

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project**  
**Interview with Gregory Samantha Rosenthal**

**April 6, 2021**

**Interviewer: Catherine Jessee**

**Length: 1:29:36**

**Interviewee:** Dr. Gregory Samantha Rosenthal

**Interviewer:** Catherine Jessee

**Date of interview:** 2021-04-06

**Location of interview:** Roanoke, Virginia & Oxford, Mississippi

**Recording software:** Zencastr

**Summary:** In this interview, Samantha Rosenthal discusses her life and work as a community member and organizer in Roanoke, Virginia. She begins by detailing her life and education training in California, New York, and Maine, before moving to Southwest Virginia in 2015. She reflects on early experiences with activism and organizing, as well as coming out. Samantha discusses her experiences and differences between queer communities in metropolitan New York City and the city of Roanoke, Virginia. She reflects on unique cross-generational challenges the queer community faces, as well as how she merges public humanities with queer history and its legacy in Virginia.

0:00 Recording identification

Samantha Rosenthal, born January 24, 1983, Schenectady, NY. Father: professor at Union College in Schenectady. Discusses primary and secondary schooling tied to liberal arts college world, white suburban public schools.

2:08 Describes music as creative outlet: French horn, band, orchestra, piano, singing. Discusses going to college for music at CalArts, Southern California, art school, pressures there.

6:58 Describes New England culture. Transfers to Bates College, Maine. Describes leftist and anarchist student groups and involvement in political activism post-9/11, early 2000s, Bush Administration, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Discusses getting arrested on night of Iraq invasion.

10:33 Describes parents' reaction to 9/11, Bates College's reaction to students getting arrested. Girlfriend came to visit on night they were arrested.

14:35 Discusses demographics of student group organizing at Bates College and early years of activism. Early queer friendships.

19:51 Discusses past experiences often tied to coming out as trans, describes wearing mother's clothes.

- 24:53 Discusses dating in high school, early romantic relationships, heterosexuality and performance
- 27:45 Discusses being married, living in New York City, Hawai'i, getting divorced, coming out
- 37:22 Discussed leaving New York City, living in Honolulu, Hawai'i, moving to Virginia, and dating a man for the first time
- 40:34 Moved to Roanoke, Virginia August 2015. Describes merging history work with LGBTQ organizations; describes a "second coming out"
- 45:16 Origins of Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project at the Roanoke Diversity Center (led by Frank House); describes first History Project meeting in detail; discusses inspiration and intersection with The History Project (Boston-based LGBTQ project)
- 49:25 Describes discussions around power and representation in the Roanoke project, how the project has changed and evolved; project leadership and demographics changing over time: young, mostly white queer women in their 20s got involved in 2016; won grant to train and support young Black queer women to do QTPOC work in 2017–2018
- 57:09 Discusses race and gender among LGBTQ relations in Roanoke, Virginia, historical marginalization of Black LGBTQ community, and current organizational relations between members of new Black LGBTQ group and old standing white members of the History Project; describes change in relationships with white cis gay male community and increased organizing with trans and lesbian communities
- 1:01:18 Describes generational differences among the LGBTQ community and spaces that it has offered over time; History Project as politicized and radical around contemporary issues.
- 1:04:42 Friendship with Ollie, a trans man, and their experience together at a History Project meeting using the term "queer" where two older trans women identified it as a slur; Ollie was vocal that he identified with "queer"
- 1:07:46 Development of "Living Trans History," an interactive theater program with youth (premiered 2017) based on oral histories collected by the project; discusses summer camp for LGBTQ youth in the area; describes event connecting lesbian organizers in the 1980s with younger queer women across generations
- 1:09:53 Describes variety of networking events, bar crawls, walking tours, social media, and "archive collection events" at various locations across town (churches, Diversity Center, CoLab, Roanoke Public Libraries)
- 1:15:27 Describes Roanoke queer bar crawl event in detail (first crawl in 2016) and most recently (temporally) 2019. Discusses how bars are chosen (some bars are "straight" but at some point were "queer"; some spaces are no longer bars at all). They include: City Market Building, Billy's, Lucky, Murphy's, Martin's, Back Street, Corned Beef (no longer on the tour after they ejected trans women of color), Nite & Day, The Park; route is always changing and shifting depending on where to spend money, the value of "queering" the space, and shifting numbers of people (25 people at its height)
- 1:23:00 Describes value of social media, funding through Roanoke College to hire research assistant for the project

