

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

**Interview with Nathaniel Preston
February 22, 2020**

Interviewer: Sebastian Harlow

Narrator: Nathaniel Preston

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Duration: 64:59

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00:00

SH: Hello, my name is Sebastian Harlow. I am in the Fintel Library study room with Nathaniel Preston. It is February 22nd, 2020. And so we're just gonna ask you a couple questions, just to get to know you. And I think we're gonna start off with your childhood, so if you just wanna talk to us about that...kinda talk about you!

NP: Okay. I was born in Martinsville, Virginia at the Memorial Hospital there. My mother, at the time was a high school English teacher. I'm not entirely sure what my biological father did for work. I believe he worked for Dupont. But he died of cancer six days after I was born. So I spent a lot of time, especially when I was younger, and then definitely weekends and summers, in Mount Airy, North Carolina with my grandparents. My mother's parents, specifically. My father's parents and that side of the family weren't super involved with me when I was younger. They hadn't particularly liked my mother, so that kind of thing bled over—other than one uncle who used to come and spend time with me on a fairly regular basis. I was obsessed with Candyland as a child, y'know in that little kid way. Whenever my uncle would ask, "What color

is this?” showing me the card for his turn, and I’d tell him, I thought it was just him checking to see if I knew my colors. It turns out he’s colorblind [*laughter*]. So that’s one of those little things that you appreciate even more when you’re older.

01:55

The church was a large portion of my childhood life, as it is when you’re growing up in the Bible Belt. My grandmother was on the usher board of a small AME church—African Methodist Episcopal, if you’re not familiar. My grandfather did not attend church regularly. Father’s Day, Christmas, and Easter were pretty much the only times he would go. He was a veteran from World War II and had been a coal miner and spent a lot of time, y’know, drinking beer and watching baseball games. He’s the one who taught me to hit a ball, throw a ball. I’m still a Braves fan because of him. But when you spend that much time in a church growing up, all those things kind of seep in.

03:04

When I was four, my mother met my step-father. They met... my mom was picking me up from preschool, my dad was picking up my now-stepbrother who’s closest to me in age. He’s only nine months older than me. And that’s where they met. They ran into each other a few times. My dad was taking a real estate course that my mother was taking as a favor to the friend who was teaching it so that there’d be enough people to actually run the class. My mom thought she was tutoring my dad. My dad had absolutely no problem with the course material, he just wanted to get to know her. And so, a few weeks before my sixth birthday, they got married and we moved into his home. Still in the Henry County area, just the other side of the county. His two brothers were preachers and his father was a preacher. All three, Pentecostal Holiness ministers. So, still, church. All the time. And I guess that’s when you start to get the feeling that there’s certain things you do and you don’t do. And as I got older, that’s when they started trying to “make a good young lady” out of me. This did not work. I hated dresses. I hated anything that was deemed traditionally “girly.” Except for cooking. My dad was also an excellent cook. I learned most of what I know about cooking from him and from my grandmother. They were both the kind of people who had zero clue of how to cook a small meal. It always had to be enough to feed an army, because you never know who might stop by, and you had to be able to offer them something. So, I still have trouble estimating how much food I need to feed people. It’s terrible.

05:39

My dad though. I remember they had made me be the flower girl in the wedding, and as soon as everything was done I was out of the dress and into a pair of shorts and, y’know, a t-shirt. But I had tugged on his suit jacket and I was like, “Does this mean you’re my dad now?” and he was like “Yes, I’ll be your dad now.” I always wanted to be like him growing up. He was way more extroverted than I could ever be. Never met a stranger, could walk into a building and almost talk to a brick wall. It was painful. There was no such thing as a short shopping trip with him, because he’d run into everyone and have to ask, “How’s your mom and them? Are you still working on that old car?” That sort of thing. If they were talking about cars, it was over. We were just stuck there. Classic cars were one of his big loves. And so I still appreciate those, too. My dad, I think, always knew that I wasn’t quite like my sisters and tried to treat me mostly like

my brothers. I mean occasionally things would slip through. It would be like a “Come help me get the riding lawn mower lifted onto the back of the truck,” but then if I jumped off the back of the truck he’d be like, “Quit that, you’re gonna skin up your legs and no man’s gonna want you,” and I’m like, “um, I’m fine with this. It’s fine.” [*laughter*] So, just dumb little things.

