

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

**Interview with Riley Chattin
February 22, 2019**

Interviewers: Jillian Barnard (Aeryn McMurtry also present)

Interviewee: Riley Chattin

Date: February 22, 2019

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

Transcription prepared by: Becca Horton, Alanna Higdon, Catherine Cone, Aeryn McMurtry & Jillian Barnard

Total: 57:35

0:00 = childhood in Salem, Virginia (through the end of high school in 1991)

1:27 = coming out as a lesbian to his mom (1990); getting disowned and experiencing homelessness (1991)

6:09 = School-age activities: Girl Scouts; high school athletics; considering joining the military

9:08 = attending Virginia Western Community College and Hollins University (early 1990s)

13:34 = doing an internship with GLSEN; working for Planned Parenthood; operating an LGBT bookstore; religious beliefs; working with people with HIV/AIDS

20:18 = owning and operating an LGBT bookstore, Out Word Connections, in Roanoke (2002-2004); reasons for the store's closure

27:01 = more on Out Word Connections (2002-2004); reflections on the Wasena Park police sting that targeted gay male cruising (1998)

32:07 = time with OUTRight, an LGBT youth organization (2000-2005); and Planned Parenthood, providing 'safe sex' education

40:12 = coming out as transgender (c. 2011-2012) and the thoughts and feelings that accompanied that

51:55 = work now as a Spiritual Director

55:31 = advice for someone who's contemplating transitioning

56:06 = qualities that make an ideal ally to a transgender individual

0:00

[Testing Sound]

0:05

JB: Alright, this is Jillian Barnard interviewing Riley Chattin, is that correct?

0:09

RC: That's correct.

0:12

JB: Okay. It is Friday, February 22nd, we are in Fintel Library. Well, thank you so much for being here with us today. To start off, could you tell us a little bit about your childhood?

0:27

RC: Oh, gosh. My childhood. I grew up in—I don't know—I grew up in Salem. My dad was a police officer, my mom was a hairdresser and she went to school to be a nurse, and I have a sister that is four years younger. I got a dog when I was in the second grade and she was so beautiful, the only thing I could think to name her was Rose because I thought roses were so beautiful, but she also looked like a fluffy ball of fur so her name was Fluffy [*laughter*]. I lived there until I graduated. I lived there until 1991.

1:18

JB: Gotcha.

1:19

RC: I don't know how specific you want.

1:22

JB: No, that's great. So then after 1991 where'd you find yourself?

1:27

RC: Anywhere but Salem [*laughter*]. I still try not to come to Salem. I was grumbling about having to come here for this. I moved to Roanoke City. Initially I was homeless, so I was living with my then-girlfriend in Vinton because she had moved back home with her family after trying to live on her own for a little while, and enjoying partying too much. I think I'd broken up with someone. So then I lived in Roanoke for probably the rest of the time since I've left Salem.

2:10

JB: And you said something just now that you were homeless for a little bit?

2:16

RC: Yeah, so I came out to my parents as a homosexual and—well, my mom. My parents were divorced—in November of 1990 and probably picking a couple of nights before a birthday was

not the best idea, but, you know, you don't have timing ideas when you're a teenager. I was just a few weeks away from being 18 and so everything was ignored for a little bit until around the holidays and then she didn't want me there on Christmas Eve so I went and slept on my Dad's sofa where my Dad's wife lived because he was working in Richmond and was commuting back and forth at the time. So I stayed there for a couple nights and then I went back home and then I was there for... I returned back to our home in Salem, which is about a mile west of the high school, probably about three miles from here, and you know, I don't know what the issue was but one day my mom was in a snit and called the police and said "I don't want this garbage here anymore." And I was in my room at the time and saw the blue lights coming through the blinds and I thought, "Wow, she really called the police" and they were really nice. They said, "You know, don't make this any harder than it has to be, just get something and, you know, maybe after things cool off you can come back." I went back with a police escort to be able to get as much of my personal belongings as I could, but didn't go back.

4:21

JB: Gotcha. So thereafter that you talked about kind of what did you do after that whole ordeal?

