

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

**Interview with Ashley Rhame
February 23, 2020**

Interviewer: Julian Edwards

Narrator: Ashley Rhame

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Location: Fintel Library, Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia

Transcribed by: Julian Edwards, Saja Alexander, and Sophia Morales

Duration: 66:45

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00:00

JE: Hello, my name is Julian Edwards. Today is February 23rd, 2020, and I am interviewing Ashley Rhame at Fintel Library for the Oral History Project for Dr. Rosenthal's LGBTQ+ Storytelling class at Roanoke College. So, first off I just want to start by asking you like early life questions such as where did you grow up and how did you like it there?

00:25

AR: I grew up in Roanoke. I was here born and raised. Roanoke, Virginia. I grew up in the Northwest area of Roanoke. I know y'all are here for college and things like that but off of Hershburger [Road], Lafayette [Boulevard], maybe a little behind if we're coming toward the mall [Valley View mall] behind the mall area and things like that. So, I grew up there. I enjoyed growing up in the Northwest neighborhood, it was kinda all I knew growing up. I thought Roanoke was just all of that. We would venture out to Salem and Vinton, and things like that, but Roanoke was, that inner city was kinda all I knew growing up. We—down from riding bicycles, to skating up and down the street, to basketball games—it all happened. I lived on Coveland Drive.

01:12

JE: So you like sports growing up?

01:13

AR: I like sports growing up. I was a sports girl before anything growing up. I think I grew up with a family of girls...mostly, but my dad, he was into sports. He was [into] basketball... a lot of guys on my streets and things like that that I would just kinda, I wanted to do what they were doing. I wanted to play basketball.

01:37

JE: Tell me more about your family demographic, how was that?

01:41

AR: Family? Ah, okay. What do you mean family demographic?

01:43

JE: I say... pretty much what did y'all do for fun... Yeah, what did you do for fun, let's start with that.

01:49

AR: Yeah.. what did we do for fun? My family... My mom's from New Jersey. My mom is from New Jersey so we would travel back and forth to New Jersey a lot, so we did do a little traveling growing up. We spent every Florida... [laughter]—I mean, every Florida, I wish—every summer going to Florida and we would go to Disney World, but things like that were big trips and things like that we did for fun. But around town for awhile. my mom she was heavily into the church so we went to, we went to church Sundays, Wednesdays, and any other days in between that she felt that she needed to be in church and that she had to serve. Ah, lets see... My sister, we would run off to the movies and things like that a lot of times, we visited... one of

the things I really remember is with growing up in a close knit community, I guess you could say, everybody knew each other on the block, so if Toya down the street was getting in trouble for something, pretty much we were getting in trouble for something too because we had everything to do with it. So it was everybody's parents could correct us and things like that. So it was different, but it was all I knew.

03:07

JE: Okay, so in terms of like your sexuality, were they accepting when you came out?

03:11

AR: Mmm... No, I don't believe personally they would have been accepting of my sexuality. It wasn't something that was necessarily talked about in our communities. I knew people, choir directors and people like that who in the community were gay and in the church, but we never really discussed that. It was just something that we didn't really talk about. So I knew that when I had an attraction to women, I just knew that that wasn't something that was going to be easy to bring up. It wasn't just something I could say over dinner, or anything like that. It was something that took a lot of thought, and just feeling out how family members really felt about different things, but as I have grown up, they have become more accepting and I think as time has changed... And a lot more, I guess, people are willing to be more open. I guess you can say. And that confidence, I guess.... [amid that,] they have become more accepting, I guess. In certain ways [*laughter*].

04:17

JE: Okay. Did you verbally express these feelings to your family or did they find out on their own or how did this.. How did it go about?

04:24

AR: ...Let's see. I verbally expressed it to my mother, but it was also at a time where I felt like I didn't have a choice. It was a lot going on with a best friend of mine and they wanted to... the family wanted to know what was going on and it was just like okay, well, [you] want to know this was going on... We're going to spell it out, and my mom, after that story kind of came out of what me and my best friend had kind of fell out over, we were fighting. It was mostly I didn't say I had a girlfriend or something like that.... Two people wanting to make more out of a friendship than it really should be, I guess you can say. And I think that was the early stages of not really knowing who to talk to or who to express these feelings to. So I guess if that answers it little bit, that answers it a little bit, but they... they, after that I will say, it was refreshing to come out, to not have to hold that secret in anymore. But after that it was also my mom she was heavily into the church and I received a lot of letters that were written from her, and books—from Joyce Meyer to T.D. Jakes and things like that.¹ And I'm just like, "I don't need a book."

¹ Joyce Meyer and T.D. Jakes are both prominent Christian self-help authors.

05:43

JE: Yes. How do you say you responded to like getting these letters, and these books, and everything?

05:46

AR: I was very passive. I didn't feel like that I could really approach or say anything to my mom about like, that I don't think that this is a phase, you know, or this is not something you grow out of, or that needs to be prayed out of. I don't think I had the confidence then to say that or even that I knew to say that or even that... I think it was also, it was just something that I knew that was in me, this attraction was in me. I enjoyed it. I was just like, it wasn't something that I was afraid of. I didn't really know how to defend that. I didn't have anything to support it. I didn't have any really experience with anybody else who had really been through it. For me personally to say, "Hey, can you help me with this?" or "How can I navigate this?" It was kind of just something that I internalized. I guess you could say that I kept it with me, and it was like, "Oh, yeah. This is who I..." almost like creating another personality. This is who I am with my mother. She thinks I am this way. And that was kind of detrimental as well because you start to look like for another person when that's not truly who you are. You have to be another person, and secret, and hide, and so always in a sense of feel like I'm continuously coming out of the closet, if that makes sense.