07:42

But where I grew up, everyone was kind of known by what their church affiliation was. I mean you’d go to school and you know that this person went to First Baptist of Bassett, this person went to First Baptist of Stanleytown, all of these things. And you kind of knew even the history of how all of these churches sprouted up because there was a church probably every half mile through the main drags of town. It was absolutely ridiculous. Everyone wanted to ignore the hypocrisy behind a lot of it because sometimes it happened that like the junior minister ended up having an affair with the first minister’s wife. And so that’s when a new church would kind of spring up and things would go down, or it was fighting about money, things like that. The church I went to [their] youth group with, because the church that was closest to my house, pretty much right across the street and one house down, they didn’t really do a youth group, it was Sunday school. And you were expected to do Sunday school and Vacation Bible School.

09:06

But all of my friends were in a different youth group and so I went with them. And it was a Southern Baptist church, with all of the attendant issues that come out of that. Because the Baptists are very big on, y’know, “Women don’t get to be in positions of leadership,” drinking is definitely a “no,” dancing is supposed to be a “no,” there’s supposed to be very definite boundaries between genders and the way that things were done. But this church got away with a lot, mostly because the church had a lot of money and that was kind of the trump card in interactions with the Southern Baptist convention. Because... Bassett Furniture, if you’re familiar with them, which is based in the town that I’m from, the man who started it and who owned it had donated this money and decided to have the church named after his daughter. So you can’t really have a church named after a woman and not let women do things. But even then the nature of kind of the welcoming group...you know, we had a female youth minister who always told us, “Hey, if there’s anything you need, if there’s anything you need to talk about, I’m here, it’s going to be okay.” But figuring out that you were queer, still in the evidence of all that, wasn’t really something that you could talk about.

11:02

A friend of mine was outed. It was my junior year, his sophomore year. Someone that we thought we were friends with started telling everyone that he was gay. And the administration did absolutely nothing. We’d have to walk in groups through the school. If he needed to use the bathroom at school two people had to go with him. And most of his friends were, y’know, at least outwardly female. And so I’d say, “Okay, so, we’ll wait by the door. If we hear anything start to happen somebody’s going in and the other person’s going to try to get someone to stop this.” That was just the way things were. We were in marching band. Huge program for our school, went to grand nationals every year. That’s just what we did. And our rival high school was also big into marching band as well, and they had a guy in their color guard during marching

band season, and the local cable access channel referred to him as a “flaggot” on, y’know, your normal news. Also a minor. They’re telling everybody his name and making fun of this kid who’s just—for all that we thought we were grown-ups as teenagers, he was a child, and yet he was this object of ridicule.

12:53

So I didn’t really come out to anyone until I went off to college. And even then, I didn’t know everything. I figured out that I liked men and women, but I’d also gotten about as far away from home as I could before doing that. So I spent my first three semesters of college at the University of Pittsburgh. So, big city. They filmed *Queer as Folk* there [*laughter*]. You know, when you’re figuring out that you’re queer, it’s a good place to be. Even then, I’d have to be drunk before I was willing to talk about it or even willing to kiss girls. But I did try to tell my best friend at the time, and she quit talking to me. She went away. No contact whatsoever. And I was, perhaps unsurprisingly, struggling with depression at the time. And so I’d call her, and I’d leave these voicemail messages in just absolute tears. And... nothing. Went home to visit, ran into her at Walmart—because, y’know, the center of small town life [*laughter*]. And she just looked past me like she’d never met me before. And that was hard.

