any involvement with the gay community of any, you know...?

19:50

GB: You mean the larger gay community?

19:52

ME: More of, you know, male gay...

19:57

GB: Yeah. No, you know most of us had friends who were men, and some were kind of envious that we had kind of created this. Again, [we were] by no means separatists, but it was just really

important to us to have a means and a venue for connection and we really wanted to just build community. And that's what we were doing.

20:23

ME: Were there any issues while you were involved with First Friday? Any maybe hostility or backlash perhaps?

20:34

GB: You mean within First Friday itself or with the larger community?

20:38

ME: Both.

20:39

GB: Okay. You know within First Friday folks it was very fluid in terms of who was involved when. There was always sort of like a core group the you could expect to be there and active and doing things. And then other people would appear because they really liked the retreat and wanted to work on that, or they really liked to do the food, so they work on that. Or would maybe choose not to work on anything else all year. Sure, there were some conflicts that would arise. I think the biggest one probably was in the first years of the retreats we provided as part of the admission fee, which I think was thirty-five dollars the first year, if my memory serves me correctly, free beer. Well there were women who were alcohol dependent and I objected to that. I had a concern about that and raised the issue. And there were other people who saw it as a matter of hospitality. This is how we show hospitality. And I said "you know, what you're asking people to do who cannot or choose not to drink to subsidize those who can, and also we're making a statement about the type of environment and atmosphere that is okay here, that's okay. And I think you know we really need to think that through." It got to be a pretty heated argument, but you know it'll settle down. I think we ended up stopping the practice. Yes, I know we did, we stopped the practice of providing free beer. But it was a lot of, I don't even—I don't want to call it hostility, but a lot of intense feelings. In one of the *Skip Two Periods* I think you'll find an article, if you can get your hands on that, we didn't put our names on anything we ever wrote, because again we all had to be closeted within most of a larger structure, so like I'm GB. If you ever find a GB that's me. But yeah that's one of the biggest ones that I remember. We had other conflicts about just minutiae, but things that we could resolve pretty quickly so, you know, there were certain personality conflicts and people just not liking that person and these two people had just broken up or whatever. So yeah but things smoothed over, [I'll] put it that way. In order for the larger cause of making it all happen.

23:06

ME: Yeah and you mentioned an admission fee.

23:10

GB: [*Confirms*]



23:14

ME: Were there any – did that admission fee go to charity at all?

23:21

GB: What we did with the registration fee, I guess we called it, was to use it obviously to pay for whatever we needed to pay for for that year. Then as seed money for the next events that we were doing. When First Friday dissolved in the late [19]80s, somewhere along the way there, there was a woman in our community who was blind and who was very eager to have a seeing eye dog and so we gave her the money to be able to get a seeing eye dog, which she did.

24:01

ME: And so what was your role through some of these First Fridays? Did you ever take a specific role every time or did it vary?

24:18

GB: You know it varied quite a lot. I was part of all the planning kinds of events. Always, meetings. I was always there. You know I did a variety of things. Sometimes I worked on developing workshops to have at the retreat. Sometimes I worked on the food committee. Sometimes I worked on things like I took on the job, after we got kicked out of the girl scout camp, I took on the job of finding other camps. And kind of drove around and looked at a lot of places, made phone calls, and got turned down. We decided we would be very candid with camp owners, operators, whatever, thereafter. Let them know that we were a lesbian group. After, of course, I talked long enough to the point they liked me pretty well. And we got turned down by a whole lot of places. So it got very dismaying. We did end up finally going to a camp in [the] Appomattox area. Beautiful state park camp. It was wonderful. And we were just in the off-season, so there was a whole segment of the camp that we could have to ourselves privately. It was wonderful.

25:29

ME: And what year was that? Do you remember?

25:31

GB: That was probably '85 [1985], I'm gonna guess, '86 [1986].

25:36

ME: And how long were you involved with First Friday? Are you still involved?

