

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

**Interview with Shamaill Ross  
March 23, 2021**

Interviewer: Michelle Ogutu  
Interviewee: Shamaill Ross  
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0:00

MO: Hello. This is Michelle Ogutu interviewing Shamaill Ross. It is March the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. We are currently interviewing through Zencast. This is for the Southwest Virginia [LGBTQ+] Oral History Project. Okay Shamaill, tell us a little bit about yourself.

0:18

SR: I think there's so many things to say, right? I am a 40-year-old Black woman who was raised here in Roanoke, Virginia, but I was born in San Diego, California. My mother was in the Navy, so we did a little travel a little earlier in my life but eventually it led back here to Roanoke where my mother was born and raised. I grew up in the school systems here, so I went to Fairview Elementary, Addison Middle School, and Patrick Henry High School. And then I went to undergrad at Ferrum (College) where I got a degree in political science and social work and I have been employed at All-State for about sixteen years this past Friday.

1:24

MO: Ok, wow very interesting. So, when did you move back to the Roanoke Valley area? I know you mentioned that before.

1:33

SR: Yeah, so after being born in San Diego—and I'd really love to say that that was a very long stay, but I think I was there for three days—my mother came back to Roanoke and was stationed in the Philippines. So, she dropped me here with family after having me and then she was stationed in the Philippines and once she got settled there she sent back for me. So, I was in the Philippines for about 18 months to two years and then we came back to the states and did some short stays in North Carolina and then we came back to Roanoke after my mom went into the reserves and was no longer active duty.

2:14

MO: Okay, that's very interesting. Do you think that the traveling affected who you were as a child and also just growing up in your teens?

2:24

SR: I don't think so because I think I was so little that I don't really remember much of it. There were times where I would really impress my mom because I would ask her certain questions and she'd say, "How did you remember that? You were so small." It's not something that really impacted my life growing up here because we seemed very stationary for a very long time.

2:45

MO: Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense. And how was your high school experience here at Roanoke?

2:50

SR: So, school was really good. I had a lot of friends, I was a little weird, but I think that all of us were a little weird when we were in our prepubescent to pubescent stages. It was a little different as far as the transition from elementary school, middle school, to high school because Roanoke at that time was still a little segregated. So, after middle school—I went to Lucy Addison, which is a predominantly Black middle school—but I lived in the William Fleming district and they were trying to diversify Patrick Henry, so there were several of my friends who got bused to PH to help with their numbers and diversity because a lot of those students would have ended up at William Fleming just because of how the districts were set up. So, my mom was okay with that because, number one, she went to Patrick Henry so she was like "you will go where I went."

4:10

MO: Yeah [*laughter*].

4:11

SR: So, she definitely wanted us to be Patriots. So, we were sorta bused over to PH even though that was not the district that we were in.

4:15

MO: Yeah, that makes sense. And how was that experience, especially just being a minority in that school?

4:20

SR: It wasn't bad, just because being on a bus with other students who you'd always gone to school with, you never really felt isolated because you knew the people in your neighborhood who were also going over to PH for their education. So it didn't really feel as segregated as it sounds. So, I think I got a really good education at PH and I think that there were some opportunities there that I took full advantage of. Not saying that I wouldn't have gotten them at Fleming, it's just that there were opportunities there that I took advantage of.

5:05

MO: Yes.

5:06

SR: I don't think there was much of an impact there, but I think it definitely prepared me for undergrad, because Ferrum had a very low number of minority students there so having had the experience at PH it was an easier transition for me to go to Ferrum because the demographic looks very similar.

5:43

MO: Yes, yes that is true. And how was your experience transitioning from the Roanoke area into Ferrum? Especially just being in the South?

5:52

SR: [*laughter*] So I laugh because... so I know that there are a lot of people, especially people who grew up in this area, that who don't look at Roanoke as a city or a bigger city or a metropolitan area. But when you compare it to the rural areas, it definitely is, so there was a bit of a culture shock there because at that time, that was about twenty years ago at this point, Ferrum was not as developed as it is now. So, the only thing that we had out that way was a little gas station store and then you had to ride 20-25 minutes into like the Walmart. And that was like all you had.

6:33

MO: Wow.

6:34

SR: So, if you didn't have a car that was a totally different experience and then two, there were people who were into agriculture, who grew up on farms and stuff and, you know, I was used to concrete living. You know, we were more used to a concrete jungle and those folks were more used to—a lot of those folks—were more used to nature and farming so there were a lot of things that I did not understand when it came down to lived experience for some of my classmates and stuff. So that was a bit of a culture shock.

7:05

MO: Yes, I can only imagine. Did you feel comfortable at this school? How was your experience just transitioning and staying there?

7:14

SR: It was really good, because I think that there was really nothing for you to get in trouble doing. So I think that that was really, you know, helpful, not that I was ever one to get into trouble but it was like, you know, the only focus that you really had was your schoolwork and it was just a constant reminder of “this is what you're here for,” you're here to get an education. And you find your opportunities to create your own fun, and I think that those were the life lessons that I took away from that experience. Because, you know, the minority population at Ferrum was so small a lot of times the activities and things that they would have on campus we couldn't see ourselves reflected in. So, it was one of those things where when you don't have folks who are asking for different types of activities, then you sort of just do the same things over and over again, right?

8:39

MO: Yeah.

8:40

SR: So, the one thing that we recognize is that we have to use our voices and speak our needs but then at the same time we have to actively be a part of the change that we want to see. So, one thing that I did was joined a lot of the organizations. So, they have Panther Productions, which is the activity programming group for campus, and then I encouraged a lot of my friends to join because I was like “I could go and speak for us. But if we all go, then that's a louder voice.”

9:05

MO: Yes.

9:07

SR: So, I got a bunch of my friends to join so that we could, you know, be a part of the programming and not just have, you know, folks who think that they are hearing what our needs are but we could actively be a part of making the change. So, that was a really good start to activism. Whether it's, you know, being an activist for myself or being an activist for my community. That was where I sort of cut my teeth, in that space. I was really impressed with some of the things that we were able to do over the three years that I was an active part of that. Where we got to—at that time, 102 Jamz in Greensboro was like one of the big radio stations. So, for them to come to Ferrum and host a party live.