1:24:49 Discusses value and pride in the community that has developed, value of social spaces and increased LGBTQ spaces in Roanoke, Virginia; discusses “pride” versus “pride of place” and history as a tool for empowerment

1:29:25 Conclusion

## **START OF RECORDING**

[00:00]

**Catherine Jessee:** Okay, my name is Catherine Jessee. Today is April 6, 2021. I'm interviewing Samantha Rosenthal, who is in Roanoke, Virginia, and I'm in Oxford, Mississippi. Samantha for the record, will you share your date of birth? Before we get started?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** It's January 24, 1983.

**Catherine Jessee:** Thank you. So to start off, tell me about where you grew up.

**Samantha Rosenthal:** I grew up in upstate New York. I grew up in a suburb of Schenectady, New York, which is also a suburb of Albany, New York; that area blends together. The Capital Region is what it's known as. My father was a professor at Union College in Schenectady, New York teaching math, which is how we ended up there as a family. I attended public schools my whole childhood, but they were very well funded, affluent, overwhelmingly white, suburban kind of public schools, like highly ranked public schools that colleges were recruiting from and so on. So it was very privileged, and definitely had the benefits of my father's role at the

university as well, because they paid. The University paid for— well, that's later for college—they paid for part of our tuition for college. But I did daycare at the college my dad worked at. So even from a very, very young age, I was in the liberal arts college world, which is where I'm still teaching today. So I've spent my whole life on campuses of small liberal arts colleges.

**Catherine Jessee:**

What do you remember spending your time doing?

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

By age seven or eight, I really got into music. Music became my — what I excelled at, and also how I made friends, and also my creative outlet as a person. I started playing piano at age seven or eight. By middle school, I was a prodigy of sorts. I never did classical lessons. I did Suzuki first, and then I started taking private jazz piano lessons in middle school with a well-known jazz pianist in Albany. And then through high school, I did vocals, piano. I played French horn in band and orchestra, and I sang in several choirs, and I won a lot of like music awards, and participated in statewide music things, wrote and then released some of my own music, and I ended up going off to college for music, which we can talk about in a bit. That was the most important thing to me growing up for sure, and it was a big part of my identity.

**Catherine Jessee:**

Tell me about playing music in college and what changed about that experience?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** When I was 18, I left home for college, and I went out to CalArts [the California Institute for the Arts] in Southern California. I basically went to the other side of the country. I really wanted to get far away, but also I had applied to maybe seven or eight schools, and I was only accepted into CalArts. So it was like, *go there or not go to college*. My parents really pushed me to go. So I went out to Southern California when I was 18, and CalArts is an art school, so they have like six different schools, like visual arts and dance and theater and music and that kind of thing, and I was in the music school. I was accepted into the composition program, and within the first few months, I realized that it was wrong, that I had taken the wrong step.

[04:41]

I didn't feel at home there in Southern California, both in terms of the natural world was foreign to me having grown up in the cold seasons of upstate New York, and that affected my mood a lot actually, and just the setting of the art school felt very competitive. I always felt the pressure to have to make really great work. That was what was hanging in the balance, was how innovative I am and how original the work I make is. Within a few months of getting out there, I started applying to other schools to transfer and I wanted to move back to the east coast. Also, I was dating a woman at that time, and I was a man at that time, and it was my

first long term relationship, and she was in Boston at college. That wasn't working to be on opposite sides of the country when you're 18 and trying to do a long distance, monogamous relationship. I ended up transferring to Bates College in Maine, which was a three-hour drive from her school, and I finished my last three years of college there, but I majored in music. I tried to get away from it. I declared other majors, tried to do other things, but by the time I was a senior, I didn't have enough credits in any fields to graduate, and music was the one I had the most in, so I ended up back in music at the end.

**Catherine Jessee:** What do you remember feeling about being back on the East Coast or being at Bates?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Well, I love Maine. I love the snow. I loved the winter. Winter has always been my favorite season. I often say it's because I'm an Aquarius. I was born in January. I was born in an ice storm. My parents have told that story many times.