25:41

GB: No, First Friday pretty much dissolved along the way. I think what happened is that around in the late '80s [1980s] there were quite a few women from this community who had been very, very active in First Friday and they had moved away to other places either for professional or personal reasons. It just sort of fizzled out, which is unfortunate, but those of us who were the regulars in doing everything knew that we could not sustain what we had been doing all those

years. And you never knew, from time to time, who you could pull in who wasn't a regular to do something else. To work on whatever.

26:30

ME: So since that kind of fizzled out are you involved with any other LGBT organizations, such as Positive Alternative Lifestyles later on or Blue Ridge Lambda Alliance or anything else you are involved with?

26:46

GB: No, I haven't been. I've always been aware of those organizations, but I guess [I] did not have the need at that point to be engaged with them. I guess the only other LGBTQ thing I was ever really involved in was the Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge, and that actually turned out to be a disastrous experience.

27:11

ME: Could you tell me more about that?

27:13

GB: Sure, it's a very ugly story but yeah. Been going there a few years with my partner and MCC [Metropolitan Community Church] is part of a denomination. In other words, it's not just a little church here, it's a part of a denomination. And a position within the church is that of lay delegate, and that is the conduit between the local church and the denomination. And someone suggested that I run for that office, and actually for every hundred members there's one lay delegate. And this church had just passed the one-hundred mark so they're going to need two lay delegates. So, I said okay, sure. So, I ran, was elected, and you know it didn't seem to be – it wasn't like a job that involved a huge amount of anything. Until... Until two women in the church came to me and said is there a process for making a complaint about a clergy member? And I said—and I knew what was going on, and I'll get to that in a minute—and I said I don't know, but I will find out. Well, what was going on was that there were two women, each of whom had partners and they started—one of whom was the pastor of this church—and they started, the pastor and this other woman who was a lay delegate, got together. And these other two women were the ones who came to me saying "is there any means for making a complaint?" I said "I don't know. I'll find out." So I, thankfully by this time there's internet and that kind of thing, and I went online and I had to dig around for it. But yes, there is a clergy code of conduct, so I printed that out, got with them and said, "Here you go. Complaints can be made through this process." Which was the other thing that I found out, which was if there was to be a process this is what it is. So, you know one of the things—the biggest thing in there was that clergy are not to violate the sanctity of relationship commitments, or something [similar to that]. The wording isn't quite like that. In other words, "sanctity" was in there. But something like "relationship commitments." And they said, "well, she's clearly... She, the pastor, has clearly violated that." And they nitpicked about, I don't want to say nitpicked, but they were, you know, pretty vehement about a variety of other things that she had done that were contrary to the code of conduct. You know, being completely forthright and honest and all financial transactions and they said, "Well she's never paid any taxes." Apparently clergy are not employees and haven't

withdrawn [withheld], but she just didn't pay taxes. So anyway, I wrote up their complaint and started the process which was to submit it to a what was called the regional elder. Am I taking too much time with this? [proceeding] Okay.

30:20

GB: And I had to talk to her. And anyway, one thing lead to another and all hell broke out. This denomination was allegedly going to investigate this. I got a call one day and it was a guy who was a minister, somewhere in the west coast and I said to him at one point, "Wait a minute. You don't investigate me. I'm simply... here is what my job is and I am simply reporting it." But anyway, she eventually was found—she wasn't absolved, I'll think of the word in a minute that they used rather than absolved. [It was determined to be unfounded. She wanted to call it exonerated, but it wasn't an exoneration.] Basically nothing happened as a result of it. But meanwhile... and it was supposed to be a confidential process, understandably, and I hadn't said a word to anybody. The two women may have but I hadn't said a word to anybody. I was very clear this was a hot item and I gotta follow what I need to follow by the letter [of the process]. And I did. But anyway word got out and I was deemed to be the evil one, the enemy. And oh yes, yes, yes, yes. And I won't go through all the nasty things that happened along the way, and they were really nasty. But there was some sort of meeting called at the church one night. For anybody in a leadership position, for lack of a better word. And I was like, okay this is not going to be pretty but I'm going. Because I had not done anything wrong, I knew that. I had been very, very careful to do things just the way they had to be done. So, I get there and... no, someone very kindly as I'm heading out of the door called me and said, "You need to know this whole meeting tonight is a set up for you." I said "okay." He said, "I can't really give you the details." So, [I decided to go anyway]. I get there, and this minister person announced that she has been absolved [exonerated]. And I corrected her, gave her the correct word, I can't remember the word right now, it'll come to me. It wasn't absolved though. [It was unfounded.] It was sort of like they weren't going to take any action on it. She was obviously trying to rebuild some credibility. I later found out that they had spent a lot of time planning this event out, which was to, I think, completely humiliate me.