4:32

RC: Well that night I slept in the car because I didn't know where to go. And that was before cell phones, so you had to old-school dial, and you woke up everybody if you called. So I slept in the car and called my girlfriend the next day. She had come out years earlier—and, oh that was before transition I guess I should reference [*laughter*]—I was living a life female-bodied at the time. I recognize that can be confusing for people, it's like, "Wait, wait, what's with this guy?" She had come out years earlier to her parents and had already gone through that whole [thing]. They'd worked through it, kind of thing. So, you know, her mom was like, "come here," so I stayed there for a couple nights, then was able to get an apartment after a couple nights because it was a little wonky, cause I didn't have credit, I had just turned 18, so she had agreed to cosign which I was grateful for.

5:51

JB: So then kinda taking a step back for a second, during your childhood, youth, and growing up so to speak, did you have any hobbies or any organizations or anything that really spoke to you during your developmental years?

6:09

RC: Well, I was a Girl Scout for a number of years. My dad and I did all of the Girl Scout badges together, it was really kind of fun. I think there's only a few of them that we didn't do. They were things that we couldn't do in this area or couldn't do easily, [they] involved the ocean or something, you know, I can't remember what they were. Gosh, that's so many years ago. So I did the Girl Scouts in two years. Probably should have paced that out, I think it's supposed to be

three years. So I did the Girl Scouts. I really enjoyed the Scouts, and I played softball until I got to high school and then I played until the 10th grade and I broke my collarbone and I was a little skittish after that diving for a ball. So, I guess I lost the nerve because it was a freak accident, a really freak accident, I tripped over my glove. It was...

7:09

JB: Happens.

7:10

RC: ...yeah, yeah, it's one of those I think back and go, "What was I doing really?" [laughter] I did most sports in high school. I played basketball and volleyball and I did indoor and outdoor track. In the 10th grade year I got most improved player... no, it was 11th grade year I got most improved player for the track team. When you break your collarbone and you only do a few meets because I was playing softball—rec softball—and doing track, and I got most improved my junior year and most valuable player in my senior year. And I thought I was going to go into the military, but that was about the time they were doing the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" thing and I recognized... my basketball coach was really, really, really thoughtful and I didn't know then because I came out to her years later, and she said, "I know how you are, and you will not be able to keep your opinions to yourself. So go spend two years at community college so that [you] can go test in to be an officer." And I think she was thinking, "and you'll come out in the process." [laughter] I didn't go into the military though. I really thought in high school I was gonna be career military, spend the rest of my life in there. Thankfully, I didn't because I do have—if there's an injustice, I get... it's really hard for me, my brain will boil if I...

9:07

JB: That's a good trait to have.

9:08

RC: I bite my tongue, so yeah, it's probably a good thing I didn't go. Good advice there. I did end up going to Virginia Western [Community College], eventually went to Hollins University which is always really interesting now, going for an interview in this area because most people know it's a women's college. And I've gotten the "So you went there for your undergraduate?" Yep. And then don't really offer anything more and I go "yes, I did." "How did that work?" "I just took classes there." And if they ask, I suppose... but we're in the South. People are more polite.

9:51

JB: Yeah.

9:51

RC: So yeah, that's always interesting. I need to get a Master's or something [laughter]. That kinda trumps the other one. They notice that one first. So yeah. I guess that covers that part. So in the process I came out and yeah, so I did all of that on my own.

10:18

JB: Did you enjoy your time at Hollins?

10:20

RC: I did. Truly. It gave me a piece of paper. There's an Indigo Girls song called "Closer to Fine." "I spent four years, now I've got a piece of paper and I'm free." So it gave me a piece of paper that says I can get an education, that really is all that it says. Because I don't use it. I had wanted to be a teacher and I was doing my teacher internship, and it was the same year—again, the injustice—the same year they were starting to implement the punishment for not passing the SOLs [standards of learning], well before they had the SOLs and this was the first year that they were implementing the punishment. And there was a student that had failed—apparently it's changed a little bit since then—and you know this is where I think this is where people listening to what the struggles are with people. And so there was a student in the class where I was doing this semester-long internship who was, I think, like the salutatorian of their high school, I think that's the second in line?

11:34

JB: Yeah.

11:35

RC: ...yeah, and had been accepted to Duke for pre-med, was going that summer to do this crash-course of a bunch of classes and they didn't pass their English SOL so they had to go to summer school and I remember the student coming in and going, "My whole life is ruined and they won't let me retake it." I think now you can test out of it, and you just have to pay for it, the summer class, but you can test out of it again. And I remember going, "The hell if I wanna be a part of this, like this has ruined this child's life. This is not what I thought being a teacher was." So I didn't finish that. Had I had a really affirming advisor they would have said, "This is how you do this," you know, but they didn't.