**Catherine Jessee:** That was the 90s—no, '83? When...

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Yep, '83. My parents were sliding around on the road when they drove to the hospital for me to be born. And so I think about how I came out into a world that was extremely cold and icy and snowy, and that's my first sense of life. And then the warmth of my parents. I left the warmth of the womb, which probably sucked. I loved upstate New York for that reason and loved Maine, that I

really connected with winter in terms of mood and emotion. I like the hibernation feel of it. I like the introspection, the darkness. I like playing in the snow. So, I loved that. In terms of New England culturally, I don't know. Right after I graduated, I left and moved back to — I did a couple things — but I basically moved back to upstate New York. New England, it can be a little snotty sometimes, or snooty, elitist in some places. Certainly Bates was. It was a lot of private school kids that I wasn't used to being around, but I found my people there. I fell in with a group of leftist students. I joined this anarchist group there, and got really involved in political activism in college, which, besides music, was probably the other number one thing I was doing with that time in my life, was protesting. I was arrested at a protest. This was the early 2000s, so this was the Bush administration and post-9/11 and the war in Afghanistan.

**Catherine Jessee:**

[inaudible]

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Mm-hmm, the war in Iraq. And I was arrested on the night, the very first night that we were in Iraq. The “shock and awe” that Bush was ordering, missiles being rained down there. We went out to protest that very night, and that's when I was arrested. Getting arrested really radicalized me — the people in my life were not happy about that: my girlfriend, my parents, they were all very critical. But for me, it galvanized me to keep

organizing and I learned a lot about organizing from my peers who were able to bring out a lot of people into the streets and then bail us out, just very organized movement work. That was a huge part of my college experience too, because when I graduated, I thought, well what the heck am I going to do with music, and instead I thought, *I want to dedicate my life to activism, now how can I do that after I graduate?* And that was the big question in my mind in 2005, when I graduated.

[10:16]

**Catherine Jessee:**

You mentioned that your parents and your girlfriend at the time were very critical of that experience—can you tell me a little bit more about that?

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Yeah, my parents were teenagers in the late '60s, and had gone to college. Yeah, late '60s, early '70s. They met in the '70s. They've always said they were not involved in any of this stuff that went on at that time. They weren't hippies, they weren't arrested at protests. That wasn't part of their experience. I'm sure—we've never talked about this—but I'm sure that having come of age at that time, that they knew very well of people who were being sent off to Vietnam or people who were engaging in protests, and — people whose lives were altered in manifold ways by the social movements going on at that time. I think that after 9/11, like any parents, their concern was always that we're safe. And the Bush



administration imposed all of these new tools of surveillance, of federal surveillance, and policing stuff that was going on at that time. I mean, so many of my friends in college were arrested — whether it was at that event or at other things. It felt like a time when left wing dissent was being surveilled and criminalized not in new ways, like from a historian's viewpoint, but in new ways for me as a young person in the world who's like, *Wow, the government has these views*. And so, like, being an anti-government activist at that time, I think, occasioned my parents to be quite concerned. And getting arrested, it's like, *is the college going to respond to that and penalize us?* I think they actually put out some kind of response, because there was a huge number of us who were arrested that night. I think the college put out some kind of supportive statement actually about, you know, *students have the right to protest and do whatever they want*. So, there were no repercussions for me, professionally. But that's what they worried about.

And my girlfriend — well, I think if I'm remembering correctly, she had come up from Boston that day, and was waiting for me in my dorm room when I was in jail. I think that that's what happened. There was definitely some — if it wasn't, then it was another time when I was out at something — some kind of activist

thing. She was waiting for me and I stood her up. So it was bad relationship behavior on my part, but I remember coming back from jail, and she was very critical of behaviors I was engaging in. But we have to put that in the context also of the failed heterosexuality of the whole thing, as it was. And this was near the end of our three year long—from high school sweetheart to long distance college—thing that went on for much too long.

[14:15]

**Catherine Jessee:** Tell me about — you mentioned your peers or some of the relationships you had in organizing in college. Can you tell me what sorts of relationships you had within those moments?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** These young people were from all different walks of life. Some of them were like me from white well-to-do backgrounds, some even more, some of them even more affluent and well-connected in their family backgrounds than I was. And I think that that's common that young, white affluent people go off to college and get radicalized. And I think about how much of that is rooted in guilt around like our upbringing and whatever. And whether white guilt is productive and whatever. But that's more of a different conversation.