33:00

GB: But anyway there was a woman there named [name removed]. My goodness I'll never forget her. She started making all these hideous, horrible accusations about what a horrible thing I had done. By then, of course, I had been trying to explain, "look this is what my job was and this is what I did." There was a guy there named Dale, who had been instrumental in that church since the very beginning of it and he would stand up periodically and say "Gail has done nothing wrong." But this [name removed] was just carrying on and nasty, immature, ridiculous stuff. [It was] one of those pivotal moments in life, that you know you will never forget. This woman named Melanie came up to me and put her hands on my shoulders and just said "Gail, it's time to leave." And I thought "oh my gosh, yes!" I was so wrapped up in the content that I just did not have that realization. I walked out of that place knowing I would never walk back into that place again. And haven't and won't. I consider it a place of evil. I really do, and there were other things, too. I don't even want to try to remember them all [laughing]. Ridiculous stuff. There was, somebody did a petition with the most absurd things and you know I probably

could've done a libel thing and some people talked to me about doing that. Frankly, I had a really demanding job at the time and I just didn't want to deal. I just didn't want to be that public at that point with it. [I didn't want to put the energy into it that suing them for libel would have required.] That was secondary, though, to just the physical and emotional time it would have taken to go through that. It would've been really ugly and I'd had enough ugliness at that point.

34:48

ME: And have you kept your word to yourself and haven't been involved with that organization since?

34:54

GB: That place that masquerades as a church, as I call it, absolutely not, no contact, no anything, never will!

35:05

ME: How long ago was that?

35:07

GB: This would've been in the early 2000s. 2002-ish maybe?

35:17

ME: Well I'm going to back track and ask more about organizations... did First Friday ever work with other organizations?

35:24

GB: I'm trying to think, I can't think of any right off hand. Again, we weren't opposed to doing that, it was just that those opportunities weren't there. I guess the closest we came was looking for venues to hold the events. Like here, we were candid with Roanoke College. This is the audience that's most likely to attract. She was a little bit mainstream, Cris Williamson, and so we knew there would be straight people would be attracted, too. You know The Park and doing that, but not ongoing, formal, kind of liaisons.

36:08

ME: Well, I'm going to jump subjects a little bit since we are talking about, you know, the '80s and stuff with First Friday. Did the AIDS crisis ever effect you or First Friday at all?

36:22

GB: Yeah. You asked about conflicts earlier and that was one of them that was, you know, really difficult. The AIDS crisis hit here very hard and there is a guy here named Myer, who's a psychologist and he had gotten very involved, and had quite a few other people, in providing aid and support to people who had AIDS. I connected with him, I can't remember how, but I was one of a group of people who had volunteered to visit AIDS patients in the hospital who didn't have any family members or any family members that would visit or really had any friends. People were really scared to go in the hospital and visit. At that point, you had to put on a mask

to go in, and these guys [were so sick], it was really sad. I asked Myer at some point, “what else would be helpful?” and they had an AIDS support group. People who weren’t hospitalized, but you know were sick or infected at least. And he [Myers] said “You know I hate to ask you all to do something that might seem like the traditional women’s role, but it would be really nice if we had some like homemade desserts. When we met. Cookies, cake, whatever.” And I said “I don’t think it’ll be a problem at all. I’ll take it to next time we have a meeting.” I did and there was kinda some silence and then somebody said, somebody who’s a very dear friend okay, said, “That is not our issue!” And so, okay... Anyway, I just did it and other people did it without there being any affiliation with First Friday. But you know, that was, that was the kinda thing that really sucked energy away that lead to our dissolution.