14:47

When I was 19, I attempted suicide. If one of my roommates hadn’t come home, I probably would have died. They called my parents, and I managed to avoid being committed, but my parents drove from Martinsville up to Pittsburgh overnight to pick me up and bring me home. They got me into therapy, and I finally admitted to my mother—who then told my dad so I wouldn’t have to—that I was bisexual. And then I got a job and starting trying to put my life back together. Eventually went to—oddly enough, but it was conveniently located—Averett University, which at the time was Southern Baptist-affiliated. Oops. Well, we started a GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance] on campus, and that was kind of the straw that broke the camel’s back in between Averett’s relationship and the Southern Baptist Convention. It was already on thin ice. There’d been a lot of other things going on. Most specifically, because one of my favorite professors, wonderful man, was an expert in the field of biblical archaeology. So, well known. Dr. Laughlin. But he used to start off his Old Testament class, on the very first day, and he’d say “Raise your hand if the Bible says homosexuality is wrong.” And of course, we’re a Southern Baptist college in Southwest Virginia so hands go up, and he goes, “You’re all wrong, and anyone who’s told you otherwise is either ignorant or a liar.” [*laughter*] So, yeah. When the head of the religion department and the director of student affairs are your two faculty sponsors there’s not a lot that the college can do to you, but the Southern Baptists broke ties with us over all that.

17:20

And I thought that I was gonna go into education, and do that sort of thing. That didn’t work out for me. So eventually I ended up moving to Roanoke. So that was probably 2007. I’ve been here ever since, mostly working retail and food. I got my Master’s Degree in Business in a program based in Roanoke. But as I was figuring all that out and settling into queer life, I started realizing that I couldn’t keep ignoring my gender identity, which then of course makes things super

interesting when you're trying to apply for positions. Because, y'know, you've got student loans to pay off, you've got bills to pay, you've gotta make rent, and all these things, and you're trying to get a job in a field that none of your work experience is in. And then you're gender non-conforming. And it's rough. I had an MBA, my track record in jobs was great, but I showed up for an interview with... it was a clothing store. I won't name them because other people's experience may not be the experience that I had with them. But I'm in a vest, a button-down, and a tie. I look good. But I introduced myself and I could just see the look on the interviewer's face, the "what on Earth have I gotten into?" kind of look. Obviously, I ended up not getting that job, even though my resume was impressive and she admitted it. It's still that "Mm, I don't think this is going to work for the business that we're in." Alright. Sure.

19:39

The years pass. I get another job, closer to home, because for a while I was commuting from Roanoke to Christiansburg every day. And at this point I've had therapy. I'm finally out as a trans man. I've started HRT [hormone replacement therapy]. I've gotten my legal name change. I go in for an interview. Panel interview, everyone's super impressed with me, they offer me the job. I have to go through the background check and there's no option to give them any other previous names. But then of course the Social [Security number] matches and they find this, and then I get a call and it's like, "We've decided to go in a different direction." Great. And this is after they've asked me to put in my notice at my other job. And so suddenly, instead of making more money than I've ever made in my life, I don't have a job. Luckily I find something pretty quickly. It's a pay cut, but the schedule's better than what I'd been working before. And it's really nice, for once, to work with a group of people who've only ever known me as Nathaniel. It's a really nice change. Eventually I get a job working in my field, just, y'know, eight years longer than I expected it was going to take. But at least I'm working for a company now that offers transgender-related healthcare in its insurance, and has a transition policy, and all these things. I know I'm one of the lucky ones. There are a lot of people I know that aren't so lucky.

21:49

SH: So, you've kind of told us about some of the trans issues and the obstacles you face. Do you foresee some of those changing over the years? Especially in Roanoke?

22:04

NP: Roanoke has always been an interesting city. When I was growing up, you know, as the queer kids were finding each other, and people were leaving, it was pretty much, they either moved north to Roanoke or south to Greensboro. You know, both places that had gay bars and gay clubs, and it was a little bit easier to blend in, but then you weren't too far away from home. So you could still go back if you needed to. I didn't intend to stay in Roanoke necessarily, it just kind of happened. My soon-to-be ex-wife, her family was in Franklin County, and so we talked about moving, but our nephews and niece were born and she didn't want to be that far away from them when they were growing up. We got involved with Roanoke Pride, and were both on the board of that for several years. I ran the festival. Roanoke is technically the longest continually-running pride festival in the state of Virginia, which surprises a lot of people. Because they're all like, you'd think like Hampton Roads or Richmond would've gotten there first, and I know they

all started at similar times, but Richmond's Pride fell off for a while, same thing out in Hampton Roads.

23:37

SH: So, what kind of activities do you partake in during Roanoke Pride over the years?