12:26

JB: So the punishment for not passing the SOL was summer school?

12:31

RC: At that time, yeah. Well, they had to go to a special intensive thing for the SOLs and at the end of it you retake the SOL, and if you don't pass it, I don't know, I guess you have to repeat the whole thing again, I don't know.

12:45

JB: Wow.

12:45

RC: But I just remember that one part and just going, “No, no. I can’t do that.” [*laughter*]

12:52

JB: Because I grew up with SOLs, too, because I’m from Virginia, so when someone wouldn’t pass in high school I think you took it again a week later. Like, your intelligence, or your knowledge, of the subject would magically grow within a week.

13:09

RC: Well anybody can have an off-day.

13:11

JB: Exactly.

13:12

RC: Yeah, and I think that was... that they changed it, because I’ve talked to people and I’m like, “Oh, they must’ve changed it.” But I think this was the first year, and I remember that student. I often wonder what happened to them. Like, did anybody get their head out of their butt and help this kid get to school? You know?

13:34

JB: So then post-Hollins, where are you at?

13:39

RC: Well, I was a good feminist that Hollins nurtured. So Hollins did give me a piece of paper but, more it gave me more of a sense of awareness of the world. I was older, so I wasn’t finding myself. I’d already found myself, where most people, you all are probably what 20... 20, 21 [years old]? Usually you’re going, “Okay, I’m learning how to live on my own. I’m learning how to take care of myself.” I’d already figured that out, so when I was there I was really in the trenches going, “Who am I? Who do I wanna be in the world?” Which is what you’ll probably start doing by the time you’re 25, so I got to do that in a scholarly setting and learning about the world at the same time, and how I fit in the world. And so, when I left I was still processing all of that and at the same time while I was at one of the internships I had I came under the understanding of Two-Spirit people, because I’d done an internship with the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network [GLSEN] as part of the... because I thought I was going to be a teacher and, you know, I want to be an affirming ally as a LGBT person.

So I left there and went and worked at Planned Parenthood for about two and a half years and in that time we bought the LGBT bookstore [Out Word Connections of Virginia] from the two people who owned it before. So we bought that, and in the meantime, I started questioning everything, and it was like, nothing was making sense. My spirituality, because I'd left the church when I was a teenager because when I was in, gosh, my early teens, we were watching *MASH* and they had Father Mulcahy and I loved how he would change from the stole to the yarmulke but he was still wearing the tabbed collar, but he met each person where they were and, you know, I don't know how many people noticed that, but there was something about that that spoke to me. That and the *Music Man* [laughter], I really like how he met with each person and helped them find their gift. So those two parallels really spoke to me, and I said, "I wanna be a chaplain!" and my mom goes, "You're not Roman Catholic," and then she goes, "and you're not a man." Well, I proved her wrong. And people call me today a recovering Roman Catholic. I'm not, I'm Episcopalian. So I became a practicing Buddhist around that time. So I was about 30 years old, became a practicing Buddhist shortly before we closed the store, and became a holistic practitioner.

And it was probably during that time that I really started recognizing issues with my gender. And my dad became ill and died in 2010, but he became ill in 2008 and I had gone back to school taking a semester at Hollins and working on a Masters in Arts and Liberal Studies. And so when my dad became sick I had a private practice, so I had the most flexible schedule so I was taking him to appointments and stuff and he ended up dying in 2010. Smattering through there I probably worked a couple of different jobs just never really feeling a connection. I wasn't teaching. That was before I did the holistic healing practice. I've worked on both sides of HIV testing and counseling and care also, because I was a registration representative with the clinic who treated the infectious disease, so I've seen both sides of "Let me talk to you about prevention" and "Talk to you about your test results," and what you do from that and to see what happened after that. So I've seen all sides of the disease. I remember someone that I talked to came into the clinic that I had done testing on for years and I go, "I know I talked to you. Were you not listening?" [laughter] They said, "Yeah, I was." It's just one of those things that takes one slip of judgement. I have a really good friend who said, "I was having a really good time and I didn't want to stop it, and that one time." And they live with HIV for the rest of their lives. That's a whole different conversation.