07:05

JE: So do you think the people in your family tried to understand like who you were becoming or who you were?

07:10

AR: I think that as I become more confident and they see that this isn't a phase, I think that they firsthand can, I guess, identify or be more empathetic or sympathetic I guess you could say, to be more open minded to who I am and how I live my life. But I will say that over the years that they have been more accepting. My mom, we have way better conversations. She doesn't think I just like anybody who walks by [*laughter*]... it's a lot of fun. But it's also hard. Some things I don't want to break down and talk to my mom about are just.., I'm just like, "Just, it is what it is." And I say that just because I want to be respectful of a sense that because I am who I am doesn't mean that what you believe isn't true to you. But so, I guess we tried not to cross those boundaries and be respectful of each other. I'm not trying to persuade her that this is right for her, but it's right for me. And if her beliefs tell her differently, then that's fine. That's the way you want to believe. But I've learned to believe differently.

08:27

JE: Being open minded...

08:28

AR: Yeah.

08:30

JE: You talked about being in a religious family, how did that play a role in your upbringing?

08:34

AR: Well, actually, I remember getting into church maybe at around 11 or 12 [years old]. I remember... my dad's not heavily into the church. My mom and my dad aren't married. They were together for twenty years, never married. We lived with my mom, but we always knew who my dad was. He was a great provider. We never wanted for anything. I had two great parents who took care of me. We just didn't live together or anything like that. So my dad, he was raised... his mom married a pastor. So he was raised mostly as a pastor's kid in the church and things like that. And my mom, she was raised, as well, not a pastor's kid, but her mom was heavily into the church. And for a while, we didn't go to church. That wasn't a regular thing until like I said, till about I was 12 years old, 11 or 12 years old around that time. So before then, we did what we wanted to do. It was Friday nights at the skating rink, Saturday nights at the skating rink, seven to seven, doing those type of things. And so, it changed our whole lifestyles. We didn't... My sister and I, we didn't know what to do. We didn't have to get up for church on Sunday, to be there at 10 o'clock in the morning and we have a whole house full of people... for a while my cousins live with us from Jersey. So that was... it was different, but I accepted it. I enjoyed the fellowship of church. I enjoyed the praise and worship of church. I still think that's even one of my center places of where I find peace and just how music can penetrate you and, you know, heal you and music as a gift. So, I will say it definitely sticks with me in a lot of ways and I have to unlearn a lot of things that I learned in the church because it doesn't apply to everyone else out there and to be respectful of how they live their lives and the people that they are. But I will say it definitely shaped me even into being confident, and into coming out. One of my friends asked me recently, do people see me as someone, you know, a Christian, someone who goes to church and things like that? I'm saying, I think they do, but I don't know why it has to be separate. I guess I can be gay. I can date women. I can go to church. I can do this that. So that's hard here in Roanoke I will say, because it's... I accept it but not all people in my community—black people in my community—accept me into the church, so I don't always feel comfortable going to church now. But I will say that it is a big part of my life. It changed at a critical time, the 18 or so minimal years of my life. So yes, I do think it definitely changed.

11:33

JE: So, I want to talk to you about school. So, elementary school, how'd that go? Like, when did you feel like you were, pretty much... how do I say this?... were attracted to the same gender?

11:47

AR: Ah, I guess it was in elementary school. I want to say... I didn't necessarily have it in my mind in elementary school. I knew personally.... I think it's a funny story... I knew personally around that initial step out of elementary school. That initial step out of elementary school, it was definitely that first step into middle school. I dated a guy. He was great. We both played sports and things like that. But for me, it was... I was attracted to his mother. And it was every time she answered the phone, or I knew that [when] we celebrated and exchanged gifts and things like that, it was the fact that I knew she was picking it out. Down to I liked her car. It was more of a sense, hmm, like "Ashley, you, this may be a little more than just, oh, I just like this person" or "I want to be friends with this person." So for me it was knowing that... I was friends with this person here, but I was heavily attracted to his mother and as I went on in different areas in my life, I think I realized how I was attracted to women. And most like, it was... I think my sister's cheerleading coach who was a little older and established and that was what she wanted to do in life. I don't want to say it was women who were doing things, but it was woman... that's where I was inspired, or I guess I felt the most inspired around. So, I feel like that was for me in middle school. And I didn't necessarily know what to do with that. I just continued to date him. This is what you were supposed to do. I didn't know any of my friends that I could tell that "hey, I think I like his mother," or there wasn't any, I guess, girls who were in my school that I necessarily liked. So I didn't really know how to explain to people, this is what's going on with me. And I just thought people thought I would be crazy like, "Oh, this girl Ashley is crazy, like don't talk to her." So that's how it was for me. I think after I learned to fully accept that, it took a while. It took all throughout mostly high school. I dated my first girlfriend, probably my 11th grade year. But like I said, I knew back from sixth grade that this is what I wanted to do. So, I believe in middle school, it was a girl, Tempus, and she was out in the open, but I didn't know how to be that way. I kind of envied her in a sense, and, you know, she would come and talk to me and sometimes I didn't know how to talk to her because I'm like, I'm not trying to shy away from you. But I'm also, don't know how to open up. I don't know how to share this with you. And, and also I know of the backlash of... I knew people who talked about her, as well. I knew people who just, you know, were friends with her, but would, you know, laugh about it in the background. So that kind of stopped me as well. Now, I can like, you know, "thank you Tempus," like you were a light at that time. I didn't know you would be but yeah, so that was even kind of hard for me. I knew. I knew it wasn't easy on her end. She was out and she was open about it. And I knew what other people said in the background. And I knew also, I guess, like I said, in the black church, in the black community, the things that weren't said just for no reason I guess you can say.