23:43

NP: There's always been the festival. When it started, back in the [19]80s, it was really just kind of a potluck picnic. And then, it grew and it moved around. It's been in Wasena Park, it's been in Highland Park, it's been in Elmwood. We had the one year that it was in River's Edge Park. So there's always been kind of an element of just coming out and hanging out. You know, food vendors, drag shows. Roanoke used to have a huge and vibrant drag history, and it waned and now I think it's kind of growing again. Now there are multiple drag brunches, and things. At one point there were six different pageants that were going on. It's not a big enough city for six national title holders. So those were some of the things that we did, kind of at the peak. The Roanoke Diversity Center, when it got started, would do their film festival and we'd have some kickoff parties leading up into the festival itself. We've done parades, but they're kind of a nightmare in terms of Roanoke City and just dealing with the city, getting the permits. You have to try and keep it close enough to the park where the festival is happening, which is unfortunately right on top of multiple major thoroughfares in the city. So getting the permissions to shut that off, and then the cost involved in having off-duty police officers man the parade route, it makes it difficult. We did, the last two years that I was involved with the festival, we developed a relationship with the city and kind of as an in-kind sponsor, they waived the fee of renting the park, and helped provide some of the security coverage that we needed, because there are always protestors. And as much as most conservatives are like, "It's nobody's business!" Well, if it's not your business, why do you care? But the reason we kind of kept doing it, and why we still go even though I'm not doing it anymore, it's remembering the first pride that I went to, and it's like hey, there are a few thousand people here who are just like me. Especially in Southwest Virginia. When you're worried that it's you and a handful of friends, that's the importance of Pride. Even now, where we have just The Park, the Backstreet [Cafe] doesn't really exist as it was any longer, and it wasn't really a gay bar for years before it was finally bought out. And the same thing is happening in cities across the country. Even the Village [in New York City] isn't as gay as it used to be. As we gain mainstream acceptance in some ways, we lose the core of community that kind of was the hallmark of the queer community for so long.

27:58

SH: Do you think that there's a way for us to come back to those places?

28:04

NP: I think that we'd have to stop trying to assimilate so much. It's like, even as corporate sponsors enable you to make your pride festivals bigger and better and lets you reach more people, and have even bigger name entertainers, there's also an element of selling out involved in that. And so, where we come from at Stonewall, to the "We're just like you, we want the exact same things," heteronormative monogamous assimilation is hurting so much. Black culture,

queer culture, and the intersection of the two was responsible for so much of fashion, music, dance, all sorts of things and we lose that, and it's kind of sad. I'm a transgender, pansexual, polyamorous person, but even then, you know, we also live a fairly normal life. My current partner and my metamour, we live together, we're raising teenagers, you know, it's like at the same time, yes, we do all still want the same kinds of things. Some of us do. But we're not a monolith. I know people who absolutely don't ever want children. And they're still, you know, humans. As a culture, we like putting people in these little boxes. And... it's not that easy.

30:22

SH: So, you said you're raising a teenager...

30:24

NP: Yes, we have two teenagers. My wife, my nesting partner and her husband, my metamour, and then her previous husband, they had one son who's 26, and so everyone's like, "Wait, you're how old, and you have a 26 year old?" And I'm like, one, my wife's older than me, and my contribution to his parenting at this point is, you know, trying to remind him that work will always be there, life might not be. And that's coming from experience. And then also trying to get him to quit drinking shitty beer. *[laughter]* And our two younger kids, our daughter is a senior. She should figure out where she wants to go to college. She's active in her high school's Gay Straight Alliance. She's got trans and gender non-conforming friends, and she always tries to make sure to introduce her parents to their parents and make sure that we meet the friends who might need help the most. And then our youngest is 15, he's a sophomore. And they're both, they're a joy. Empathetic, and they have a strong sense of right and wrong. And watching them form their own opinions on politics and things is fun, because politics in this country is a giant dumpster fire right now. And seeing them, and knowing that they understand that "Hey, this isn't the way things are supposed to be," and writing opinion papers with zero prompting from us. They're like "Nope, this is what's right," and they go with it. I think the kids are alright. I have hope.