9:51

MO: Wow!

9:56

SR: [*laughter*] And to have some bigger name artists, like we had the Roots come. What?

10:01

MO: Wow! How was that?

10:02

SR: I know, right? So the Roots came to Ferrum and it was like, people were like “what in the world are y’all doing?” but it was just because, you know, we showed them, like we can get people to come. And for those of us who were based out of Roanoke or surrounding areas, you know, we would just put in a call to our friends back home and say “we need y’all to come and flood, like come in masses and bring carloads and loads up here.” So that we can show people that it’s not just us asking for things but just understanding that, you know, the entertainment that we like is a part of popular culture as well. So, like, people will come if we have it. So, what we started to do was just inviting all kinds of people to come up to the different activities. We found that the student population, a lot of times what would happen was they would leave campus during the weekends but they started to stay on campus because the activities were ones that they enjoyed and they didn’t have to go, you know, all the way to Greensboro or all the way to [Virginia] Tech or Radford to be able to enjoy themselves. They could do it at their own home campus. Then, you know, you bring the townies in or you bring people from the surrounding communities in, and you just add to the numbers. And then money, you know, money matters. You charge 10, you know, 15 dollars at the door and we were able to say “we brought people but also look, this event paid for itself.”

11:25

MO: Yes, yes that is true. That’s really amazing. I’m really honestly just shocked by that. Do you feel like that experience really kind of just shaped you into the activist that you are now?

11:32

SR: I think it did, because it showed how a collective of people can bring about change, right? So it showed where one person can be the spark but a collective of people can be the fire, and to be able to go back to campus now and see how the numbers as far as diversity have improved, how the activities have improved, and seeing people stay on campus. Like, you know, I think a little piece of that, I sort of... I’m like “maybe I started a little bit of that,” you know? So, I see myself there and, you know, hopefully those things that we started continued and have helped the college to continue and help with diversity efforts. Because it’s a really good school. It’s a really, really good school, but you know there has to be a good mix of quality education but at something that is enticing for students to stay on campus and be a part of campus culture.

12:26

MO: Yes. Yes, no, that is very true. Especially here at Roanoke [College], that is something that we are also striving to do. Apart from being involved in those activities, were you ever part of anything with the LGBTQ+ community at that college? Did they have anything at that time?

12:44

SR: So, they did, but at that time I was still finding myself. So, I think that while I knew that I felt a little different I don't know that I had a name or a title for it. I know that there has been a transition in time. I'm not saying that everybody in 2021 feels open and out and yelling it from the rooftops but it was... you didn't see it as much back, you know, twenty years ago on campus. So, at that point I was sort of focusing on the other intersection of myself and that was making sure that the Black community felt loved and supported and uplifted on campus. So, I didn't really have much involvement in any of the LGBT issues on campus.

13:48

MO: Okay. I mean that makes sense, like college is still a time where we're trying to figure ourselves out. When did you begin to realize that you weren't straight? Was it during your college years or more so after when you graduated?

14:04

SR: So, I think it's one of those things that I talk about with my friends a lot. I think you come out to yourself several times before you actually have that real conversation with yourself. It started for me really early. So maybe when I was about five or so, there was a little girl that I thought was really pretty and I was wondering like... You know those fairytales that you tell yourself about like "Oh! You know, we could get married!" But then that just didn't feel like that was an okay thing. Right? So, it was something that you sort of suppressed and said "I can just think that," to myself, for this moment, but then I have to sort of tuck that away and you better not say that out loud.

14:49

MO: Yeah.

14:50

SR: And then I think that in different parts of my life that sort of popped up, and I would just sort of suppress it. But not until after I graduated from Ferrum and I went to law school at Duquesne (University) in Pittsburgh. And I think the difference between the time at Ferrum and the time at Duquesne was that while at Ferrum I was 45, 55 minutes away from home, and plus I was on campus with people that I went to high school with, so I was surrounded with people that I knew and so I was always busy, right?

15:38

MO: Yeah.

15:39

SR: And there was always something to do. But when I was at Duquesne and Pittsburgh being the furthest that I had even been away from home by myself, without a supportive family, you spend a lot of time with yourself and a lot of time having conversation with yourself. And at the point I couldn't suppress it because there was nothing to suppress it with. So, I was like, you know, this has come up many times in my life so maybe it's time for me to have an honest conversation with myself about what these feeling are.

16:11

MO: Yes, makes sense. Sorry, just going back a little bit, do you feel like something triggered you into having this conversation or did you just, you know, decide “hey, like this is the time that I really need to think and talk about this to myself?”

16:30

SR: I think it was just loneliness. So, while I am an extrovert now, that was not always the case and I was a little shy and then being in Pittsburgh... like, its different because I don't hear it but sometimes other people do, the accent, cause I can get real Southern real quick, and you sort of feel like a little bit of an outsider because, you know, there are things that are done in the South that are a little different than other places, so, you know, you sort of feel like an outsider. And the only thing you do is find solace within yourself because that's familiar, right? And so, I think it was just one of those things where all these different feelings of like, what kind of woman do you want to be, and there were a lot of life decisions that I had to think about at that time, and that was just one of the feelings that came up, and it was just like “okat, what is this? What is this feeling that you've been suppressing all these years and what do we do with it?”

17:30

MO: Yes. Yes, no, that makes a lot of sense. How did the conversation start? Because you said that you did have to come to a point where you had to really address how you were feeling.