15:21

JE: Tell me more about your peers' responses to how you feel.

15:24

AR: One of my friends, when I was in 11th grade, she asked... she realized I was hanging out with someone a lot more. I remember my friend Natasha, and she realized that I was hanging out with this girl Ashley a lot more, and she asked me and she came up to me and she asked me "hey, are you dating Ashley?" and I was just like "No, we weren't dating. We were actually just friends." But that kind of gave me... I did actually tell her well I'm dating someone from another school and that they are a girl. So for me that was like the first time of like, she asked. I'm gonna just see how it goes out there and she was just like "alright, I just thought y'all spend a lot of time together. Like I thought I just thought I would ask," and I feel like that really helped me a lot. One of my best friends, Mishika, who lived right beside me. She's just like, "Oh, yeah, I was just waiting for you to tell me" or "waiting for you to feel comfortable" and things like that. So a lot of my friends, they responded well, but I think it was something that I didn't know how to fully say. So I kind of just kind of let them find out about it and if they were okay with it, that was fine, and I had nobody never talk to me again, per se. But it wasn't something that I felt comfortable with fully coming out and saying. I lived in Georgia for a little while and that was also kind of easier for me. I left my senior year of high school and so I was able to be just, be a new person in Georgia and that was kind of helpful. I didn't know anybody so I could identify how I wanted to with nobody would necessarily question it, or know my background, that I dated Dominic in six [and] seventh grade, you know [*laughter*]. Nobody would know that. So, that kind of made it, that made it a lot easier. A lot of seeing a lot more brown faces who looked like me in the community, living in Atlanta, things like that. That kind of helped with it. But I will say my peers were pretty open. I think not all of them kind of knew what to say or what I was going through. But I think as times have changed, I think that they have become more accepting and knowing that, you know, everybody lives the life the way that they want a mother's love and that it doesn't matter who you go to bed with or spend your time with, that we're friends, and that's what matters the most to me... we're friends and that was kind of what got me through a lot.

17:55

JE: So you feel like people were just happy that you were happy, rather than...

17:57

AR: Happy that I'm happy. And I think it's mostly of getting over that fear or that notion of even thinking that people were still so homophobic or close minded, and I know that is true and very open in the world, but it is slowly progressing and opening up in the black community and in family. And the biggest part is that somehow learning or finding a way to talk about it. Until I was really able to tell my mom like, that it really hurt my feelings, that it wasn't fully true, and here we are ten years later, and I still have those letters in my head. So, being able to talk about it and just being able to understand that everything changes. We evolve, and we may not have all the right answers now, or know, but it's about being in good spaces with each other and being able to respect how one another lives their life.

18:57

JE: Yeah. So you told me how your mother responded to it, so can you tell me how your father responded to it?

19:01

AR: Ah, my father... I don't want to say... I don't know if I really came out to my father. I know he knows. I think he maybe asked around to my sister or a couple of my cousins and they told [him] and they just like, you know, "it's something you need to talk to Ashley about." I think that it's kind of something within our relationship that I think it's kind of just unspoken, that we haven't really had to discuss it and that's kind of helpful for me as well. He's met every one of my girlfriends, he's celebrated every one of my birthdays with them and things like that. He's more respectful than my mom would be in most situations, in most situations with things. So I don't think it's necessarily something I had to come out and tell him. I think it's something that we just kind of understood about... he understood about me, and he accepted it about me, and I think that's been a big helping and stepping stone with that, and especially as I grow up and I realized that I'm a lot more like my dad than I thought I was, looks wise, personality wise, things like that, that we have a lot of common things. And I think that... I lived with him for a long while with just me and him and I think being able to spend that time with one another, it just ... it kind of became a question or something that didn't really need to be discussed. He doesn't ask me when I'm having kids or when I'm getting married, or when I'm going to meet the right guy or he's never questioned when I went on a date with a guy or when I went on a date with the girl. I'm just like, "yeah, I'll be back later." He's just always been open and he was like, "okay, alright see you later. Have fun. Let me know if you need anything." So I think that part with my dad is... it was a lot easier than my mother's response and I feel that even still my mother carries a response even ten years later. She's not as friendly to my girlfriend and I know why. Because she doesn't respect my... or necessarily respect or accept the way I live my life. She thinks what I'm doing is wrong and she can't help but project that. But also, she's not a perfect person... she, in her beliefs, she's afraid for me in a sense and so in a sense, I can respect that. I can understand that. But also we have to talk about like "no, mom..." We're still going to be respectful. We're still gonna be polite. We're still going to be courteous because even beliefs or not we treat everybody with kindness.

21:48

JE: Okay, so you think your dad's kinda before his time pretty much.

21:51

AR: Yeah, before his time. Definitely I would say before his time. He's just chill, he's easy going, nothing really gets to him and I feel like [he's] just more understanding. He's more open. He's not caught up with the ways of life or society or the way that we should live our lives. And

he's just kind of his own man and wants to do his own thing. He's retired and he likes to watch his sports, have a drink every now and then, and exercise. And that makes him happy. So I think that chillness, that levelness of him, has helped me with coming out, or being out with him. Cause he knows. It's just not something that we have had to verbally say.

22:39

JE: He lets you do you pretty much.

22:40

AR: Yeah.

22:43

JE: Going back to when you moved to Atlanta. That was pretty much a way for you to reinvent yourself, start over again.

22:47

AR: Yes.

22:48

JE: How'd that feel, not being in that social island that you were in in high school?