32:42

SH: Well, that's good. So, you're raising teenagers in Roanoke. Do you think it would have been different had you raised them in Martinsville with the childhood area that you were in?

32:57

NP: Oh, god no. I would never raise children there. *[laughter]* I know people that I went to high school with who are raising children there. And they're having to fight some of the same battles that we had to fight when we were kids there. It's still a profoundly not diverse place. I mean, things have improved. They had a gay homecoming king a few years ago, and that never would have happened when we were in high school. When I was in high school, the newspapers ran editorials about stripping the homecoming queen of her title because she had a tongue piercing. Really? So, to have an openly gay homecoming king, alright, we've made some progress. It's still, having out gay teachers is not really a thing. Like, it's always been kind of an open secret. People know, but you don't really talk about it. It's still that same sort of stigma. My mother raised my younger cousin, who's now 19 and she's a student at [Virginia] Tech, but when she

was little, like in the after-school program there, one of the directors of the program was a lesbian, and people kept talking about whether or not she was able, like, capable of doing that job. It's like, yeah, it's not contagious. But yeah, this is the same place where it comes out that the sheriff's department has been confiscating drugs and then selling them themselves, or using them. Whole big thing. Then the next sheriff election comes around, the incumbent sheriff steps down. Someone who's not from there runs against the previous sheriff's right-hand man. And you'd think, obvious police corruption... But who wins the election? The corruption they're comfortable with, not the outsider. It's just, it's always going to be that kind of place. And granted, it had a huge manufacturing background. That's what it was, furniture manufacturing. And you had three, you had Bassett, you had Stanley, and you had Hooker furniture. Then you had Sara Lee products, DuPont was there. All of these things. And then, NAFTA happened, and the jobs left, and a lot of people left with it, but then a lot of other people stayed. And the ones who stayed are the ones who like change the least, so, change happens slowly.

36:30

But, as people, and I hate to say it, die off, it might get better. And some more jobs are moving in down there. They did actually hold a Pride festival there last year, for the very first time. Someone had started talking about it, probably eight years ago, and it took that long for it to actually happen. There have been drag shows at The Dutch Inn, which is like the big hotel in town that also had a bar, so that's where people used to go. And so, hey, they were doing drag shows, like twice a month, on Sundays. And it was the talk of the town, and how scandalous it was. So, I would not want to raise children there, for a variety of reasons. There's just not enough for them to do. Cultural opportunities are few and far between. Right now, our kids don't drive, they're not really interested in it. It's not a huge thing to get them where they want to go, either. Down there, my parents made me get my license. They're like, "no, we can't just keep driving you everywhere." And in their defense, it was kind of true. I resented it at the time, because one of my close friends had died in a car accident, and I was with her, and another friend of ours when it happened. And so, consequently, understandably not at all interested in getting behind the wheel of a car. And, you know, tough love. And it's a good thing, that they made me, because otherwise I might never have learned, and I really needed to. But, we can afford to let them do things on their own time. And even then, one of us is almost always home to make them dinner, and things like that. And, you know, my parents, my mom worked and depending on, she moved from being a teacher to being an administrator, and as she's working, sometimes she was at a school as much as an hour away, and having to make that commute. And then, my dad did a lot of volunteer work. He had to take a disability retirement from DuPont. But, he was really active with the Free Masons, and with the Shriners, and doing all of those things, so he had meetings. I had to learn to do things like cook and things, because, nobody's delivering pizza out in the sticks.

39:38

SH: So, I do have a question about, when you were talking about the lack of change that people were susceptible to in Martinsville, do you think that's different here in Roanoke?

39:50

NP: I think that Roanoke has a lot more diverse population in a lot of ways. I mean, Local Colors is kind of an example of that. When I was growing up, you had black kids, you had white kids, you had a few, and this is gonna sound terrible when I say it but it was the mentality [at the time], Mexican kids. Whether they were from Mexico or Central America, or anywhere else, they were “Mexicans” as far as everyone else was concerned. Like, the Asian population of our high school was a kid who was a quarter Korean. You weren’t running into different ideas. Everyone, almost everyone, was going to a Baptist church, we had like three Catholic kids. We had no Jewish population. It was, everyone was pretty much the same. Roanoke has the benefit of having a lot more cultures bumping into each other. And there is still very strong religious sentiment here, but there’s also more business. The airport helps; now, we’ve got Amtrak. There’s more travel in and out the city. These businesses are doing business with people around the world, and it’s harder to stand against change when you’re encountering new things all the time.