38:27

GB: And I think over the course of time, if it had been in this millennium rather than in the 1980s, it would’ve been a whole different response. But back then, I think, and again it wasn’t a separatist thing, it’s just what it was. Back to conflicts, there were women who were parenting children and wanted to be able to bring their kids to the retreat. It was really, pretty difficult, you know. Because then they had to find weekend child care and some people didn’t have that. So there were some arguments about that. We never did allow it. Or maybe we allowed for kids over the age of something, maybe twelve or something, but we didn’t want to have to be monitoring our behavior, or... *[cut off by Michelle]*

39:15

ME: Sorry. Did alcohol ever had a hand in that decision that you didn’t want to monitor your behavior?

39:19

GB: No, no it was separate. We just wanted to be completely free to be ourselves. That’s all we wanted for those weekends and to have a really good time, connect, have a good community thing going and I think we did allow children at some point. Or maybe it was under a certain age, if they were infants or toddlers, I can’t remember now. Another one was pets. When we were looking through a bunch of memorabilia for the film, when Kathryn the producer was here, we all about plotzed, I think it was an invitation to a retreat and it said, “No Children or Pets.” It was like, “oh no!” *[laughter]* We were not exactly politically correct then. We are all sort of embarrassed by it. Oh my gosh, we actually put that out? No children or pets? And I remember then there were some women who really had a tizzy fit. “Oh you’re equating my children with being a pet, huh?” No, no we didn’t mean to. It’s amazing that we did as much as we did for as long as we did with the nature of some of these conflicts.

40:27

GB: And then of course there was the issue of boy children versus girl children. Some people didn’t want boy children present in anything. It was like, oh come on. So, yeah. We had a great time but there was some tough things that happened, too.

40:42

ME: When you were saying “no children or pets” did you get that out through word of mouth or was it printed on fliers?

40:51

GB: That was printed on the invitation to, I think, a weekend retreat. Yes. We about plotzed when we saw that, it was like, oh no! We didn’t really say that did we? Yes we did! *[laughing]*

41:08

ME: So switching gears here. You were involved with the [Southwest] Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project event last year. Am I correct?

41:20

GB: I attended some events, uhuh.

41:22

ME: What events did you attend?

41:24

GB: Down at The Park, out for Pride Day. Did that. That might have been the only thing. Although I have some recollection of something else. But, I definitely remember Pride Day.

41:35

ME: But you didn’t really have the role of setting it up or anything just *[Gail nods no]* having fun. *[nods yes]*

41:49

GB: Did y’all do that through the Diversity Center? That somehow rings a bell but maybe I’m wrong. Okay.

41:56

ME: I’m not quite sure but, yeah, any future plans of going to events or being involved in other things?

42:08

GB: At this point not really. We did a First Friday reunion last year, it was great and we’re doing another one this year just building a whole weekend around that with the film on Sunday night. Also Denim Day at Tech [Virginia Tech]. It’s the 40<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. Have you ever heard of Denim Day? *[We all shake our heads no]* Okay, 40 years ago a Gay Student Alliance I think it was specifically, I think, four women of that alliance decided to declare a denim day. Denim of course was what everybody wore, and still do. But the thing was, if gay people wear denim or only all people who wear denim are gay or something like that. And it got [a] huge amount of attention, much of which was fairly controversial. I think I’ve heard that the university president got a letter from a state legislator saying “you’ve gotta get that place under control up there,” and stuff like that. But the university as part of sort of making amends because they have

acknowledged in some ways that we did not handle that well, wanted to do a 40th anniversary of “hey, this is who we were then, and this is who we are now.” The Diversity Center, I will not go into that building that houses the place that masquerades as a church [MCC], and that's where the Diversity Center is housed and I think maybe, is the History Project there also? No, okay. Anyway I think over the course of time, you know I've got my own community network of friends and that works.