22:52

AR: It was freeing. Even in the sense of high school, of being here in Roanoke, small town, I think it still can be cliquish, just anywhere. Still wanting to fit in in certain crowds. [In Atlanta,] I could really choose where I wanted to go, I could really sit back and look at, you know, the lunch room and be like "okay, this is who I would like to share my time with." And I was able to share my time with a lot of people. I didn't necessarily know everybody in certain areas or feel like I had to be a part of certain situations because I lived here, or I grew up in this neighborhood, or I identify this way, even. So it was freeing. I met so many different people, so many different nationalities, it was definitely different from growing up and going to [William] Fleming [High School] and actually I graduated from South Gwinnett [High School] in Georgia. It was different. I guess you could say it was definitely different going to a different school, especially coming in on your senior year. That was very hard, meeting people, but I did have... I moved with one of my best friends so she kind of introduced me to people. But with really being able to reinvent myself it was, I think... my best friend I didn't necessarily like the name of "bisexual barbie" but that's kinda how she introduced me sometimes, but it gave me kinda range to see how people would respond to it, and I was able to be my own person. I didn't have to sugar coat anything. I didn't have to look over my shoulder and see if someone from 5th grade was seeing me kiss this girl and go back and tell everybody about it. So I will say it was freeing and it

definitely boosted my confidence. Gave me a boost in confidence. Living in Atlanta definitely helped me be more out and open here, in Roanoke, I guess you could say, sure.

25:05

JE: That's good. So, you going out, what was your first social gathering, having fun on the weekends, doing your thing? What do you usually do?

25:12

AR: Okay, so, I host a poetry show called The Speakeasy on 11th Street and we actually just had a show on Friday night. It was called "Black as I Am" and we shared Black stories. On 11th Street right in the Melrose neighborhood where my dad lived, still in a Northwest neighborhood, but right where my dad lived, and where I spent a lot of time. So I like poetry shows. I like anything with lounges and music. I'm not too much of a party person, so you won't find me at a club. I'm usually asleep by 11 [*laughter*]. So I'm not a big drinker or anything like that, so I really like spaces where we can actually talk, fellowship, and actually share a space. It could be games, it could be drinks there, I'll have a drink. I just don't drink excessively. I like close knit gatherings. I love family and my family is kinda huge. We celebrate birthdays a lot, so that's once a month, we'll be out at a restaurant, about 25 of us. So that's something we do for family. But as for just with myself, with social gatherings, it's mostly poetry shows, live music. I'm always on one of the campuses at a poetry reading or when a lecture comes, things like that. I like things like that. Anything that's stimulating. Not too many parties, but with social gatherings just something chill and relaxing for me, where we can actually conversate, have some records playing in the back or something like that. I just like a chill atmosphere. Does that make sense?

27:03

JE: Yeah, that makes perfect sense to me. So, how would you say the Speakeasy and poetry and things like this define who you are?

27:09

AR: I believe, with doing this work, I am becoming everything I imagine Ashley could be, growing up. I guess in my own little head I had this picture painted of who Ashley was, who the real Ashley was, and not who I had to show to people and things like that. So, with actually breaking out and getting into poetry and things like that, it makes me feel like I'm becoming the person that I truly desire to be. And I think that definitely matters because, not even just because of my sexuality and how I choose to identify, but just work and everything in life right now that takes the things that we are truly passionate about and happy for away from us, I think that we just really have to focus on the things that matter.

28:08

JE: So, how do you think this poetry affects others and do you use it to affect others?

28:12

AR: I use it to affect others but also because... y'all are here in Roanoke, there's not too much to do, outside of either going to a club or going to a bar downtown and things like that. I want it to create space for other creators. I want it to create space for other people who didn't necessarily want to go to the club. I like the hookah lounge, I'll go there, but even that turns into a little club after 11 o'clock or so, it's a little too crowded. So I think that, I wanted to create a safe space where people can come out and have good fun. And what I like about the Speakeasy is, I'm 29... well, this time we had it 21 and up for obvious reasons, but we'll have everyone, of every age group in there, from grandma, to uncle, to sister, to little brother, to little cousin, and I have loved that the most about it. That we can get so many people and that we can be on one chord and one page and that there's no drama, that there's no issues, and that we can still relate and share our stories with one another. There's no age gap there, even though we're all different ages, there's no age gap there. I like that. I like that we get to do it on 11th Street. I actually do it at a... I collaborate with Xavier Duckett, whose with The Humble Hustle [Company], but in the space he's in that used to be a video shop and my family used to own it, so I love even being in that space there. It's so significant to me, to actually be there and to be able to bring Black events, Black stories, and things back to Roanoke. Especially in Roanoke. I don't know how much you know about the Gainsboro area and things like that. It's not too far from the Gainsboro area, right in Melrose, but that was a thriving community. It was over... I don't want to say the wrong number, but I'll say 60, I think it's 70... over 70 Black-owned businesses there. They had a club, they had an ice cream parlor, they had disco spots, they had TV shops, they had every... you know, the [Roanoke] *Tribune*, and things like that. So, I love downtown and things like that, but there were so many other communities that were thriving and those buildings are still there. So why not still use them? Why not still reach out to those communities, especially those communities where people just drive around to get downtown, but people live there, people enjoy their lives there. And so my goal is to... even though we are on 11th Street and a lot of people are coming from Northwest or Cave Spring or wherever they may be coming from, because they have heard of the event. I want people on 11th Street or in Melrose to be able to walk down the street or to drive by and be like "you know, what's going on over there?" And they show up next time, and they'll be able to just "oh, we'll I'm going down on 11th Street and I'm able to just walk out of my house and trickle on down the block," and here we are having live music, jazz, and poetry, and storytelling going on. And I think after the show it even went into a cypher, so I think it, it fills me, the community in so many different ways. Honestly, I just love that I know so many artists in this community to be able to put it on and to show people that there's great things going on in Roanoke, with people who are Black and Brown.