17:40

SR: So, it was interesting, because I hadn't really thought about it until you asked that question just now, but the first memory that came up was everything was under the cover of darkness. So, I'm in this room, 100% by myself, and I was one of [a] few law students who lived in the dorm. So, a lot of people had apartments and stuff like that. I was not ready for that phase of my life yet. So, I lived on a sorority floor and then there's me, the one lone little brown girl at the end of the hall or whatever, and I just happened to look into having a room by myself and the internet was... it was not the internet of now but it was this new thing where you could explore and you know... But you were always fearful that someone could see you or that somebody would watch. So, I would cut the lights off in my room and sort of like Google things and look up stuff and try to figure out what does being a lesbian mean, or what do the letters for LGBTQ—like what does that mean? But it was all me sitting in the dark in just the glow of my computer screen on my face [*laughter*]. And I laugh at it now because I'm like “girl, who did you think was watching you? It's just you in a room.” But it was, you know, a totally different time then.

19:23

MO: Yeah, no that makes a lot of sense and plus, when you are trying to figure out who you are, you do have to do the research yourself and just try to figure it out on your own. Do you feel like the internet helped you a lot with that?

19:37

SR: I think it did, and I think it made me feel a little bit more normal, that there were other people like me in the world. Because, like, I had always been—and I use air quotes, because it makes me roll my eyes now when people use the term “tomboy,” like “oh, she was a tomboy”

because like I was really into sports, and like, you know, don't give me another doll. Don't try to put me in a dress. That type of thing. And the internet allowed me to see that there were other people who showed up in the world the same way that I wanted to, and that brought a sense of peace because I think back at home, while I know that there were other lesbians now, at the time I did not know. Anyone who identified that way or the folks who did, they, you know, they didn't represent the way that I do—more masculine presenting, or in Black culture, you know, a stud comparing to like a butch woman for the term that I've heard more white masculine presenting women feel comfortable with that term.

20:56

MO: Yeah. Yeah, no that is true, and like, I know it has been a while, but can you think back to anything on the internet particularly that helped you? Any websites, any persons that really helped you during this time when you were trying to figure out who you were?

21:09

SR: Umm no, I think it was just, I don't know if it was any particular person or thing. It was just like, I think a lot of it was like style of dress, you know, was the first thing. Like it was okay for me to dress the way that I felt comfortable. I think that is the thing that stuck out. It wasn't a particular person that I was like "oh, I wanna mimic that." But I think it was just seeing a style of dress that really felt comfortable to me first. So, that was the initial thing. Because within my household, you know, my mom would critique me a lot, like "why do you wanna dress like that?" You know, "why can't you look like a girl? Why can't you show up this way?" It just didn't feel natural, you know, to me. It didn't feel authentic at all.

22:04

MO: Yes. Yes, no, that's true, because again, you do like come to terms and you develop in your own time and while you were doing this, how did it make you feel as you were coming to terms with yourself and your sexuality?

22:25

SR: It was scary. It was extremely scary, and I think I almost used a curse word just now because it was really scary. Because, you know, you hear about the stories of other people. Of like hate, you know, their family rejected them, or you know, they were kicked out. You didn't hear of much violence at that point, or I hadn't heard of, you know, many violent interactions at that point where I was doing that level of research on the internet, but it was just really scary. What do I say? You know? I think that not having the words to be able to articulate, you know, how I felt, that felt scary. My mother being in the military—I used to call her a drill sergeant and I would often have to remind her "you know I didn't sign up for the military, right?" Because my life shouldn't feel like bootcamp. But, as the only girl and the oldest, it just felt like a sense of responsibility to show up a particular way, to represent the family a particular way, and I didn't want to let anybody down. So that was really scary to know that like, I'm the only girl in the house but the kind of woman that you want me to be, that's not in the cards for me, and if it is, then I'm not being true to myself.

23:53

MO: Yes, no, that is very true, and how did it feel when you were just like realizing that this is not who your family wanted you to be? How did that make you feel and did that kind of slow down your process of coming out to your friends and family in some ways?

24:15

SR: I don't know that it slowed it down but I think that it brought me a sense of comfort that I had something that I could call it. Like it had a name, it had a title. So, I think that that sort of calmed the anxiety around it a little bit. And then it was at least if I can tell myself this, hopefully at some point, I will be brave enough to say it to, you know, my family. But I felt comfortable for a while just being in the space where I was where I could just say it to myself.

25:08

MO: That's true, and how did it make you feel when you were able to finally say it to yourself?

25:12

SR: It felt like a hug [*laughter*] or a warm Krispy Kreme doughnut. It was just that sense of comfort, right? Of just "okay, you're owning something for yourself," and that was something that was a little different. Again, growing up in my house everything was shared, because again being the oldest, there was a sense of responsibility for my younger siblings, and it was like I was the other parent in the house, so everything that was mine was a collective of everyone's. But this was something that was mine and I didn't have to share it. So, there was comfort in just owning that for myself.

26:00

MO: Yes, and that's good to know and as you were finally able to come to terms, did that make you feel different while you were in this new environment? Cause I know you were now in graduate school and things were very different from undergrad—how did it feel now that you were finally coming to terms in this new environment?

26:16

SR: I would love to tell you that it was like the sky opened up and the sun and the birds were like welcoming me. But law school was a totally different animal. And I think it was like, yeah you recognize that, but now we gotta get back to work. So that became 100 percent my existence. So, it was like "nice, high-five, you got there," but now law school is your journey. So, get lost in the books.

26:46

MO: Yeah, that makes sense, law school is very difficult. And at that time while you were in law school, did you wait to come out later? Like did you talk to anyone? 'Cause I know you said you came out to yourself, but was there anybody else at this time that you talked to about it?