But even though Bates was very, very white and Maine was very, very white, there were activists in that group that were not white,

who I was friends with and had different views on some of these issues. I had friends who had spent time being homeless different times growing up. I had many friends who were queer. Many of the people involved in the leftist anarchist organizing stuff in college were queer, and that was new for me to be around queer people. I think in high school, I was aware of the very few out queer people around me, but I didn't have any friends who were out queer people, so it wasn't really on my radar screen. But in college, definitely, I had great friends who were gay or lesbian. I had one friend who was trans, who was the first trans person that I really ever met, a transmasc [transmasculine] person in college. So, it was a good group of people, yeah.

I am certain that there were ways that we were just like, being college students, and some of the campaigns and some of the tactics were naive, and college-y, and I have a different perspective now as a professor who sees students organize now. I'm like, maybe this isn't actually like an effective thing you're doing. But it was like a training ground for me to play out different approaches to making change, and to adopt different ideologies. Like for example, I was a big animal rights activist in college. And hardcore vegan, like the kind that's like really annoying, and there were some views and tactics of the like animal rights people at my

college, including myself, that I find really abhorrent today. Like we read and passed around this book that analogized between human slavery and “animal slavery,” quote-unquote, which in retrospect is clearly racist and problematic and wrong. That kind of analogy doesn't hold up. But I think at 21 years old, there was a lot of fierceness without deep thinking behind it sometimes. And yeah, some of the stuff in college, looking back, it's cringy. I think that's part of the privilege of being a young white man as well, is the ability to engage in these kinds of discourses and practices without fearing the harm, the potential harm, that comes from them. The harm of some of these radical discourses is often felt by marginalized peoples and communities that at the time, I was just like, horribly naive of. So, I would say I was a white leftist. Yeah.

*[laughter]*

**Catherine Jessee:** When did you graduate from college?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** 2005. 2005.

[19:15]

**Catherine Jessee:** 2005. I want to pause here and, and ask a bit about your experience as an LGBTQ-plus person — and what some of your first experiences were like. You mentioned, having friends who were queer and being in those spaces, but yeah, what were some of your first experiences like?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** So this is always hard because there's something that I've

experienced, and I've seen this with other trans people. When you come out as trans, then you start to look back at childhood or other times, and you start to see things that you never realized before. And I wonder about how much those are real versus... not implanted memories, but that there's a process of creating a narrative of how to explain why I'm trans or why I'm queer. And so I'll share the stories with you, and I share them in my book that's coming out soon. But I think it's worth questioning how do these memories get curated into a narrative that quote-unquote explains how I became who I am. And I think a lot of that's constructed after the fact.

But when I was in middle school — I tried to really think about when this was by pinpointing different memories together, and I think it was like seventh grade to ninth grade. So early, tween years, probably right when I was going through puberty, that I wore my mother's clothes, like a lot. I mean, it went on from seventh grade to ninth grade. It was always in secret. It was always, I came home from school off the bus before my parents were home from work, that I went into my mom's wardrobe and closets and stuff. I mean, underwear and dresses and bras and everything and I would put those on and look at myself in the mirror and liked it. And then I would put everything away and

there was intense shame around it. Like I'm pretty sure I often told myself, *that better be the last time I do that, this is wrong, what's wrong with me? I'm not going to ever do that again.* And then of course, I would do it again and again and again. I don't know why I stopped eventually, probably something with the hormones of puberty that had kicked in and then leveled out or something, all that testosterone pumping through me when I was 12, 13, 14 years old. So, I did that a lot. I have no recollection of thinking at the time that I wanted to live as a girl, be a girl. I wanted to wear those things. It was erotic to wear them. And in trans studies and discourses, there's this whole debate about like, *are you really trans or do you just have a fetishistic relationship with like, clothing?* There is something in the DSM [Diagnostic Statistical Manual] like a mental illness diagnosis that's about transvestic fetishism which delineates people who wear women's clothes just to get off versus like someone who actually has dysphoria and is actually trans—which is all bullshit, and I wasn't thinking about that at age 12. But thinking about it now it's like — my recollection of that time was that it was it was very much an erotic experience putting on the clothes, it was less about a kind of gendered embodiment that I hoped I could carry into other spaces.