31:53

JE: So you feel like they were really welcoming to you when you first started...

31:57

AR: Yes, very welcoming. I will say, I started with the Speakeasy on 11th, it was a collaboration thing. I kind of went to, with Xavier Duckett, we traveled up to Norfolk and we went to an art show. All types of arts, down to culinary arts, body paint, live canvas painting while we were there and we were like, you know this would be really dope to bring back to our city, like we have... I've been a poet for a few years. I've met a couple of artists. I started out with Soul Sessions, it's a poetry group downtown hosted by Harvest Blaque and they're every other Wednesday. I started out there, so I was able to meet and connect with different people. The only different thing for me was I knew that we could reach the Black community. And I felt like nobody wanted to reach the Black community... Not saying that nobody wanted to reach the Black community, but nobody wanted to say "I want to have Black events." I want to have Black events in the Black neighborhood, and I want everybody to feel like they can come. I want everybody... I want a white person from Cave Springs or the Grandin area to come over to Melrose where it's talked less about, I guess, in certain areas, because of different things that are going on in the community. I want them to feel comfortable coming over here and hearing these stories. And even eventually sharing their own because it all matters. It all ties in and I think creating that space to see that actually come to life, it's been dope, it's been amazing.

33:32

JE: That's fantastic. Was there a spotlight on you for being an African American while also being part of the LGBTQ community when you started doing all this?

33:42

AR: Um...

33:44

JE: Are you like a beacon? Do you feel like a beacon for those who feel underrepresented?

33:47

AR: At times. At times, I can feel like a beacon... and I also felt like I, at one point, I had to realise that I just kinda had to embrace it. But I also felt like I had to separate it. I could be a poet here, but I couldn't identify, I think, personally, I didn't feel like that I could identify on the LGBTQ spectrum as well, in Roanoke, in this community, where my whole family lives. Where this is just everything that I have known. So I do think for a while that there was a spotlight on me. But I think, I kinda thought, why not take advantage of it. Why not really share my stories, because the LGBT community, especially in the Black community, it's slim to none. I don't know anywhere where we can necessarily feel safe and... we're working on that. We're working on getting things together, where we can have dinners and things like that, and we can work on things and talk about and share our stories. But yes, I felt like for a while I felt like I had to be a beacon, but also I didn't feel... I personally felt like I had to separate it. Then, I think that's way

too much for my anxiety and just my life in general. Even in the sense I was tired of separating myself. I was tired of having to be one way here and one way there. So, I think with being able to just embrace it... I take steps everyday, it's a process, I take steps everyday. It was just last Tuesday, I was doing a reading at the Franklin County library and I had to, my mom was there, and I'm looking around and it's just like, "oh, am I gonna do this poem?" Or am I gonna save it? And if I were to save it, it would've been because my mom was there. And I know she doesn't necessarily agree with how I believe and I don't know if I can say these things in front of her. But I did the poem anyway and that was even my first step of being able to embrace myself and my mom, she didn't say anything, she said I did a great job and I know she may have still felt somehow, but just there in the moment she respected me as a poet and for the person that I was. And that was helpful. So it's always a process, but I do at times feel like I have had to be that beacon. But, I hope that more people step up. I hope that me being able to share my story and how I grew up will inspire somebody else to share theirs because we all need to know. There's too many of us. I know you, I see you around town, so I know that there's a story there. In time... but I believe that as we tell our stories that it will be better for the young girls, or young people coming behind us. To be able to be open about who they are as people.

36:53

JE: That's fantastic. And also you just like, it's like a way of gaining respect from those who aren't really aware of what you go through. So, can you tell me things like, relative to other people who are doing interviews you're like one of the youngest people here, so could you tell us more about how the internet played a role in, pretty much, your life.

37:13

AR: The internet still plays a major role. I remember our first computer, we ran to the store, I remember it was over where the Advanced Auto is now, I think it was called Circuit City. We ran over to Circuit City, it was still dial up. I didn't know the internet was going to open us up the way it did there, but it also created a space where people could be other people. People could really say how they were truly feeling without being aware of other people's situations or the full stories on the other side. So I think the internet, for me, I won't say it was... it wasn't as helpful as I would like for it to be. Especially now in 2020, it's a great tool because we're able to have so many interviews, we're able to read so many different articles and that has opened me up. That was definitely... with the internet, social media. I love being able to read someone else's story, have their whole background and things like that. So I do like it in that instance, but I also think that it's a horrible place for everyone to fully speak their minds. And I think that we forget that, we get behind a computer and we forget that we're actually people. That, you know, no, words do hurt, sticks and stone, [but] no, words do hurt and that the biggest thing, we stick with the things that people say to us. Whether it was true or not, with their tone, with the words they chose, and how they said it, so I think that the internet is not, wasn't the best way for us, for people, to fully express themselves. Just with the backlash that you didn't know was possible or

coming, I guess you could say. But, now I think that it creates a platform, and I still think that, with the platform it creates, I think that it's up to us to create that safe space for it. And I think that the internet is helpful. I think that it hasn't always you know, gave us, you know positivity and things like that, but that's with everything, and we have to take the good with the bad. But I do think, in the long run, especially with the internet and the age we are in now, that the internet is everything. That's how we share our stories, that's how we go to do research and things like that, like how we're doing this interview now, we're going to be able to keep this, we're gonna because of the internet, that it's always going to be around. And I think that's what matters, because so much of our history is erased with moves, with fires, with things that just magically happen. I think the internet is going to keep the stories that matter at the forefront. You're not going to be able to forget about it. You're just going to be able to type into the search bar and you're going to be able to look it up and read it and be inspired by it. So it's had its downfalls and it definitely has caused a lot of tragedy in the LGBTQ community, but I do think that we still have the right and the access to turn that around and make it work for our good as well. So it didn't work necessarily in one area but it's gonna work in another and even though we are being attacked in certain ways we're gonna attack back with the same vices that they use.