27:06

SR: No, so it was once I came home. Law school was an awesome experience, but I think that first of all nobody tells you that the cost is real. And you quickly run out of money. So, I think that my journey with law school was not to complete it. So, the lesson in it was not to complete it. But that first year I learned a lot about myself and it really created a path for me to explore

myself in a more realistic way. So, the Shamaill that walked away after that first year was not the show pony that she was when she went to school because I felt that I had the weight of my entire family in this journey going into law school. And I was the one who was always the ‘good child.’ I just did what everybody told me to do. So it was the expectation ‘Shamaill is gonna go to school. Shamaill is gonna do this,’ and I fell in line with that. And when that first year was over and I realized my resources were depleted, I wasn’t the show pony anymore. It was, okay, now real life is hitting you, what are you gonna do now? So, to come back home and to understand “Shamaill, this is who you are, realistically, and like what is the next stage of your life gonna look like?” The first thing I did was have a conversation with my best friend and his mom because they have always been a safe space for me. It was sorta like, you know, I think that I might be bisexual. And I giggle about that now because in meeting some other members of the community, they were just like “girl, that’s my story too! I came out as bi first.” And it’s like, why did we do that? And we did that because it seemed like the safe path. If I tell you I’m bi, there’s still hope that I might end up with a husband with 2.5 kids, dog, fenced house, all that good stuff. But very quickly in that conversation it was like “I know that I’m not bi.” So, it was like two weeks [later], I came back to them and I said “Yeah, hey, so, I’m a lesbian. Just letting you know I’d like to swim in the lady pool that’s all [*laughter*].” It was an interesting story there too because my best friend and I came out to each other that same day.

30:08

MO: Oh wow, how was that?

30:12

SR: It was interesting because we both told each other we were bisexual. And at that two week point later we both looked at each other like “I’m a lesbian,” and he was like “Yeah, I’m a gay man.” So that was an “a-ha” moment and for his mom, the one thing that she said was “I just worry that someone will hurt you all.” Especially for him being a gay man, at that time violence towards gay men was increasing. So, you had Matthew Shepard. We had the situation here in Roanoke at one of the clubs where a gentleman walked in—and it was a gay club here that is now closed—and the gentleman walked in and shot several people. So, you started to see violence towards the LGBT community start to increase. Not saying that it didn’t exist before, but now it was getting more television coverage and people were talking about it more. So, for his mom, her concern was “I don’t want anyone to hurt you all.”

31:28

MO: Yeah, and that’s very valid especially given the environment that you were in. How do you feel that those experiences and those situations affected you at that time?

31:41

SR: The one thing that our parents told us was like number one you already got a strike against you because you’re Black. Shamaill, you’ve got a strike against you because you’re a woman. And now you’re adding another thing for people to side eye you on. So, it was one of those things like when I am the only Black person in the room, I look and check out my safety. If I am the only woman in the room, I look to see where the exits are to make sure I’m safe. Now as a member of the LGBT community, I look for those same things. When I’m with my partner, I want to make sure that we’re good. Is anybody giving us too much attention? Is this a safe space

for us to exist? I think it was something that I was already doing, but now it's just like a heightened sense of awareness and something else that I have to be on the lookout for.

32:49

MO: Yes, that's true. Do you feel that now you are a little bit less as protective as you were at that time or do you feel like you're even more protective of yourself now and your environment compared to that time?

33:04

SR: I feel like I am even more protective of myself. Just because at that time I liked to call myself a "baby gay" at that time. I was just trying things out. I still had my feminine clothes that I would wear out because I didn't want to make anybody else feel uncomfortable. So, it was harder for folks to assume that I was a member of the community. Because if you looked aesthetically at how I showed up, it was kinda just like "okay, she looks like a tomboy, but she's wearing semi-girly clothes." Whereas now I walk in my truth. There are people who don't feel comfortable with that. So, whether it's men who feel like "well, you just haven't had the right man," or like "I could show you a 'good time' and I can change you." I think I am more aware now of my surroundings and my security. Even when my girlfriend and I are together, just making sure that we're both okay. I made an agreement with her dad that I will make sure that we get home. And I will make sure that she's safe. We gon' always get home. Whatever that needs to look like to make sure that we do, we're gonna get home.

34:37

MO: Yeah, I think that's a good point and a good idea because at the end of the day, you do never know and the world is changing so much. So, it makes sense to feel like that. How does your girlfriend feel about this, is she also as open to walk in her truth as you are, or is it a different story?

34:59

SR: So, she is one hundred percent comfortable in who she is as a person and in her lesbianism. She is a strong personality and she doesn't take much mess. That's good. But I think, too, we just have two different lived experiences. So, whereas I think growing up as a Black female, you are taught to be on guard all the time. And then for her as a white female, she is a little more carefree than I am. So sometimes that sort of clashes. Sometimes it's a bit of a pain point because she's like "why are you so nervous and anxious and worried. We should just be free to exist," and I'm just like "yeah, but..." You know we just grew up in two different worlds. She is learning to deal with my anxiety and awareness and I am trying to be a little more open and free to things.

36:20

MO: Yeah, I mean it makes sense, different lived experiences. Do you feel like after your coming out experience, do you feel like that's shaped how you are today? Or do you feel like you've slowly developed into who you are because of your life experiences?

36:36

SR: I think it's a combination of both. I lost my mom when she was 45 and I was 24. I think that there was a lot of growing up that happened in that space. With her passing and with being the

matriarch of our little family now... I found that with her passing at 45 that life is short. Live your truth because you don't know how many days you have. There were so many things that I would have loved for my mom to be able to see. Whether it was me having my own place, and being established, and being able to treat her out to a vacation, or dinners, or whatever. But we never got that opportunity. So, the one thing I told myself at the time that she passed, from the time she took her last breath to the time that I got across town to my house was that I was going to live my life. And for anybody who had a problem with it, that was their problem. It was one hundred percent me understanding that the pain of my mom's passing was also a blessing for me because that's where I found myself. I was able to grow me without being concerned about the judgement, whether it was the family or the world. 'Cause at that point I didn't care.

38:56

MO: Yes, I'm so sorry to hear about your mom's passing. While she was still alive, did you ever get the chance to tell her? Were you able to come out to her? And how was that experience if you were able to do that?