19:33

JB: So it sounds like you dabbled in a little bit of everything.

19:38

RC: I have. And I think that's one of the things that where I am now as a spiritual director and I finally started studying to be a chaplain, and I go, "I want something more long-term than these

little, ‘here’s your bandage.’” It was during that time that I started recognizing that this could go further than this when they leave the hospital. So spiritual direction is one of those things that I appreciate more. It’s like a chaplain that you go see on a more long-term basis.

20:12

JB: Could you talk a little more about the bookstore that you owned and operated?

20:18

RC: Sure. It was started many years before. I can’t remember how long it had been in existence, probably [19]92, [or] ‘93, and we took occupancy of it in... 2002, and had it until 2004. The two men who owned it, they were moving out of state and having grown up here, I recognized the importance of having a bookstore and the importance of it being a central hub—that was before the Roanoke Diversity Center was here. And MCC [Metropolitan Community Church] was here, and we worked a lot with MCC. But having grown up here and going to OUTRight—yeah, it was OUTRight then—having gone to OUTRight, I recognized the value because the bookstore where I got a book called *Invisible Lives* which talked about lesbian—mostly lesbian—existence, and it was the first book, where the first time I ever read like, “Oh my God, there’s other people like me,” but there’s this one little section in this bookstore—and the bookstore has since closed, it’s now a restaurant, which I look as such a pity, such a pity, it was such a great bookstore.

But that was at the beginning of the internet and you can get everything on the internet, and in Roanoke we’re still a very closeted community, even in 2019. That was in 2002 to 2004 and it was really easy to get stuff on the internet and just have it shipped to your home and most things said in private, not rainbow-colored: “This is your queer package coming to your door” kinda thing and people liked that subtlety, that privacy. So I think that we were struggling with keeping up with the internet and having a store. During that time we brought in a lot of authors for book signings. We had Rita Mae Brown, Lambda literary award winner Alex Sanchez came twice, several others that came, but you know I think everybody knows Rita Mae Brown, especially with the *Sneaky Pie* series.

We tried to create an environment that was more of a hub where you could come and find out where there was because it’s hard when the only thing that you know is a bar, to know that there is other things out there and that not everybody is comfortable with going to a bar, especially people that are in recovery and that there needs to be other options. So when we took over the store, shortly thereafter they were building the now empty Roanoke Times building to upgrade the newspaper processing. And during that time, there was a weird rain that came that dropped 4 to 6 inches in a matter of a half an hour and I had gone home and was getting something at home and my wife was at work—my partner then; that was before we legally married; we had had a holy union though. And I called her and I said, “I am on my way, pack up what you can and lift up what you can,” and she said, “No, we’ll be fine.” And by the time I got there, she said, “No

we're fine, it's still in the road." By the time I had gotten there I was walking in ankle-deep water and she had flipped the breaker and we got cash. I wasn't there for, gosh, just a couple of minutes, and we left the store with 4 inches of water in it and walked out into knee deep water and we ended up having to walk home because in that process our car got flooded, and, literally, I had parked the car and that's how fast that rain was rising. We were on the front page of the newspaper. It was kinda funny. It was really dramatic. She had taken off her glasses and I was holding her hand because she was like, "I can't see it's raining so hard." It was just, you know, muddled. So I was holding her hand and we were trying to walk across the road and I was taking her over the curb so the picture looks really dramatic and it really isn't. It was our classic life of, "What's that?" "Like I can see anything!" [laughter] So it looks really dramatic on the picture but, you know, it's really not. And it's like well there's this huge mat and it ended up being all the mats in several of the restaurants had lifted up and floated off so you had these huge black rubber mats floating down the road, because we, literally, we walked across the road in knee-deep water and walked home.

I would say that was the beginning of the end. We never really recovered from that, along with the internet coming along and, yeah. It was just becoming more popular, Barnes and Noble had an ever-increasing LGBT section, and you know, that's one of those things that there's positives and negatives to becoming more socially diverse and accepted, and for that reason, you lose things that are hubs. I think unfortunately one of the things we could probably do more of is try to figure out how to retain that in the process, but how to, you know, hold onto the inclusivity within the diversity.

27:01

JB: So you said that was kinda the beginning of the end of the bookstore.