41:15

JE: Yeah, often times you see groups of people come into hate another group that's trying to succeed. Do you think that is more common now than it was before?

41:23

AR: No. I don't think it's more common now than it was before. I think that we just have phones and social media to actually record it and that I guess, in a sense, that sadly because it is recorded that more people will believe it in a sense, but I definitely think that it's not more... not more now. I will say it's... all hate crimes and things like that definitely has always been happening it's just that the internet, phones, and social media it makes it very hard to sweep it under the rug especially when it's out there before you can create a story behind the news. You have to read between the lines and things, so I think that definitely not more, it's just we were able to see it more.

42:23

JE: True. About hate crimes, have you ever experienced any sort of like discrimination, hate-based, off either like your race or your sexuality or things like that, either like I said from the internet or anything else or even school anything...?

42:38

AR: With sexuality, I wanna say not that I was aware of at the time. I wanna say not that I was aware of at the time. But with... let's see, with my race I will say the first time I realized I was black was after a lot of things after Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner and things like that going

on... But for me, it was I was rounding the corner and a cop came out of a bank and in that moment I just immediately knew who I was. I immediately knew that I was black. He didn't do anything to me. He didn't say anything to me, but I just automatically knew. But besides for you know being called a "nigger" in traffic, I want to say it's hard for me because I've always, to identify with or feel like that I had been discriminated against or things like that, I don't wanna definitely say I have when I didn't, but I want to say it was hard for me to identify because I've always just loved anybody, and in certain instances I've had to, you know, "they didn't have my best interest at heart," but I didn't see it that way at first. And I don't want to say it was because I went to a mixed congregation church. I went to Valley Word Ministries growing up, but I knew good white people. I knew, you know, I know good people and things like that in general. So it was hard for... I will say I didn't necessarily have to go out and face racism and things like that at the forefront until I was of age, of 18 or older, and I think the biggest thing now is even living in Southwest Virginia, working in Southwest Virginia, and working even at times working for the government, and how they, I guess, treat our children or people of color differently. And I do know that for sure, because I have worked in different organizations—the same organization just at different locations—and it differs depending on the zip code and how I handle everything. And that's one of the reasons why I stepped away from the city and the government because it's, it's hard to know that's how it's going down and still to be there. So I guess you can say in those instances that explains.

45:25

JE: I understand. Pretty much, do you think we're getting better when it comes to acceptance of other people's cultures, identity, and everything, since when you were younger?

45:40

AR: I believe we are getting better. I believe we are getting better. And I will say that for me personally, just from stepping outside of black communities and black culture, that it's okay to experience, and it's okay to experience and learn of other cultures. And, I think so. I think we're getting better, where we're reading more books, we're traveling more, we're getting out in nature more, and things like that. So I definitely think we are doing better. We have a lot of ways to go, and as we all have work to do, and then our work in our progress, but I do think that we are getting better. And I think that, but I also think it's... if we're not getting better it's, I believe... If we're not getting better as a whole, I think that we'll have to even break it down into individual case by case because everything starts with one person, that our destiny in this journey is all connected into one another. So my being good to the world is helping your being good to the world. So I believe that it's an individual case by case but as a people we are getting back to ourselves and our own thoughts. And we're getting better, so...

47:05

JE: Do you believe that you still have somethings to learn?

47:07

AR: Yes. I have so many things to learn, even a lot within the LGBT communities and the spectrum and things like that, I will say because I didn't learn a lot of the terms or even anything until I went to college myself. So I had to get out of my community to even realize how other people were addressing things and how that this, you know, is just, it's just different and other places that you know, everybody doesn't live in small Southwest Virginia, in the small town in Roanoke. So definitely, I'm learning every day. I'm learning learning every day. It's always a process. And I think that as I even grow as a person and identify with myself, it's changing. And I have to do my own research. So I have to go talk to people that I have to... you know, get into therapy to talk about it, to actually process what it is because we can feel it on the forefront. But I think as we said in the black community, we don't talk about a lot of things so we actually talk about it, not internalize it per se, but actually talk about it, and with being able to talk about it we're able to learn and move on from that and get over the next step, because if we are... if we can't move forward we're just gonna stay backwards.

48:29

JE: So, do you believe like your poetry works as a way of like not internalizing some of these issues that people often do? I guess, an outlet?

48:34

AR: Yes [*laughter*]. Yes. My poetry is definitely an outlet. I don't know where I would be without it. Definitely with speaking my truth, we we did a "Love is Love" event and even with creating spaces like that it was, I knew certain questions would be for me at this event, but I knew that we would have to answer questions, and it felt good to identify. It felt good to be open, and exactly who I was and say how, you know, love is different for different people in the community, that I think about taking my girlfriend's hand downtown a little more than someone else may, but so yes. I think that may answer the question.

49:30

JE: Yeah, it's all good. That works for me. Okay, so let's talk about like significant events that occurred like during your upbringing. So, gay marriage legalized, how did that play a role in your life?