39:08

SR:[*laughter*] Yes I did. So, I giggle because my coming out story is so so trash [*laughter*]. Because I was too old to be navigating the world the way that I did. So, I just happened to sneak a girlfriend of mine into my mom's house, not that we did anything in particular. We just, you know, were spending time together, just watching TV and talking or whatever. But my mom had rules in her house. That you just didn't have company over. We just didn't do that if it wasn't family. My mom just happened to get up in the middle of the night and saw her car in the driveway. I was thinking that we had gotten away with it. My girlfriend at the time sorta scuttled out early in the morning and left. My mom's getting up and ready for work, and I'm just be-bopping getting ready for work. My mom calls me when I'm at work and she says "So Shamaill why was that little girl at my house?" And I'm like, "what are you talking about?" And I'm like, I am in my twenties, sneaking somebody in my momma's house. This is stuff I shoulda been doing when I was like fifteen, sixteen. But now here I am in my twenties trying to figure out how to get away with this. So, my momma was like "yeah, you know we're gonna have a conversation when you come home." I was trying to find everything to do. Listen, if there would have been like a community service project that needed a week-long volunteer, I would have signed up [*laughter*], so I could have escaped that conversation because I knew that that was wrong, to have someone in my mom's house without her knowledge. So, you know I finally got it together, and was like "you can't ride around all day, you gotta go home." So, I came into the house and my brother who is 18 months younger than I, he was in my mom's room and I come in and my mom's like "Is there something you want to tell me?" And I'm like "no, like what do you mean? I got nothing." And she was like "Y'know, don't play with me girl." And I was like, "ah, no, what do you think I want to tell you?" And she was like, "Shamaill, like what is happening with you and that girl?" And I was like, "Ahhh, what do you think is happening?" And so, you know, I just sorta hemmed and hawed for a while and then she was like "I mean is that your girlfriend?" and I was like "well, if you think it is then okay we'll go with that." And she was like "I need you to say it." And I'm like "well you said it so that's enough." You know, at some point I was like "okay, Shamaill, you need to be an adult," and I was like, you know, "yes, that's what it is." And there was an interesting part there because I had had a prom date back when I was in high school, and somehow my mom thought that was a love connection for

life. So she was like “you dated that boy!” And I was like “we went to prom, momma! What? That was like four years ago, why are we still talking about this?” And she was like, “you know well, I thought that was a thing and you weren’t being honest with me,” and I was like “I mean we went to prom, you know?” And at some point, we were going back and forth and my brother just sorta looked at my momma and said “Momma, Shamaill has always been Shamaill, and you know if you’re honest with yourself, you knew this whole time.” And he was like “This is my sister and I love her. And as long as she doesn’t try to steal any of my girlfriends, I’m cool with that.” And I was like “all your girlfriends are ugly.” And he [went] “What! Which one of my girlfriends? All of my girlfriends are like bomb!” And I was like “No they’re not!” And we’re going back and forth and my mom was like “this is not even what we’re talking about like where did this go off?” So, it was one of those things that I will always appreciate that space that my brother had for me in just saying, “That’s my sister and I love her and that’s not going to change who she is to me. She has always been an awesome person and that’s not going to change just because of who she loves.”

44:00

MO: Oh yes, that’s a beautiful story. Very funny. How do you feel like that support felt like at that time? Like how did it feel to finally be able to tell your family who you really were?

44:14

SR: I think it was really good because I think that all these years later, going back and looking at that scenario or the scenario of friends who I’ve talked to, is that we give a lot of credence to people who at the end of the day don’t care about us... and we don’t care about them that way, but we care about their opinions. Right? So, strangers, or even like family members. Like there are family members like “okay, family member, you have your opinion,” but like it doesn’t nourish me, it doesn’t matter to me. Right? So just being able to have that conversation with my immediate family. After they knew, I didn’t care who else knew. So, what everybody else thought after that, it did not matter. At all. So, I never have had that conversation with the rest of my family because, I think for me, in particular, it’s like if you invite people’s opinion in it, into your life, they will give it. But if you make it like “I don’t care what your opinion is,” people are less likely to give it. Right? So there have been very few people, whether it’s in my family or a coworker that tell me what they think because I don’t give them the option of giving it to me because I don’t care.

45:36

MO: Yeah, and that’s true. It’s your truth and it’s up to you who you wanna tell it to. Do you feel like any family member that did find out, or any friend that did find out, after you came out do you feel your relationship changed with them or did it just stay the same?

45:49

SR: I think from the family perspective, my grandmother who was really deep in the church, I think she... well, I know she had some really strong feelings about what my end of days would look like, where my final destination would be. And she would share that with my mom, but she wouldn’t share it with me. So, my mom would be like, “oh your grandma’s over there crying.” And I’m like, “what is she crying about?” And she’s like, “well, you know, she thinks you’re going to hell.” And I’m like, “Oh, what did I do?” And she was like, “Really?” And I was like,

“No, but what did I do?” And she was like, “Are you? Like, you know, you being a lesbian.” And I was like, “Oh, is she still on that? I’ll talk to grandma later.” And then when I would go have a conversation with her, and I’m like, “Well grandma, I don’t believe that for my life. And I think that there are other things in life that you should focus on. And if you want to pray for me, fantastic, but don’t let that be the thing that you pray to change because that’s not something I want to change about myself. So, our prayers will cancel each other out. You’re going to pray to change it, I’m going to pray that I fall deeper into who I am in that space. So it’s gonna end up being nothing. So if there’s something you want to pray for me on, find something else.” So I think that was the only family member that we had to have any additional conversations with was her. But then from the friend perspective or the coworker perspective, I think the one part that was a little interesting was people’s way of connecting with you. So, I have had some really uncomfortable situations with folks who are just like... it was weird, because I would have coworkers or friends that would come up to me and just be like, “Yeah so I had a dream that I was intimate with this woman.” And I’m like, “why are you sharing this with me? Why are you telling me this? I don’t care [laughter]” And like they would want to have this deep conversation and like, they’re not reading the room at all, because I’m like, “Do you see this look of terror on my face as you continue to talk? [laughter]” So those types of things were always interesting. And then for male friends, they look at you and want to have that “bro” moment with you like “oh is that your girlfriend? High-five bro!” Or like, “Oo you walked in with all the sexy ladies!” And I’m like “Okay, weird, but alright. Thanks, friend.”