41:33

SH: Yeah. I actually really like that you mentioned that because I kind of want to talk to you about the Park and kind of the influx and the change that it’s undergone. It’s primarily known as the gay club, but there’s so much more there now. And I kind of wanted to ask what your experience was with the Park, like your first experience, or your favorite one.

42:02

NP: I guess, because I was still kind of young... I was 17 when I graduated from high school. So I didn’t really get to experience the Park until I guess I’d come home for Christmas break my freshman year of college. An old friend of mine from our rival high school—but we’d gotten along really well ever since we first met because we were black queer kids—and of course, not everyone knew that and so everyone was like, “Oh, you’re such a cute couple!” No, no, we’re really not, but sure. He and I came up to Roanoke and we went to the Park on New Year’s Eve. Came home, and we ended up back in Roanoke the very next day with a friend of ours because the mall in Martinsville, such as it is, was awful even then, and now it’s only gotten worse. So, we came up to Roanoke to shop with a friend of ours, who, you know, the three of us had always spent a lot of time together. But he was home, he had just finished basic training, and so we were all going to hang out. And we’re trying really hard to figure out how to tell him that we’re queer, because we hadn’t told him. We’re like, alright, we’re going to do it, we’re going to tell him, now’s the time. We were putting it off all day. And at one point he looks at my friend and he’s like, “Dude, is that glitter on your face?” And we’re like, “Oh, don’t know where that came from!” We’re trying to play it off like we hadn’t been covered in body glitter the night before. And so we had to sit him down in the café at the Barnes and Noble at Tanglewood [Mall] and come out to him. That’s kind of the most memorable thing, the night at the Park was whatever, you know, that was back before they had a liquor license so it was just beer and wine coolers. But, still, the chance to wear glitter and drink, even though we really weren’t supposed to be, and smoke cigarettes, and be around mostly gay people, it was great.

44:40

Even then coming to the Park after I moved to Roanoke and y'know had friends, like we'd go and there was always random straight guys there. Straight women are all like "Yes, I wanna dance with the gay guys" and it's fine, and then you have the guys who are trying to date these women who are like "Why am I here?" like obviously uncomfortable, and then trying to dance with women but not realizing hey, most of the women here have zero interest in you. The bar scene has never really been my scene but it was still really important for us to have that opportunity. And over the years things have changed and now they've got a liquor license and they serve more food and things. But still going to The Park on Pride weekend is like old home week... you see all of these people that you might not have seen in years. People who are in town just to go to Pride again and it's still in a lot of ways a home for the Roanoke gay community. I mean the Roanoke Diversity Center does a lot of great work, and it's particularly great for people who can't be around alcohol consumption and things like that, and for those who are past the point of loud music being what they want to do. And so I'm glad the RDC got off the ground when it did, because it is a great resource for information and for community outside of the bars.

46:49

I think we are losing some of the history. Especially... The bars were the gathering places at especially at the height of the AIDS crisis. There would be the people that would be there and suddenly they weren't there anymore and that was kind of... you're marking time, and that is sad. It's... even in the black community, your sororities and fraternities, the divine nine, are the staples of the Black college experience but even they are losing numbers. So it's one of those, like, as times change and everyone becomes more integrated you lose something important historically. Or it's still there, but it's different and people don't understand why you're sad about it being gone. And it's like "Well, it's great now, we can go to whatever club or bar we want to." Well yes, we can, but it's still not the same. The idea that after Obama that we're in a post-racist country, it's like "ehhh, no, it's not quite," but people can't see past the "Well, we had a black president," and they're like, "well, if Buttigieg gets elected then we'll have a gay president and it will fix things." It's like, it's not going to fix things. He is—whatever way you feel about his policy positions—he's still like the most comfortable version of gay that a lot of people are ever going to be. Then their like, "okay, he's a Christian white guy, he's married, he was a military vet," it's like this is the most palatable gay. And that leaves behind all of us who are not palatable gay.