27:06

RC: Yeah. We only had possession of it for, it was just over two years. We closed it in March of 2004 and we had taken occupancy of it in February 2002. I think also the idea that during that time we replaced the front window three times because people would throw bricks through it. It was also during that time when, I can't remember who was doing it, but some church had these videos of the life of Jesus and you could send it to someone that you felt you needed to get the message to. We received an astronomical amount of Jesus videos, let me tell you, and DVDs, when DVDs came out [laughter]. Like you know, it's really sad you know that they could use that. You know, I understand people believing in something but no one likes things being forced on them, and I wish people would recognize that. That's not love, that's not the action of God, but that's a whole different conversation.

So that was the beginning of the end, it was also the beginning of the internet and you know there's something about being able to hold your privacy and not go into a LGBT bookstore,

because around the time that I came out there was also this huge sting operation that happened and there were seventeen gay men that were arrested for soliciting sex. It wasn't for payment but they were still arrested, one of which was a teacher in my high school and there was another teacher that was part of this. It ended up being, I think 17 that were convicted but I think 22 had been arrested.

The other ones I think were of questionable, you know, whether or not it was more forceful or whatever it was. And that was between the two parks of Highland Park and Wasena Park and I think Wasena Park is now not drive-through, and I think that's one of the reasons why. And it's now just a Greenway. So there's still a lot of privacy that Roanoke has and in some ways we've created a closet in that way because we've removed that hub.

29:52

JB: Yeah, that was something I was going to ask, operating the store that is designed to be the hub in a very closeted environment, regional space. Do you think that impacted the number of the visitors that you received?

30:11

RC: Oh yeah, yeah definitely. Because we would have people that would come in during the day and because a lot of people were closeted and... It was really awkward when we would see people that would come in with their boyfriends or girlfriends during the day and we would see them later with their married spouses of the opposite sex and we saw that probably more than people would realize. So there was also that element of privacy that we had to, keep that. "How's such and such?" and I had started a thing when I was with OUTRight of, whenever I saw and whenever anyone came to a group, we said everything that anyone says here is private and if you see me in public you have to say "hi" to me first because it's easier for me to explain who you are than me to explain... for you to explain "how do you know this adult?" And you know, I don't know who they're with but most people know how I am, so that's how we operated in general. So, we didn't really say hi to anyone unless someone said hi to us. Which is partially lonely in an LGBT community because you start isolating yourself.

31:50

JB: Right.

31:52

RC: Because you start knowing the secrets.

31:54

JB: And there's a fine line between being respectful but also wanting to be a community.

31:57

RC: Yeah.

32:01

JB: Could you expand a little bit more on your time with OUTRight?

32:07

RC: Sure. So, I became the coordinator of OUTRight in spring of 2000 and was there until December of 2005, I believe. Might have been 2006, trying to think. It was 2005 and during that time we had the Backstreet [Café] shooting and so the processes of listening to young adults think, “This could be me in a number of years,” and to recognize the importance of having something other than bars to go to, because that was the only thing that we had for a number of years. We had three different bars and I remember when I came out, “Oh this is the bar you go to if this is how you behave. This is the bar you go to if this is who you are. And this is this bar you go to if this is how you are.” And this is how you came out. I’m going, “Well I don’t really fit any of those, so there’s nothing else.” And you know, once you became an adult, I think OUTRight then was [up to the age] 21, you had nothing. And, so OUTRight, the way we operated, or the way I took it, into the direction of creating more awareness of things in the community and each year we had a job day or career day, and we had people that were openly LGBT in some way, come and talk to the people there and say, “This is who I am, this is who I am in the community, this is the job that I have.” And talk about their experience of coming out. Are they out in their work? And you know, not all of them were.

And there are some people that were really, really visible in the LGBT community that were not out at work, and if you saw them out in public, they will not acknowledge you even to this day. Which is interesting. So, in hearing their experiences and sharing their experiences, trying to help to educate to be aware of the otherness out there, and that there’s different ways to live your life. I think right now, we’re still pigeon-holed in the LGBT community. In that people lose the idea of who they are and that we’ve become almost homogeneous in some ways. In that you know, we’re either this or we’re either that and we’re not really diverse as I remember growing up, the diversity and the awareness... [*At this point Riley notices Aeryn moving her watch, and indicates with his hands to ask what she is doing*].

35:16

AM: Oh, sorry, I’m just keeping time.