49:39

AR: You know, it was for me, honestly, it wasn't a huge deal for me. Because, like I said, it was something in our community that we didn't really talk about. So it was something that I, in a sense, [was] just in a condition to think that we wouldn't get that far in the first place. Or even to think that for me, with the way I was raised and my religious beliefs, that even though that this is, you know, gay marriage and being legalized and everything and things like that, I didn't necessarily feel like that it was something still that I could do anyway. So it didn't. To me, it

didn't apply to me. Now, I think I'm becoming more open into it and as I am approaching three years in a partnership, and we... in just thinking about those type of things. And I think so until now, it really hasn't really played a part in my life. I guess it took time to fully accept myself and to separate myself from my religious beliefs and take a more spiritual approach. So, excited for it. I was excited for it, supported all my other friends, my friends were happy and things like that, and a lot of people immediately started getting married. Things like that. But for me, it was something that I see them, [I'm] like, "Oh, that's dope. That's great." That's a great strive for history and great steps moving forward. But where I was at the time, it still just wasn't something that I felt like that I could do.

51:19

JE: Yeah, so less politics more personal feelings?

51:21

AR: Yes. It was more of a personal thing.

51:26

JE: So, a lot of people often talk about assimilation to like, white society or a heteronormative society. How do you fit into that? Do you feel like you went against the norm at certain points or do you feel like you had to assimilate or conform to be more accepted?

51:40

AR: Yeah. I feel like in ways I had to perform to be more accepted, that I guess in the back of your mind that you have to make up for the things that you know that they aren't going to like about you, or things that they consider to be flaws. So that almost in a sense that I had to project more of myself and show a little bit less of this. So yes, I feel like in ways to adapt, bend, squirm wherever you could fit in to get there. So yes, I do feel like that in certain ways that I had adapt to conform to certain situations.

52:15

JE: do you feel like you had a harder time than other people or do you feel like you had a better time conforming than other people in your community?

52:23

AR: I think I had an easier time performing. I'm easygoing. Growing up, I always kind of cared what other people thought and things like that. So, it was easy to kind of just fall into that line and do what was needed to do to fit in and be safe in a sense.

52:44

JE: Okay, that's good. So, you feel that you and your peers are more open with who you truly are now than who you were maybe like in the past?

52:53

AR: Yes, um, I will say I had to also find my own peers, find new peers, then necessarily, I guess you can say, people that I grew up going to high school with and things like that. My partner... a year after she graduated in 2010. So we were kind of in the same area and things like that. But tell me the question again, I'm sorry [*laughter*].

53:24

JE: What did I ask?

53:24

AR: Were our peers more open?

53:25

JE: Oh yeah were your peers more open?

53:27

AR: So yeah, in certain areas. In certain areas. I will say that we are able to be more open. I wish my peers that I grew up with. I wish I could say... I guess, I wish we had the space together to fully be open together. I feel like in the sense that the peers that I grew up with, we're kind of just living our different lives and we're doing our own thing. I don't know much about their journeys. I know, you know, possibly who they're dating and things like that. But we don't have that journey together. So with peers that I met in Georgia and beyond high school, college and things like that, yeah, we're more open, more open minded to different things. And we're definitely more open with each other. I definitely would do more with them. But it is my hope to have a more open community within the black community of Roanoke. Because, like I said, I know who you are. I know you are. I believe that we should get together. And I think that it will be... I think it'll be healing for all of us that we need to know the history here, up here in Roanoke, and how we have become who we are as people, and it matters.

54:48

JE: True. We have a lot more to learn.

54:49

AR: Yeah. So much to learn.

54:51

JE: Yeah. You talk about being a romantic relationship. So, how do you feel about that? How happy are you from where you were?

54:58

AR: I'm happy in my relationship. We're at our three year mark. We've had our ups and downs and especially in Roanoke. We always search for more open community, more friends, more people to actually hang out with. I will say that's our only downfall of Roanoke, what we really want of events and things to do, and more LGBTQ couples or inclusive people who would be more open to that, I guess you can say. But yeah, we've been good. The last three years. Her name is Alexis. We plan to continue to do more events here and create more space in Roanoke for our people, our kind, and to make it a safe space and to just continue to actually bring the arts and culture into the community that we would desperately move to another place for. We want that here. We want to be able to have that at home. I love other places but it's nothing like home so yeah. That's where we are. That's where we are.

56:15

JE: Do you feel like your relationship kind of strengthens your poetry voice?

56:18

AR: Definitely. Definitely my poetry voice, even, especially with hosting and events and things like that. I am definitely a poet. Definitely a creative. My partner is definitely organized, responsible, and not that I'm not responsible, but just more level headed and more task oriented, I guess you could say. So we definitely balance each other out there. And, you know, she never misses an event. I don't think she's not heard me speak and it was also pretty cool because when we did meet, I had already been doing poetry in front of her for a couple of years. So, in essence, I kind of felt like she kind of already knew who I was, even if a little bit through my poetry.

57:08

JE: So y'all met through poetry, pretty much?

57:10

AR: We met, we actually met at Soul Sessions. Well, not at Soul Sessions, but she was an audience member at Soul Sessions. I was a poet at Soul Sessions, and we actually live a block away from each other. Where my grandmother, my dad... where my grandmother lived, she grew up a block away from my grandmother all her life. So we've always literally almost been a block away from each other. She was working with Macklyn Mosley with the neighborhood and she was doing their background work on some of their events and organization and stuff like that. And we happened to work an event together. We hit it off. We were cool, and I think she messaged me on Facebook one day and asked me if I knew a poet, Elizabeth Acevedo, and I was just like, "yeah, I've heard a couple of her poems," and she was just like, "you know, she's

gonna be at Longwood [University] and do you wanna go?” And I was just like, “Yeah, sure.” I was like, “I don’t know where Longwood is [*laughter*], but yeah, sure, I’ll go.” And she was like, “cool. I’ll drive,” and I was just like, “all right.” We drove and we had great conversation down. We went to go see Elizabeth Acevedo. And after that we just really became good friends. And I think that was probably like August, September, and then around February, we were talking and we decided that we liked each other a little more than friends and that we have been hanging out and we wanted to make it official. So we did that. And it’s been three years. We love to travel. Definitely adventures, anything. Live music, street art, good food, sweets, we’re there. If you want to travel with us or anything like that, that’s what we do. And if we’re at a beach I wanna be there all day [*laughter*]. Yeah, that’s how we met. Um, so she had been hearing my poetry for a while. And I liked it. I knew that she was into poetry. She had been to open mic events and things like that. And we were kind of really just into... [we’re] different people, but into all of the same things. And we kind of hit it off and it’s working.