43:52

ME: So for the, I guess, Denim event, was that a party? What kind of event was it?

43:59

GB: You know, I truthfully don't know. I know that the biggest thing was just that if you were wearing denim, you're gay, and, you know, they had fliers all over, they apparently spent the whole night putting fliers under everybody's doors. So, but the campus apparently went into some kind of an uproar. Keep in mind I wasn't a student there, so I don't know exactly what happened. But, apparently it got a lot of media attention as well as just on campus, divisive kind of attention. I'll make sure I get to Dr. Rosenthal if you'd like information about it, so if any of you want to go. I think it's that Thursday night, maybe that Thursday and Friday nights are memorial kinds of events or remembrance events. But, I think it's neat that Tech is doing that. I think it's important. I think institutions when they can acknowledge when they have not done something well, and make amends, are the strong institutions. That's why that place that masquerades as a church... I remember, with one of the two people who wanted to make the complaint... a few years after that we had gotten together, we were just chatting about a variety of things, we were well past that, we didn't talk about that mess anymore. But, just out of the blue, she said “You know, I really thought that, at some point, we would get an apology from those people [MCC].” I just looked at her and started shaking my head and said, “No, they're so wrapped up in justifying the horror that they did.” It really damaged that institution, and I, maybe once or twice a year, will hear somebody comment on it and say “It's not doing well at all.” And it hasn't. They no longer have a full-time minister. I've heard they have trouble paying bills and just stuff like that. But I really think that, either as a person or an institution, when you indulge in perpetrating that kind of evil, that you're not able to be a healthy, robust individual or institution.

46:04

ME: I was gonna ask, were a lot of the people that you did have confrontations with back then, still in that church? Are they still involved?

46:16

GB: Truly I don't know who goes there. I can tell you that... *[laughs]* one pivotal moment in all this was that person, I guess I should say that person who masquerades as a minister *[laughs]*, as a part of her sermon, or maybe as she concluded her sermon that day, standing there at the pulpit—beautiful historic church building in Southeast [Roanoke]—was pounding the bible on the pulpit and says “Anybody who doesn't like what's going on in the ministry of this church can just leave!” Well, that was the last day when a lot of people were there. On the other hand, I still have incredibly vivid memories of people, well, the first person jumping on his feet to applaud, is

[name removed]! But, you know, people don't know that side of somebody, and there were other people who were on their feet applauding and... as I left that day I just sort of sat there in awe, looking around thinking "This is so sick and no, I will not be back here." That was before I knew I'd never enter the building again but, I'm thinking "This is so sick, a pervasive sickness here." And as I left that day, I ran into a number of people who said "That's the last time I'll be here." So, I don't know, and truthfully don't care anymore [laughs]. It's all ancient history now. But it's a real sickness that was, and I think probably still is, present there, and it's very unfortunate.

48:02

ME: So, what do you currently do?