35:17

RC: And so I think that is one of those things that we try to focus on because I worked at Planned Parenthood, I was really adamant, and I did HIV testing and counseling. I was one of the first ones to do the oral tests. And to be trained in that, in Roanoke, one of the first three, and

because of that I said, “look, this is a risk,” and you know we did have safe sex. People that would come in and talk about safe sex.

And you know, a lot of people would take issue with that and you know it was really interesting, it was a really Christian conservative person at the Rescue Mission that said, “We don’t all approach sex awareness in the same way and we all assume that everyone’s parents are going to be able to have that conversation. And you know sometimes you have to be able to have that conversation and if your parents are thinking that you’re just abstinent and you’re not, then it’s a risk.” So I really appreciated their conversation because we had a condom tasting. It was like, you still have a risk with oral sex and so, you know, good to know what flavor you like. And so we made it playful, we made it okay to use condoms and we wanted to make it fun. Now they have all kinds of fun colors and designs and ribbing and they’ve come a long, long way from the plain ones. I remember, they had ones that came out that were the color of the Bomb Pop and that was a big deal when that came out. I think those were the first ones that were colored that weren’t the flavored ones. And you know, we also had dental dams. It was really funny because when I started dating my partner she would go and get stuff out of [the drawer], “oh yeah, my socks are there,” and she said, “You had the most condoms and dental dams of anybody I’ve ever known.” [laughter]

I told her “You know, it’s not that I’m using them, it’s that I always have them in hand to take to group meetings.” Whenever I was around Planned Parenthood or the drop-ins, it was before the Drop-In Center was around, so it was at the Council of Community Services. I always like to make sure I have condoms on hand for meetings and stuff [laughter]. So while I was at OUTRight, OUTRight increased tenfold and we had three meetings a month on Thursdays. We had one that was for allies and the other ones were just for the LGBT youth because it’s good to know that you have allies but it’s also good to be able to talk about those things that you could talk about with people that understand what you’re going through. So, we started a journal group and we had just a casual meeting, we’d show a movie once a month or every other month, something like that. And then, yeah, it was a lot of fun. Usually we’d show a movie every now and then for the allies and a lot of the youth I still talk to. When I came out as transgender, one of the youth said, “You were so helpful to me, I’m here for you. I know I’m not transgender but I’ll be your ally.” Which I thought was really thoughtful.

39:17

JB: Yeah.

39:17

RC: And that was when she shared with me you know, “You don’t realize what little things that you give people.” She said, “You were very forward that day but what you told me, helped me” and she said so “that’s why I’m here for you.” She said, “You looked at me and said ‘Wow,

you're a triple minority, as soon as you recognize that and that you're gonna have those obstacles, then you're not going to be shocked when they happen." Because she was a Black lesbian, and she said "No one had ever told me that." and she said, "That probably kept me from being a bitter old woman."

40:00

JB: Wow. So, you spoke a little bit about your coming out process. Could you share, if you're comfortable, about coming out as transgender?

40:12

RC: You know, it was a process and when I was like "Listen, I learned about two-spirit" and so when I met my partner I go "I am a two-spirit person," and at that point I took it to mean an androgynous person that occupies two spirits. That I have a masculine side and I have a feminine side. And also at that time I was talking to Patricia Nell Warren who just died and she had said "You have to get an alligator eye." And I took that to mean that you just ignored that and unfortunately, right around the time she died I literally was thinking I need to email her and say, "I understood what you were saying, it took me a little while, ten years, but..." you know... So, she said, "Okay, one body two person, great. Two-spirit." So as I got older and started learning more and started recognizing that I didn't see myself the way other people see me. And I had been doing triathlons and doing open water swimming and stuff and I noticed I was reading magazines, and fitness magazines. I was always reading the articles about the men, which are usually more, this says a lot about our community, the women's were always about looking fashionable and nice and the men's were "This is how you become stronger."

Excuse me. I think that says something more about our society than you know... But one day over breakfast I look at my partner and I go, "Do you ever forget when you're running or riding your bike, that you have a female body?" And she said, "No." [*In a small voice:*] "I think that might be a problem..." [*normal voice:*] And so I, you know in my head I'm going, "Okay, there's something, there's something with that." And, you know, because I was active in PFLAG and there was an open transgender woman there [who] openly shared her story. I remember her story, where she was like "Women talk, you guys are chatty in the bathroom!" [*laughter*] And she was like "I... hand reaching or 'I need some toilet paper.' 'Okay honey.'" [*laughter*] I'm hearing her story, so I remembered that when I came out. "Don't talk, don't talk. 'Hey how you doing?'" Not that people really ever talked to me because I was always really androgynous. A lot of the reactions I had going into the bathroom were horrible.