59:26

JE: Fantastic. So you say you guys met over content on Facebook? So do you believe like social media is kind of like an outlet or pretty much a good tool to use?

59:39

AR: Yeah, it works [*laughter*]. We would have probably had to wait to another event that we’ve seen each other at. Because we literally didn’t have each other’s numbers. It was easier than having someone play the middleman and say, “Hey, can you get somebody’s number for me?” It worked out and it was honest, genuine, and I think it plays a role. I think it plays a significant role. I know a few people who have got into it with each other right over social media and one of my cousins they live in Florida now, but they just had their...well, I won’t say second child, because it’s a set of twins—they had a little boy and then they had a set of twins and they met off of a Facebook post and it was and then they went in, you know, got into the Messenger and started talking, and I think they were talking for maybe about six months and they decided that they were in love with each other, that they were both heavily in the Christian field and things like that, that they wanted to get married and they’ve been together for about five, six years now. So, and that was just off of six months. So yeah, I think it definitely plays a role. I think that I just... at the “Love is Love” event, Daniel was telling me that he met his wife in Miami and they got each other’s numbers and they accidentally messaged each other or something like that and ended up being on, you know, something on social media, and then actually started talking and they’re married. So yeah, social media, I think you definitely could have a few strange people in your inbox, you know? [*laughter*] And scale those accordingly. Look through those. But yeah, I think that good things can come from social media. I think good things can come from social media. And at the end of the day, it should be connecting us with different things, different people, organizations, political topics, things that are going on. It connects us. So yeah, I believe good things come from social media.

1:01:45

JE: In general, do you think that just social media is a good way of meeting other people in like your community, LGBTQ people, to meet each other forming relationship and go off to form into bigger groups?

1:01:53

AR: Yes, I think it's good. Definitely, I think it's definitely good and I will say personally, for me, I think that there should definitely be a better social media presence because I say, for instance, when I do travel, that's who I go to, I go to people who are LGBTQ-identified, who live in certain neighborhoods, and I want to know what they're doing. So those are the neighborhoods, I want to know I can go there because I know it's safe. Like, I know that I can relax and I know it's gonna be rainbows and stuff everywhere. And not just... even if it doesn't have it. I just, that's what I look for when I travel. When I'm looking for recommendations, you know, different arts or museums or things to visit other places. So, yeah, I definitely think that social media and the LGBTQ spectrum and just in general, around town, social media, yes, I think that would be good for it, definitely, definitely. Definitely to connect us and especially how I was... we were wanting to do dinners and things like that. But just to create another hub another connection, somewhere where we can go comment on each other's posts, share each other's pictures, share our own experiences, and next thing you know, you've both been at the same restaurant five times in a row and just get a table together like enjoy yourself. So yeah, I believe that it plays a great role.

1:03:16

JE: That's good. That's really nice. So, as a poet, do you believe that there are like specific terms that y'all can use that you don't necessarily hear like outside the poetry community?

1:03:29

AR: Me? Terms?

1:03:31

JE: Terms, phrases, lingo, verbiage...

1:03:38

AR: No. Not for me. I don't have any right off. I think poets definitely have a certain aesthetic and also we have a certain aesthetic and... just a certain aesthetic. I don't think that verbiage and anything like that... I know personally, for me, I don't have a particular line right now in my head, but I'll use the line over and over again. So you may hear it in one poem here, you may hear in one poem here. So when I'm kind of inspired by something, I stick with it till I'm not

inspired by it anymore. So, it means three different things in three different poems. So that, for me, that's how I think of myself.

1:04:30

JE: Okay, so final question. What is your goal and dream as an African American person in the LGBTQ community, as a poet, what is your dream for the world? What do you envision the world being like in your in your mind? What do you hope it becomes?

1:04:47

AR: I envision the world being a place where we always have space to reflect, heal, to love people, and for me personally, I would see it as my dream is... And it started off as I didn't know this would be the dream then that it is now.... But I always dreamed of owning a publishing company. And I want to do a publishing company where we hear from people who are black and brown, people of color, LGBTQ, queer people, everyone, but also have it kind of in a snug little bookstore, huge international publishing company, things like that, but where we can actually have a snug little bookstore and we can actually do readings and share experiences right together because even though everything is global and things like that, it's the intimate moments that matter and that will reach the world. We have internet and everything so far. So I think that route is still using the publishing company of Rare Press to create those realistic authentic stories that we truly need in the world today.

1:06:02

JE: We really need stuff like that, too.,

1:06:04

AR: And if we don't write about it, we won't know, so we have to write our history and we have to write the real history. So I want to help facilitate that and create that platform.

1:06:18

JE: Alright. Thank you.

1:06:19

AR: Thank you.

1:06:20

JE: I appreciate you sharing everything you've shared with us. You've really improved the world just by speaking your mind, telling us your story.

1:06:26

AR: Thank you. I appreciate that for having me, for even just inviting me to share my oral history. It's helped me think about so many different things and so much of what I truly still want to learn, so I appreciate you.

1:06:39

JE: Thank you.

1:06:40

AR: Thank you.

[END]