48:29

MO: Yeah, and how did that make you feel, knowing that your friends were now viewing you differently than before?

48:36

SR: So, it’s different. You know, you have different pockets of friends. So the friends who I had grown up with and people who have known me were just like “Girl, duh.” And I was like, “Yeah, I just wanna tell you this!” And they were like “uh-huh, yeah, so what’s new? “Like [I] knew this, just waiting for you to get there.” But then for coworkers and those level of friends, I think it just had to settle down and just become the norm for them. Because I think that for some of those folks, what they needed to realize was that it was borderline sexual harassment for some of the activities that happened. So, like if a man was in the workplace and did some of those things to a woman, that would be HR worthy. But they felt like because they were sharing it with me as a woman that it was okay. And I’m like, “No, I’m uncomfortable.” You know?

49:40

MO: Yeah, that’s true. And how did you feel in the workplace after you came out, especially with your male workers treating you differently? Just overall in general, how did it feel working after you came out, especially in the Roanoke area?

49:51

SR: It was really good because All-State has a culture of inclusivity and we have employee resource groups who deal with, not deal with, but support the needs of different marginalized groups within the company. So, creating safe spaces there and having a zero-tolerance policy for any kind of activity that would discriminate against anyone because of—whether it’s their sexual

orientation, or their race, or their religion, those types of things. Work was really cool. I have a really interesting story there. I was a trainer at one point and we had some folks come over from India who I was in the process of training so one of the practices that we had was that the leadership team, and the trainers, and the trainees would go out for like a big company dinner or whatever. And this was like my first time being invited to one, so I was super nervous because you know, there's going to be senior leaders there and it's not really many times where you got to sorta hob-nob with those folks, so you know I'm super nervous. And they're just like, "Yeah bring a guest!" And I'm like "Okay." So I was like, "Okay, we're gonna rip the band-aid off this one." So with my girlfriend at the time I was like, "Hey there's this company dinner, I really would like to take you." And she was like, "Are you ready for that, are you okay?" And I was like, "Yeah, let's go." You know... wide-eyed and like sweating, but let's go [*laughter*].

51:49

MO: Yes, and sorry what kind of work environment was this? You can just give general details as to what kind of work you were doing at the time.

51:56

SR: So it was just data processing. We were in the process of transitioning some work to India. So I was training those folks. They had come over for a period of time to sort of learn the functions and things like that.

52:12

MO: Okay, okay. So how was it when you guys were going to this work dinner party?

52:19

SR: So, we go there and we're sitting around the table and I think it was like fifteen people or so just sitting there and we had went to Nawab downtown, an Indian restaurant downtown. And everybody was ordering their food and you know the awkward silence after everybody has ordered? Like "Okay, what are we gonna talk about?" So, I just happened to be sitting at the head of the table, so one of the managers just sorta looked at me and said, "So Shamaill, who's your guest?" And I'm like, "Oh crap, this is how it starts. Like what do I say?" So, I looked at my girlfriend and she says, "These are your folks, so, whatever you wanna say." So, I was like, "So umm..." And the manager was like, "Is this your sister?" Now, me and my girlfriend did not look anything alike. At all. So that was a thing, right? And I was like, "Well no, actually this is my girlfriend." And I just waited for that pause, and I waited for everybody's heads to blow off, and you know that never happened. And the manager just sorta looked, she took a sip of water, and she said, "So like how'd y'all meet?" And it was just like a regular conversation. And I was so tense and I was so worried and I looked around the table at everybody else and they were just engaged because they wanted to hear the story. It did not matter that this was my significant other and we just happened to be two women.

53:44

MO: Yeah, that's really amazing. Was this kind of like your first time like presenting your girlfriend in public? Or had you done this before?

53:57

SR: Like at work, yes this was. Like in the club scene, so the club scene being The Park, right? In my personal life, it wasn't a big thing, but in a work function, a work capacity, this was the first time bringing someone to an event. It was kind of a big deal. After that, I was like, "Oh yeah, I'm ready, bring on the next one. We're gonna do this."

54:27

MO: Yes, 'cause it kinda just gives you that confidence boost like, "Okay I got through this, I can get through something else." That's really interesting. I guess kind of going back, when was the first time you actually presented your girlfriend to someone or your family or people?

54:41

SR: So, my first girlfriend she came around the family and stuff like that, but you know, people will say that they know, and, in a polite way people will just say "oh your friend, your friend." I'm like "okay, I have lots of friends, but this is a different friend." So my very first girlfriend, she would come to different family things and stuff. But people were just like "oh, that's just Shamaill's friend." And that was before I came out.

55:16

MO: Yeah, that's interesting. And, also going back a little bit, how was your first queer sexual experience while you were figuring everything out?

55:30

SR: Awkward. Because I think it was like awkward. Number one, because I feel like I'm 16 again. This feels like I don't know what to do. I have no idea what I'm doing here. So, I'm just gonna fumble my way through this. It felt very awkward. It felt like losing your virginity all over again in your twenties... It felt weird. But I think that once I had my second girlfriend, it was weird as well because she was... I'm trying to find the right words. She was like the epitome of like a goddess to me, you know, at that time. I was like "oh my god, I don't know what she sees in me, why is she talking to me." Right? You know when she was interested in me back, and we got to the space we were going to be intimate, I was like, "uhhhh..." I'm nervous. And I remember her saying to me, "what would you do if I, you know, like, took all my clothes off and was ready?" And I would just... you know, I answered like a dude and was like "yeah I'll handle my business." What did I mean? I don't know [laughter]. I was just talking, and I wanted to sound cool. So, we jumped up and she, you know, was like alright. And you know, went and took a shower and everything, and I was like having this holy crap moment. What did I just agree to? I don't know what I just said. I don't know what any of it means, that I just told her! Like, I am setting this expectation and could possibly fail. And, I was so embarrassed, you know. I'm embarrassed now to be like "why did you say that? You were such a doofus."