48:12

GB: Well, I retired about three and a half years ago. That came about earlier than I thought I would be retiring, but I acquired a medical diagnosis of a cancer called multiple myeloma, it's blood plasma cancer, and it was evident after a couple of weeks or months that, if I was gonna live for more than a year or so, I needed to have a stem cell transplant and that was gonna take me out of commission for [a] minimum of three months. And really, the stem cell oncologist said "You know, it'll really be a whole year before you really feel well again. Feel like yourself again." And that turned out to be about right. So I realized I needed to retire. Thankfully I was of an age and a duration where I worked and I was a part of the Virginia Retirement System, that I could retire pretty comfortably. I started Social Security at the age of 62, not really thinking I'd ever do it that early but thinking pragmatically, I may not live long enough, if I wait until 66, to ever benefit from it, so better start now. So, medical treatment takes a lot of my time. I do a lot of volunteer work. I'm licensed in Virginia as a professional counselor. I retired as a clinical director for adult services at Blue Ridge Behavioral Healthcare. I worked with a local district court judge to start a... really it's a mental health court, she calls it a therapeutic docket because when she was starting it the Supreme Court of Virginia would not allow any more boutique courts so... okay, it's not a mental health court it's a therapeutic docket. But I volunteer with that with the treatment team and really, really enjoy doing that. I teach courses in substance disorders at the police academy a few times a year. Um... I read. My partner lives in Michigan! Of all things, I know. Her cousin who used to live here introduced us, and she'll be here next week and... you know, long distance relationships certainly have their challenges but, you know, it's okay. It's about ten years now and we've gotten accustomed to managing this, yeah. When we're together we're really together though, that's nice, and we're not under each other's noses all the time, so, there's some real advantages to doing it that way. I travel when I can. I was so happy this past summer, I was able to do a... I always thought "Retirement! I'll do all kinds of travelling." And then I got this diagnosis thing I gotta deal with. Multiple myeloma is considered a chronic form of cancer, if you didn't know that. So, I was able to do about a three and a half, no, a little over three week trip out west, from Vancouver, Seattle, down the coast... the coastal highway there. That was with my partner, Peggy, and her daughter and one year-old grandson who despises the carseat [mimics a baby cry, we all laugh]. And then they all had to go home and I went on enjoying the tour group that did the national parks of southern Utah which was just beyond fabulous. I'm in a bunch of different groups. I'm in a reading group, a supper group, a diversity group, a spiritual, social justice group. I think there's another one in there



somewhere. So I'm very socially active, very politically engaged. I try to take care of myself in all ways, just cause I know that I have to, I have to.

51:57

ME: And you're also on the Board of Directors for the Salem Museum and Historical Society, am I correct?

52:04

GB: Yes.

52:06

ME: Does that society have any involvement with local LGBTQ history in any way?

52:15

GB: Hmm, not that I'm aware of. I don't think that thought has ever come to mind, really. When Doctor Rosenthal did a presentation a few weeks ago there, he was talking about public history and the LGBTQ work that you and other students were doing and certainly there was a very enthusiastic group. People asked questions for a long time, made comments and, I assume I'm just out to most people. Most people do know or they figure it out sooner or later. But that was one of those opportunities. He [Doctor Rosenthal] had said that he was a part of the LGBT community when somebody asked about the Samantha in his name, that's what it was. A 90 year-old woman! Used to be the religion writer for the *Roanoke Times*, asked that question, no judgement at all. Anyway, he responded. Later I had a question and identified myself as an LGBTQ community person also. Um, but no, I don't think it's ever crossed anybody's mind but I think that the board... the director would certainly be fairly receptive to it. They do try to focus on Salem though, so it'd be very hard, I think, to get Salem-specific kind of history [LGBTQ history]. I think that'd be the barrier there, so it's not a philosophical, I don't think it'd be a philosophical issue, more of a pragmatic one.

53:48

ME: Well, I guess, in the realm of maybe, Roanoke and Salem, the Roanoke Valley area, were there any, maybe, LGBTQ+ spaces, you know, now or back in the day that you used to go or used to enjoy going to?