However, I will say, then as I moved into high school, there were times — in middle school, there were several times that I had homosexual inclinations but not experiences—with sleepovers with boys, male friends and stuff like that, where I craved touch with them and stuff in ways that I never consummated but felt that yearning and I didn't know what to make of that either. But then by high school, my sexuality had gotten to a point that was more clearly about being attracted to women, but I did increasingly desire the embodiment of being a girl with a girl.

And so, I remember there was a girl in my high school who I did end up having a couple-week long thing with at one point of just making out and maybe dating, whatever it was. She also dated women, and I remember seeing her with another girl on campus one time and feeling extremely jealous in a way that I was putting myself into the body of the other girl and wanting to be in that embodiment of the lesbian encounter. I was in high school—and I wrote about this a bit in my book, too—but I was discovering porn online. This would have been like the late '90s. My parents had—yeah, late '90s was high school—my parents had a personal computer, and we were very early to get internet because we dialed in through Union College, through my dad's employer. So, we had the World Wide Web access in the mid-90s, like maybe even

before a lot of homes did. And I discovered porn—there's always been porn as long as there's been [the] internet. And I was attracted to lesbian porn. And again, it was the eroticism of imagining myself in the embodiment. It wasn't just the gaze. I mean, it's certainly true that there are straight men who watch lesbian porn and it's through a male gaze. But for me, it's always about imagining myself as one of the women. So, a lot of that was— it's clear to me now, I'm not sure how clear it was to me then—but a lot of that was going on in high school. And I did date girls; my first girlfriend was freshman year. And so, I had girlfriends. I think once I was actually—just to close up this topic—once I was actually into relationships with girls, then it felt like, *Oh my god, I need to perform heterosexuality for them*. This is what we've agreed to, this is what this is, is about me being the man and trying to get them to like me as their boyfriend and perform that role. The goal of performing that role successfully became all-consuming from age 14 to 31 when I came out.

[27:41]

**Catherine Jessee:**

Tell me about life after you came out.

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Well, that's jumping ahead, but yeah. So, three years after college, I met someone who became my wife. I was married. That all happened in my twenties, before I came out. I was 25 when I met



her. We were together for five and a half years, and I moved to New York City with her where I ended up spending five, six years of my life in New York City. We got engaged and we got married, and we lived together, and it was the culmination of that heterosexual goal of mine, of my life. Like, *Look, I did it, I got married, like, I'm a successful straight man. I got this to work, despite the fact and I'm so feminine, and despite the fact that I hate straight sex, and despite the fact that my wife often joked around and called me a lesbian, which didn't make sense to me, but I'm sure deep down it did, and now it does* [laughter]. But she could see that I approached her through a kind of embodiment that was not 'straight man.' And yet, despite that, despite—I think she clearly saw that—despite that, we really tried to make it work. And once we got married is when things started to deteriorate. It was like reaching that culmination, and then immediately realizing you're looking down the other side of the hill, and realizing, *what have we done?* And so, we were only together married for about a year. That was like the end of our relationship, where it just devolved. She, to her credit, she did a lot of the realizing of like, *what have we done, this was a mistake. How do we get out of this?* [That] kind of thing. Whereas I was grasping at it for dear life because heterosexuality was the armor that I'd been wearing for so long to try to actually be successful in the world. I mean, on top of

being a white man, straightness was also something I really wanted. Because, I mean, who wants to be—who wants to face sexism and oppression and homophobia and stuff? And I had faced homophobia growing up because I was always read as a gay man and bullied and all kinds of horrible stuff. I was really, really grasping at straightness. And she had to take the real bold steps to kind of end the marriage. But anyway, I was like, *We need to go to couples counseling. I want to save this marriage.* And she wouldn't agree to [it], which I think in retrospect was very smart.

So, I went to therapy on my own, and it was in therapy very quickly with my therapist that I realized that maybe I'm not straight. I had moved out by that point of our place. I lived at the YMCA for a few months, and then finally found an apartment in Brooklyn. And I came out as queer in early 2014. I was 31. And I guess what I'll just say about that before your next question is that, when I came out, I wrote a blog post, put it on social media, and put it everywhere. And basically, I said, *I'm not 100% straight. I'm not 100% cis*—I'm not sure if I use that word. No, I probably said male, not 100% male. It was a very negative coming out, it wasn't like positively saying, *I'm this, I'm that*, because I looked at the letters in the acronym LGBT, and I'm like, *I don't think I'm any of those things.* I'm not a gay man, because I'm mostly into women.