58:20

MO: Yeah, but I mean, you were younger, and also again, you were still trying to figure everything out. So, it makes sense, and I'm sure by now... I guess, now do you feel more comfortable as you've grown and developed?

58:38

SR: I would love to tell you yes, Michelle, because I'm 40, and I would love to say that you know, I've gotten it a little bit together. I definitely am way more comfortable in myself now. I don't know that in my lifetime I will ever lose the awkward little me that still exists within this body. I am sure that I will say another awkward thing, and do another weird thing that will have my girlfriend looking at me and saying "are you a 14 year old little prepubescent boy, like what are you doing?" So, yeah.

59:27

MO: I'm sure obviously with time and stuff, you know, things will change. But that is interesting and how did you meet your current partner that you're with today?

59:38

SR: So, I hope we have time for this because this is a pretty long story. I'll try to keep it as short as possible. I am very active in our LGBT employee resource group at Allstate. Currently, I'm the president of our national board. But I am also a field leader here in the Roanoke area. So, we have about 22 active chapters, and we have over 2,000 members throughout the company and that's ever growing, but we create safe spaces for employees, we have honest and real conversations about these lived experiences of the LGBT community within the walls of the company, as well as outside and in our communities. So, with that we had an opportunity to speak at a national conference, it's called Out and Equal. We presented a couple topics over the last couple years. But my current girlfriend was there and was able to hear me present at one of the conferences, and we were friends. Just because I always shout out Virginia wherever I go. The conference was in Seattle. I represent for Roanoke, Virginia wherever I am. It was funny because afterwards she walked up to me and said "oh my God, I'm from Virginia too." Who would have ever thought that two Virginia girls would have met in Seattle? We just remained friends for an extended period of time, then our paths crossed again a little later on in life, and here we are today.

1:01:34

MO: Aww, that's beautiful. I know that we talked about this earlier, but how do you feel now that your relationship is currently compared to your previous relationships that you've had before?

1:01:51

SR: I think that the big thing is, I took a really long time building my confidence. I thought that the years of wanting to fit into the mold that my family had for me was a heavy burden in that I was very apprehensive in going down the path that I wanted to, or you know, being the Shamaill that I could see for myself, but being nervous that it would upset, you know, our family dynamic. So, I think that now I am 100% confident in me, which reflects in my relationships better, so I think that every relationship that I've ever had has been a really awesome lesson that has challenged my way of thinking. There was a lot of work that I needed to do and a lot of baggage that I carried, you know so therapy has 100% been an important additive in my life. It's helped me sort of process some of those things. So, I think I am the healthiest I have ever been, because I am real with myself on like who I am and how I show up in the world. I think that for my past relationships, a lot of those young ladies did not get the benefit of having me not be as fleshed out as I am now.

1:03:40

MO: Yeah, that's good to hear. Growth and self-development is always something that we are striving to achieve. And besides therapy were there other support services that you used in order to get to where you are today?

1:03:53

SR: Yeah, I think conversation is always a big one for me, like hearing other peoples lived experiences and talking to people matters. I was very bullheaded when I was younger—like, this is the way it is, period. Because I said so, right? I think that being able to hear other people's lived experiences and understanding where my biases are. I think that a lot of times people feel like because you are a member of a marginalized community that you can't have biases and that's not true. So it was like, I had a lot that I had to come to terms with, come to grips with, and it definitely cleared up my vision on how I see the world now. I have to hold myself accountable, and having friends around me to hold me accountable as well, and not telling me that everything I do is fantastic and wonderful, but really calling me when I step outside the lane, or you know If I say something that is ignorant. It is important to have people around you to hold you accountable for that.

1:05:02

MO: Do you feel like the support of therapy, as well as your friends, has shaped how you view yourself as a lesbian here in the Roanoke Valley?

1:05:12

SR: I definitely think 100%. I definitely think so. It is beautiful just to see how the Roanoke area has grown and become a bit of a safe haven. Are we 100% there? Absolutely not. But to see where the Pride parades here have grown. To hear more people speaking up, walking in their truth. That was definitely a lot different, you know, in times past. But just to be able to see that continuously growing, that matters. Joe Cobb, the fact that our vice mayor is an openly gay man, and speaks his truth, and knowing Joe for years. I used to be a member of MCC when he was pastor there, and just to see how his journey has been is amazing. Again, it's not saying we get it right 100% of the time, but also patting ourselves on the back for the fact that we definitely are not where we used to be.

1:06:28

MO: That's very true. And now there's various organizations, and support systems, here as well. A lot of strides are being made to be more of a inclusive city. Have you ever used one of the support systems that are present here? Like, the Drop-in Center? The House of Expression?

1:06:48

SR: Yes. I am a member of the House of Expression. When the Drop-in Center was created, I was a volunteer, so I would go to the clubs and give out condom packs. The Drop-in Center used to have a support group for gay men, [but] there was no support group for lesbians. So I would just go to those meetings because I said "there's no meeting for me, but I need to be able to talk to, you know, other folks too who are in the community." So I was the one lesbian that showed

up to the gay men's events. I said "well, until there's a lesbian space, you know, I'm here with y'all! Hey!" [laughter] So yeah, definitely have used the Drop-in Center—and they do, and have done fantastic work for years. I think being able to go to clubs and give out condom packs and do education was really eye-opening, and I think for that little introvert that was me in the past, it kinda opened me up to connecting with the community in a real way.

1:08:06

MO: Yeah, that is true. What role has the House of Expression played in your adult life? I'm currently working with them a little bit. How have you felt being part of that organization?

1:08:16

SR: So, for any house culture it's that sense of family and community. I'm newer to the house so a lot of the heavy lifting and a lot of the work that was done was prior to my involvement with it. It is awesome to be a member who is learning from the experiences of those who created the house. Being an active part of the direction the house will go in the future. So, I know there's some amazing work that the mother and father of the house are doing with the Roanoke City Police Department to help with some education and training for new cadets. We have some input in giving some education on how they interact with our community when they are out on call. And being a safe space for them to be able to ask questions, because that's a big thing, right? A lot of time, people have these preconceived notions because they've never been able to be in a space where they can ask questions and not feel judged or feel like "hey, that was a dumb question." So, we have offered ourselves that way. Also, there is a connection to the LGBT organizations within the school systems, for the high schools, to be able to be mentors for those folks and ask questions, and see where there's opportunities for partnership with us. And just with the History Project, that was a big one, that we wanted to make sure that voices of color were represented within the History Project.