49:34

SH: Do you think that's a step forward or a step backward for getting people to change and kind of expand on the idea beyond... I would almost say stereotypical, kind of like a formula or mold?

49:50

NP: In some ways I would say a kind of representation or whatnot moves us like baby steps forward. My mother has always loved me but has had trouble kind of assimilating my identity first as bisexual and now as a trans man. But *Modern Family* helped her kind of get there, with dealing with "Okay, my kid is queer and married. Alright, I can work with this." Laverne Cox—bless her soul—in *Orange Is the New Black* helped my mom recognize, "Okay, the transgender community is a thing." So, it helps and we can't discount the help, but it's still not getting us

completely there. And in some ways, it's not always helpful. The idea, the "wrong body" narrative that gets people to kind of understand the trans identity in some ways, it's super uncomfortable. For some people, yes, it's their truth, but it's not everyone's truth and it's really unhelpful for non-binary or agender or genderfluid folks. Really, really not helpful for them. But you have to weigh the good that it's doing versus the harm that's gonna come. There are people who really felt like we should have dropped the trans identity from getting employment protections passed back in the late [19]90s, early 2000s. "If we drop the T, we can get there, and once we're there we can add that back in and try to move the line a little further." But when you do things like that, all you do is put your more marginalized, your more vulnerable people, further behind.

52:18

SH: I know you mentioned the Roanoke Diversity Center a little bit ago, and kind of the separation from the bar scene. Do you think that there could be some sort of program or outreach at the Diversity Center that could help in Roanoke with the issues that you were talking about of having employment issues and representation? Do you think there could be a push or something?

52:45

NP: They've done some things like that, historically. They had their own speakers bureau for a while that would go and kind of talk to businesses, talk to school systems, and things like that. And I pinched in for them a few times they were looking for more people of color who were part of the queer community. But because they are a very small non-profit, a lot of their money comes from grants or comes from donations or fundraisers they can do, and they are kinda spread a little thin. And they do have support groups and things like that in their center, and they try to do some outreach through some of their grant money, but it's hard for them to get funding. And right now I'm part of Equality Virginia's Transgender Advocacy Speakers Bureau. And because EV is a statewide organization, and they get some of that sweet, sweet northern Virginia money, that kind of helps them have a little bit of reach. And I wish some of that could come into Roanoke so that we could get a little further. But they are trying at least to talk to the marginalized groups more, making sure that HIV-positive people have support that they need. They work with the Council for Community Services on that, making sure that the multiple transgender umbrella support groups have a place. My wife runs a bisexual and pansexual and all middle sexuality support group there. They're doing good work. They sponsor at least one of the local drag bingos and try to do things out in the community like that to try and raise awareness of the issues. But in Roanoke, a lot of the issues come down to unemployment and underemployment, housing protections, things like that. So, they spend a lot of time trying to talk to our local legislators about things like that so they're encouraged to help pass those things. In this area, there's a lot of conservatives that sort of not getting there. Bless [Delegate] Sam Rasoul from, y'know, the city, cause he's kind of our progressive voice. And Senator Edwards. Because we don't have a lot of that from out here. I think if we can finish getting the Virginia Values Act passed, that's going to do a lot for people around here. Because the governor says he'll sign it. And then we'll be the first state in the South with housing and unemployment protections for LGBT folks. And y'know back in 2006 when they passed the constitutional amendment for the state constitution to outlaw gay marriage, I didn't think we'd ever get here. There's hope.

56:10

SH: Do you think if we got backing from the city of Roanoke, that would help a lot? Or do you think it would still kind of keep us where we're at?

56:23

NP: I think it would help. I know that Joe Cobb being Vice Mayor is helping. He's a prominent voice, he's well known and well liked in pretty much every circle. I think some funding for that would be great, but then there's also... We've got a lot of problems in the city in terms of economics, and in some ways if we're making sure that all of our under-income folks can eat and have housing, that's going to help the LGBT community, too. Several of the city schools have free breakfast and lunch for all their students, because we're not able to take care of children, but I think that passing more progressive policies will bring in more jobs. As the statement always says, equality means business. The company I work for, that's one of their things. Making sure to be involved and to have policies. They did the [Human Rights Campaign's] Corporate Equality Index survey for the first time last year and got a 90, which in terms of the auto parts business is pretty much as good as you're going to get, because the other 10% comes from things like your supply chain and there's just not a lot of queer people making auto parts. Yet. Hopefully we'll get there.