I'm not a lesbian, because I was a man. I'm not bi because I have to have both of those things sorted out to figure that out. I didn't think I was trans because I thought I was still a guy. So, it was like, *I know I'm not straight. I'm not male. But I don't know what I am.* And honestly, when I came out and approached—starting to meet queer people and try to find my place in the queer world—it was really, really, really hard, because I couldn't articulate to people what I was. And I would just say queer, which is such a wonderful word. Because I felt I belonged with that word in the fact that the word is so unclear in what it encompasses.

But yeah, I had so many dates that first year of coming out and dating people, mostly dating women still, but I did go on dates with men and non-binary people. But they would all ask, they'd be like, *so what are you?* And I could never really answer it. And I thought, *this is the riddle of queerness*—to neither be cis and straight and not be L, G, B, or T. So that's kind of where I was at when I came out.

[33:53]

**Catherine Jessee:**

How long did you live in New York? After finding your own apartment? And what year was that?

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Like a year. I moved to New York City in 2009. I was 26, and I

was with my wife there until I was 30, 31. I moved to Brooklyn in 2014, when I was 31, and I moved out the next year, when I was 32, which is when I moved to Virginia. So, I had like a year in Brooklyn of queerness. And it was awful. [*laughter*] People have this metronormative narrative, right? That being queer in New York City, you must be like a kid in a candy shop, and being queer in Appalachia must suck. But for me, the experience has been completely flipped. I was just talking to a New Yorker, a gay man who is from New York recently about this. And I was saying, when I came out as queer in Brooklyn, it was overwhelming. There wasn't just an LGBTQ community, but there's tons of communities, there's tons of different cliques, there's tons of different scenes, and I had no one to mentor me or to guide me into spaces. So, I don't remember going into any kind of LGBTQ group spaces, organizations. Probably I could have tried, but I think I was so embarrassed and unsure about what I was, because I couldn't say, *Oh, I'm a gay man, or I'm a lesbian, or I'm trans*. None of that made sense to me yet. People saw me as like — I always worried that people saw me as a straight man who is interloping in these spaces. And the queer women I dated had questions about that, too, like, *So, are you just a straight man, or what?*

So, Brooklyn was really lonely and hard for me in that way, versus in Virginia, there's one LGBT community center in the city I live in, there's one gay bar, there's one of many of these things. So, like, I can just go to that one place, and assume that whatever the heck I am, like, whatever letter I am in the alphabet soup of the acronym, that I belong there, in a way that in a big city like New York it was really, really hard to have that sense of belonging.

[37:01]

**Catherine Jessee:** You mentioned the one LGBTQ community center. Is that the Diversity Center?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Yeah.

**Catherine Jessee:** Can you tell me more about what it was like moving to Virginia?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** When I moved to Brooklyn, I then was going into my last year in my Ph.D. program. So, I knew I was going to leave New York anyway. Because I didn't feel like I had a shot at getting a job as a professor in New York, because it's so competitive. So, I applied to like seventy jobs all around the country, and there were a handful that I got interviews at and were interested in bringing me on, and none of them got to the point where I had an offer in writing except for Roanoke College. But the places that I was becoming a finalist in were like — Idaho was one, which, I don't know, I can say right now, *Ooo, I'm glad that didn't happen.* But that's exactly what I thought about Southwest Virginia too [*laughter*] at the time. I'm

not sure I imagined at the time that either Southwest Virginia or Idaho had anything good going for it when I was in New York. I think one of the jobs was in Connecticut, which seemed more like a known quantity to me.

But I knew I was going to move and, actually, I moved out of New York City, I moved out of my apartment before I had a job lined up, because my lease was up, and I just knew New York was done. So I ended up — I had money from a fellowship to finish my Ph.D. that I used to go to Hawai‘i, where my dissertation research was focused, on Hawai‘i. So, I left New York in February, I spent the rest of that academic year in Honolulu, where I rented a room. Actually, I dated a man for the first time in Honolulu and had some new experiences there. I started wearing more — doing my nails and some makeup and stuff in Honolulu. I remember where I was, I lived in a boarding house kind of thing. There was six of us in there, it was all women, and they saw me as a gay person—they saw me as a gay man—but it was the first time I had been openly seeing... they knew I was going on dates with this guy, and they were like very perplexed by my feminine embodiment that I was starting to come into, and they were like really, really supportive of that, of me being a gay man, and I had never experienced being out around people in that way. So, it was good. But anyway, that

money ran out, and I got a fellowship in Boston that summer, and then I moved there, by that point, the job had been lined up and I moved to Virginia in August.