GB: Well, I went to The Park a lot, back in the early days. A lot of us went there, and that was neat. It was neat to have that, it always felt safe and we got to know the owners and the bartenders and all that kind of stuff and, it was good. Very colorful, it was good. I would get tired of the music after a while and tended to be somebody who left fairly early, but that's okay. I hadn't been in Roanoke real long when The Park opened. I think it opened around maybe about '80, '79 [1979] maybe, something like that. Other places... you know, when I lived in Old Southwest, there was a place called Hugo's, yeah it was Hugo's, it was a restaurant. It's across from where the Wildflour Restaurant is now and, he was a neat guy and he opened, made the space available for showing videos, periodically, of gay themes, it's before DVD kinds of days I think. So, big ol' huge screen TV and stuff like that. Also [laughs] my birthday lunch was there

once and Rosie O'Donnell came [*everyone in room reacts surprised*]. I'm not kidding, Rosie O'Donnell was there for my birthday lunch! What it was was that, she was pretty unknown then and had done a show at the [Roanoke] Civic Center and, some of the First Friday folks had somehow wrangled their way into getting backstage afterwards and, just chatting with her, they said "Oh, we're having a birthday celebration lunch for somebody tomorrow, why don't you come?" Told her where it was and they didn't think she would show up but, darned if Rosie O'Donnell didn't come to my birthday lunch! [*Laughs*] I hope there's a picture of that somewhere, I don't seem to have one. Ah... those are the only two places really, that I can think of.

56:11

ME: Was Hugo's, was that a bar-restaurant? A...

GB: I'd say emphasis more on restaurant-slash-bar, than bar-restaurant. Fairly small, nice place. Good food as I recall, and a willingness and receptivity to doing, you know, things in support of our community. And Hugo's was not open long, I'd say a couple years at most but it was neat to have it. And that was before the Wildflour [Restaurant] and it was just nice to have it.

56:43

ME: What years was it open, would you say?

56:45

GB: Oh, I'm gonna say, maybe '81 to '83 [1981-1983], '82 to '84 [1982 - 1984] somewhere in that period.

56:55

ME: Well, we're about winding down on our questions here. Is there any points that you'd like to discuss with us? Any stories that you have?

57:05

GB: [*Laughter*] You know, countless stories over the years. One of my favorites was when I lived in Old Southwest, my house faced... it was on Washington Avenue and faced Highland Park. And I would often take walks out on the park and, one day I was taking a walk and met a guy who is a neighbor I had met previously and we were chatting and he asked me where I lived. And I pointed out my house and he said "Oh, that's a group home for women, isn't it?" [*laughter*] and I said "Mmmmm, no? I have a lot of friends." [*Laughter*] But, that was again at a time when it wouldn't have been comfortable for me to come out and, if that should happen today, first of all I don't think it would happen today. I would think everybody would just assume you know, "well, woman is a lesbian, has lots of lesbian friends coming over." "Oh look, there's a man! Occasionally, they come too!" [*Laughter*]. Uh, gosh there are just stories galore but nothing jumps out at me right now.

58:18

ME: Well, I think that just about does it. Thank you so much for coming out here and we really appreciate it.

58:27

GB: So welcome. [*Addresses room*] do any of you have questions [*laughter*]?

58:29

KT: No, I just think your story's really cool and I'm very interested.

[*Room laughs*]

58:36

GB: I really do recommend that you come to the film [*The Unlikely Story of the Lesbians of First Friday*] on...

58:40

ME: Is it the 7th [of April] or...

58:40

GB: April 7th, at 5 o'clock, it's a Sunday.

58:43

ME: That would be really fun to see that.

58:45

GB: It's gonna be pretty amazing, I think. I've seen... there's a trailer. I'll pull up my phone and show you the trailer.

58:51

KT: Is it cool to see how it's [the community at large] kind of more accepted now?

58:56

GB: Oh yeah... oh yeah. And you know, oh gosh, it's so nice just to be free for the most part.

59:03

ME: Yeah.

59:04

GB: And again, you know, I'm not exactly running around, coming out. People just figure it out or I'll say "My partner, Peggy," or, you know, something like that.

59:15

ME: Well, thank you so much Gail.

59:16

GB: Looks like we hit right at about an hour! [*Laughter*]

[END]