So, about that time I had seen a documentary on gender called "Genderqueer," I think is what it was. I said "well okay, I'm genderqueer," and I thought, I'm going to focus on not recognizing my gender. And I was very noticeably female. And I had a really high voice and so every time I spoke, even from when I was a kid I would say, "Whose voice is that?" Because that was not the

voice I heard in my head. So I never felt that I was trapped in my body, it never made sense. And one day I was working a temp job because it was right after we had closed the store. I was looking for a job and it was right before I started doing the holistic practice and I was working this temp job, I was listening to a podcast. It was on transgender people and they referenced, “And transgender people, it’s not that they feel trapped in their bodies. They have the identity of a male body.” And I go, “Ahh, shit.” [laughter] And I think I was filing and I think that I audibly said that. I was also listening to one that had a ghost story and I jumped when someone walked past the filing room, it was really kind of funny [laughter]. So it was about that time that I started recognizing that.

And I was doing a lot of swimming and I was a practicing Buddhist at the time and my swim coach said, “I’m going to challenge you to...” This is about the time Diana Nyad was swimming from Key West to Florida and I was following that and I was really inspired by that because I wanted to do long distance swims in open water. And she [Riley’s coach] said, “I challenge you to swim three miles for the three days that she’s out there in the ocean every day.” Which was the distance, it would be 110 or 111 laps, was the miles that she was swimming, which equaled three miles for me in a pool. So I did that three days in a row. I was so sore that third day, but that is when I recognized it’s when you leave your mind. It was the time that I understood the Buddhist practice of sitting on a meditation cushion and letting go of your thought because your physical body, the only thing that you can do is, I had a conscious decision, I had to push off that wall each time. But because your mind is so tired, all of those thoughts that are buried deep inside come up. And in that process came out, “Will you ever know what it feels like to be a man in the world?”

And I left the water that day and I became really depressed. I had contemplated suicide. I had a plan. Weird course of things, I also ended up with a B12 deficiency which made me look like I had Parkinson’s, sorry, for a day. And prevented that. And I go okay, well I’m here and I was getting a tattoo of a joy Buddha with swim goggles. And I said, if I make it to get that tattoo, then I will forever remove suicide as an option and I have to decide how to live my life. And I did, obviously. And the very next day I fell out of the lifeguard stand and I twisted my knee. So, I had the tattoo. I couldn’t end my life. I had made that promise and my promises are pretty serious. And I remember sitting there and crying and going, “What the hell God? Fuck you.” Excuse my language, but I was mad. I remember sitting there and crying and I had bought a book. I had thought, well I’ll sit and read this book. It was the *Dharma Punx* by Noah Levine and in that he talked about doing a year to live. So that December 21st...in 2011, I started the year to live.

And it was a meditation that January where I go okay, how will I feel if I lose my hair? It’s just my hair. Can I take care of myself if I lose my sight? And it was one of the meditations I would go through. And I remember looking in the mirror, if you were dying in a year what would you

regret? And it was not knowing what it feels like to be a man. And I go, “Who said that?” Called my counselor and said, “uh, I think we need to talk”. And he said, “Well the toothpaste is out the tube. What do you do with it? The ball’s rolling.” So about a month later I came out to my partner and we had been together for a little over eleven years at the time. And it probably took us about eight months to figure out how we were going to be a couple in the world. What the importance of that is. And she is an amazing person. I can’t be the person I am today without her I don’t think. She said that she asked herself a question of, “Would my life be better without me [Riley] in her life?” And she said no. And so we spent probably a year figuring out how our life was with me being male and coming out to our friends.