58:20

SH: Rainbow cars! *[laughter]*

58:23

NP: That chameleon car paint was super popular for a while in the [19]90s. It could make a comeback.

58:28

SH: So, I guess just a couple more questions because I don't want to take up too much of your time. You did talk about... the bar scene wasn't really your scene. What would you call your scene?

58:42

NP: Like the coffee shop, bookstore kind of thing. I don't like loud noises, other than like concerts, where you're completely surrounded by uniform sound. I guess it's an anxiety thing. I don't like being in loud places where I can't always see who's around me. And we don't really have a gay bookstore. I wish we did. That's always been like a side dream.

59:15

SH: I thought it was the Tanglewood Barnes and Noble...

59:17

NP: I mean, the Tanglewood Barnes and Noble used to be even more gay. When I worked there many years ago, about a third of the staff was queer of some variety. And that's back when there were like almost sixty employees working in that store, so there was a lot. *[laughter]* And for a while, I was maintaining the LGBT section, like shortlisting books and making sure that we had the stuff that people were looking for. But then, in the grand tradition of corporate retail, they were like "Well, we're gonna cut staffing because that will save us money," as opposed to

having people there to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be, and that you can have books that people were looking for. Even a decent portion of management staff there at the time was queer. So yes, that used to be it. But I've spent some time in cities like Philadelphia, or even if you're in Richmond, like Diversity Thrift. So you have the [LGBT] community center, and the shop, there's a little cafe where people can spend time. Even in daylight hours, a place to gather that doesn't necessarily revolve around alcohol, and is, therefore, more accessible for the youth, too. I would have given a lot of money as a queer kid to see a queer adult that wasn't having to hide who they were. And now, bless the internet. There's an idea that, yes, Neil Patrick Harris with his husband and his adorable children are living the dream. We're still getting there with our trans role models, but there's still community there. But there's a lot to be said for getting together and going into a space where there are stories [about people] like you easily accessible, and you don't have to order them. Your magazines are there and the covers easily visible, unlike *Curve* and *The Advocate* and *Out* that used to come in black poly mailers. But now at least the *Advocate* comes in a clear mailer. But you couldn't even voluntarily opt out of the packaging at one point. It was always, it has to come in the opaque mailer so no one knows what you're getting, this sense of shame.

1:02:22

It would be nice if we had something like that. Having the library is nice now but it could also use some more donations, so it's not the same dozen lesbian mysteries and things like that. Copies of the *Gay Kama Sutra*, three copies of *And the Band Played On*, that sort of thing. Because there's more out there and there's even more out there for young adults, even for middle grade readers. I loved the *Bunnacula* books when I was growing up—the Vampire bunny who would suck your vegetables dry. But it wasn't until I was an adult that I found out that James Howe who had written those books that I loved so much was gay. And then he wrote some books that have a gay middle school protagonist whose best friend is running for student council, and “Hey, these are kids, just like us, who are going through their lives.” David Levithan is there, and his books are somewhat fantastical because these kids are queer and they're living in small towns in the middle of America but it's an absolute non-issue. And you're like, this is utopia and it's absolutely unrealistic but I love it, because it gives me the chance to turn my brain off and just be like, “Hey there's someone in this story who's like me,” as opposed to the dead lesbian trope. It's like yes, you can show these women having a relationship together, but one of them has to die and/or go evil. [laughter] That's the way things used to be. It's like you saw Willow and Tara have their heartfelt reunion, and then the morning after they reconcile, “oh! Tara's dead now.” It's like, why? Even the movies used to do the same sorts of things, it's like, “Alright, you can show this but here's the caveat.”

1:04:43

SH: Well thank you so much for your time. I actually really enjoyed this. It was really nice meeting you and hearing about Martinsville, because I don't get to hear a whole lot about that. So, this is Sebastian Harlow signing off.

[END]