1:10:07

MO: Yeah, that's amazing. How have you felt as a woman of color in these spaces that you are in currently?

1:10:16

SR: So which spaces in particular?

1:10:18

MO: Spaces like the House of Expression. At work... you said you also do a lot of work as well with community involvement, with the LGBTQ+ community. The Drop-in Center. How have you felt as a woman of color? Were you ever tokenized in some way? Have you felt unsafe in these spaces?

1:10:41

SR: So, tokenizing is 100% a thing. But I think the one thing that I have come to terms with is that you can use it as a way to get other people into a space that they otherwise did not know existed. Or that they wouldn't have been invited to. Right? So, if you need me to be your token, "oh, Shamaill's one of those good folks." Okay great, that's great that you think that, and I'm not saying that I'm not, but let me bring some other folks. I'm holding the door open, let's get as

many folks as possible into this space so that if I have to be the comfort level for the non-POC [people of color] in the room, for them to be okay with other people having space there, then use me as your token. If you look at me as the good POC, or you know, the amicable one, fine. But we're gonna create spaces for more of us to exist. In spaces that are beneficial to others, it will become beneficial to us as well.

1:12:06

MO: Yes, that is very true. While you have been in these spaces for a while, do you feel that now more people of color are more comfortable to be in these spaces? Or do you feel like more work really needs to be done to include more people of color in these spaces for LGBTQ+ people.

1:12:24

SR: I think it's combination of both, because sometimes for us as POC, when we get into those spaces, it feels phony. It feels fake. So it's just like, I worked this hard to get right here, and this is just a bunch of... tomfoolery, is what it is. So, you find folks that are like "I don't really want to put on a show, I don't really want to be fake in this space," but I think something we need to realize is everybody else in this space is being fake. They're being fake to each other, so it's not just fake because you're here, it's fake period [*laughter*]. Play the game to get the benefit from it. For instance, whether it's resources that wouldn't be available to our communities, it's like if I need to play the game to get resources for our community, I'll do that. Again, these people aren't being fake just for me, they're fake period. Whatever I need to do to make sure that resources are spread out amongst the community then I'll do that for the benefit of the greater good. If that makes sense.

1:13:43

MO: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Do you feel like maybe there's also a difference in age? Do you feel like the older gays vs. the newer gays view these safe spaces differently?

1:13:56

SR: That I don't know. The one thing that I love about the younger generation of folks, is that they do not play games when it comes to their time and their commitment to things. So, if it don't look right, if it don't feel right, I'm not staying here. I'm not going to waste my time in this space. Either I will create a space that makes sense, or I'll just find something that feels a little bit more like what I'm looking for. Whereas, for me, I have found in situations I might invest a little too long or stay in a place a little too long, hoping that I can bring about some change and change an established culture. And sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. You definitely wear the scars of that. Whereas the younger generation is just like "absolutely not, no." And they peace out in a heartbeat.

1:15:03

MO: Yes, that's true, and especially now with the younger generation, they're very active in the community and they've caused a lot of change to happen, a lot of good change to happen. Do you feel that more change is going to occur in the LGBTQ+ community as we continue on with our lives? Has it been more drastic now or less compared to when you were growing up in the community?

1:15:32

SR: Well, I think that there was a large focus at one point on marriage equality, and I think that for some folks, once marriage equality passed, it was just kinda like “yep, the needs of the LGBT community, we did it.” Check, mark, done. But I think that with the creation of the additional letters in our community and the additional family members that we have there, it is going to be an ever-growing situation. We’re gonna forever have to be allies to each other and create spaces for the change and for the evolution of what the communities’ needs are. I love the fact that there is a lot of attention on the trans community right now, because it is long overdue. The violence against the trans community, while we do see an increase in the murder rate, we have to ask ourselves why that’s a thing. Because it’s not just happening, it just wasn’t reported previously. It’s been a problem for a while and people should not lose their lives for being who they are. Why is that a thing? I just think the younger generation are folks who are 100% vocal and like out in the streets, ready to make some change happen. I’m just excited because it’s definitely a journey, and it’s not one and done. I love the fact that for those of us who are a little older, and our knees don’t work as good as they used to, to be able to pass the baton off to the next generation to run it forward, to then pass it off again. I think that is fantastic.

1:17:37

MO: Yes, that is very true, and specifically to you, what changes would you like to see in the future, either here in Roanoke, or just in the U.S, or the world? It’s really up to you.

1:17:50

SR: I think that for Roanoke in particular, we are a bit of a sleepy town. Things tend to get to us a little later than they do other communities. I think the one thing that would be really important for Roanoke, even for me, is just being educated and updated on what’s happening in other parts of the U.S and what’s happening in other parts of the world, because eventually it’s gonna come this way. Right? What can we do to be prepared? What can we do to be an active part of making the change happen, so that when it does hit Roanoke, we don’t feel blindsided. It makes it seem like we don’t care until it hits our community, when we are a very caring community of people who are willing to fight for what we want, but we’re just slow to get there sometimes.

1:18:55

MO: Yes, yes, that is true. I also hope too that change comes here in the Roanoke Valley, but also as well as everywhere else in the world. I just want to say thank you so much for this. I have learned a lot about you. You’ve provided a lot of insight for this project and I really appreciate you taking the time to do this.

1:19:17

SR: No problem, and thank you all so much for providing this opportunity and just for anyone who listens after this, your voice matters. Anytime you have an opportunity to share your story, that is the most valuable thing that you can ever give anyone, is your perspective and your lived experience.

1:19:36

MO: Yes, that is true. Thank you.

[END]