Most of them, we aren’t friends with [anymore]. You really find out who your real friends are when you come out and you say, “I have leprosy,” so to speak. How close are, you know, who’s your close friends? That was my process of coming out and I came out slowly. We joked and said we had weekends with Riley. And I was working a job as a lifeguard. I was in a swimsuit and you’re not hiding a whole lot then. I stopped shaving my legs, which was horrible from the day I began. It was just not natural. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve shaved whole sections of my leg off when I was a teenager. Just gashes, like that didn’t come natural. Shaving my face, never once. It just kind of shows you, it’s like come on, mom, you knew it. Like when I came out to my mom she went to her best friend torn up and her best friend said, “You’re surprised?” [laughter] My mom, God bless her, didn’t find any allies. Everyone was like “come on!” It’s like stereotypical. I drove a truck [laughter]. Listen, if there is a stereotype I had it.

51:32

JB: Well thank you for sharing that.

51:33

RC: Yeah.

51:37

JB: So, now you’re a spiritual director.

51:41

RC: I am. Yes.

51:42

JB: Right? It seems like that’s kind of been a theme throughout your life...

51:46

RC: Yeah.

51:46

JB: ...throughout our conversations. Can you talk a little bit about your work right now and what you do?

51:55

RC: I'm a spiritual director and because of two bouts of being homeless. The second time I was literally homeless for two weeks and I didn't look for a home at that time. And I couch surfed. Slept in my car, which is now illegal in Roanoke County. The absurdity of it. Because I was going to go to New York City to do the internship and I used that time to really delve into myself. And to find who I am and I think that's when that seed got planted of being a Two-Spirit person. As a spiritual director I serve at the Rescue Mission. I volunteer there one day a week. I am not openly transgender there. If they have someone that is LGBT they usually say, "You'll really connect with Riley." They usually send me to the LGBT people. Because we live different lives than most people. As a spiritual director I found a real connection to saints because most of them were outcasts in their community. They weren't understood because they were talking in a way that most people didn't. Even Jesus was an outcast in his community. And so I found a community that way and as a spiritual director, it's more of, I take it from a place of empowerment and help people to find their own spiritual path.

I have Christian and Buddhist practices, but since [then] I've studied Jewish mysticism with the Kabbalah, I've studied under a shaman. I've dabbled in a whole bunch of different things. So I'm trans in a lot of different areas, not only in gender but in spirituality and I'm partly Episcopalian and partly Buddhist and partly Roman Catholic. Sometimes I'm very male identified and sometimes I... even before transition, I didn't talk with my hands. I don't know what this is. They don't sit still now. I have jazz hands [*laughter*]. But I also don't feel male or female. I know I recognize I have a beard but I go through life recognizing that people see me as male but I know how everybody lives differently. And you two might be in the same class but if you really sit down and talk about it, you're going to have two different perspectives. How many people are in your class, you all have different filters and different experiences coming into the class. So you're going to process it all completely different. And so that's really how I take spiritual direction. "Who are you? How did you grow up? And how can we help you to feel more full?"

55:00

JB: That's like related to something Dr. Rosenthal said one day. I think it was intersubjectivity...

55:10

RC: Yeah.

55:10

JB: ... How we all bring our own perspectives and ideas and everything. So our interpretations are therefore different from one another.

55:16

RC: Yeah.

55:18

JB: Wrapping up a little bit, what advice would you give to someone who is thinking about transitioning or wanting to begin that.

55:31

RC: Someone who's contemplating transitioning? To find a person that is a confidant. At least one person that they feel is solid because that person might be the only person at the end of it. Transitioning is like playing cards and you have to be willing to put them all on the table. And if you're lucky enough, you get to pick some of them up.

56:06

JB: So then also, what qualities or what characteristics do you think makes the most ideal ally?

56:16

RC: Someone that accepts you where you are and listens with empathy. And recognizes that we all approach transitioning in different ways and we ask different things of our bodies. Whether, I know people who are trans identified and don't wish to have any surgeries and don't wish to take any hormones. But this is who I am, honor who I am. So, an ally would meet that person there. Because also, not everybody's able to have surgeries or begin hormones for health reasons, but an ally meets you where you are. As best they can.

57:07

JB: Makes a lot of sense. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we wrap up?

57:12

RC: No, I want to be respectful of your time. I was already fashionably late.

57:17

JB: We don't have anything today.

57:17

RC: Oh good.

57:20

JB: Well with that, I think we can conclude.

57:24

RC: Okay. If you have any other questions feel free to ask if you're listening to it and you go "what did he mean?"

57:30

JB: Okay, yes definitely we will. Thank you so much.

[END]