So that year was 2015, and I just bounced all around. When I moved down here in August of 2015, I was in a really precarious place in my life in many ways. I mean, being queer — I had been out at that point for almost a year and a half, but I still had no fucking idea like what I was. And I reached out to the Diversity Center before I even came, before I showed up, like, reached out and said, *Hey, I'm moving down there*. And I said that like, *I'm a history professor, and I'd be really interested in doing some LGBT history project work stuff*—that had already been like formulating in my mind. I think I also connected with Joe Cobb, who was the pastor at MCC church in Roanoke, which is a gay church. He's now the first openly gay elected official in Roanoke city, but at the time he was a pastor at this gay church. I connected with him, too, I think, before I moved down. I may have connected also with the president of Roanoke Pride by email, which is the organization that puts on the pride festival. So, I just reached out to a lot of these contacts I found online. I was like, *Hey, I'm moving down there*. I don't know what I said about myself, that *I'm queer* — that's probably the language I used — and *I'm a professor, and I'm*

*interested in getting involved in the community and offering my skills as a historian.* So, I very clearly had conceptualized that merging my work as a historian in with LGBTQ stuff would be a way to make community, to find people, to have a sense of belonging in this new place. And I write about that in my book, just that there was something strategic about this project for me, at the beginning of trying to find my people, so I feel safe. The college struck me as a very heteronormative institution. It is a Christian college, and I didn't —

**Catherine Jessee:**

Roanoke College?

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Roanoke College. Yeah, and I didn't initially meet any out queer faculty, although later I did. But so initially, I felt like... and I wasn't out when I applied for the job. I was completely closeted and just presented myself as a white, straight man, which has been the great surprise for my colleagues that they now have a trans woman lesbian colleague [*laughter*]. But I mean, I guess I knew that I needed to be out, and I would need to do that process, and I knew that I needed to be around LGBTQ people, and that wasn't going to happen at the college, and so yeah... I hit the ground running. Within a month of moving here, we had had our first meeting of the history project.



A couple of months later, I joined the board of the Diversity Center. I served on their board for two years, and I just started getting involved with everything LGBTQ — and dating, also. And to try to see if I could make a life for myself here in a way that I wasn't able to do in New York. It's like a second coming out, a second chance at *what does it mean to be queer in the world? And what does that look like?* And this was an odd place to do that work, obviously, although it's not odd for people who grew up here, they have to do that. But, for me as a New Yorker — yeah, I mean, maybe it felt somewhat scary, but it felt also very exciting, to —especially the [Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+] History Project—to be able to be on the cusp of new work, to help people in a community do new things and think about our queer — think about our community in a new way, like that felt purposeful and exciting.

[45:04]

**Catherine Jessee:**

How did the History Project come to be? You mentioned that started pretty quickly within I think you said a month or a few months. How did that start?

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Yeah, I think I had been in touch with Frank House who is the co-founder of the Diversity Center, and I suggested to him that I would be happy to do a workshop at the center around LGBT history. I still have the notes for the workshop, which are

interesting to look back on. I didn't have any training — I don't have training in LGBTQ history. Some gender studies stuff, but really not — that's not really what my training as a historian is. But I cobbled together some—for the workshop, I cobbled together a bit of a presentation about, *What does LGBTQ history look like?* And particularly, *what do community-based LGBT history projects look like?* A big example I shared with them was the History Project in Boston, which is one of the oldest LGBTQ history projects. I had been in Boston that summer, like I said, and I intersected a little bit with that project when I was there, because I knew I was going to Roanoke. I took one of their walking tours and read some of their materials, and I wanted to learn from that project as an example. So, I talked about that one. I may have talked about some other projects, and then we did a lot of workshopy stuff. We were there for two hours that first meeting, and the workshopy stuff was with big pieces of paper and markers and splitting into groups, which is one of my favorite tactics still to this day, and asking people to brainstorm. And the brainstorming was like, *What do you — what would you want an LGBT history project to achieve? Like, what do we — what should we do? What should we work on? What do you want to work on?* And we left that first meeting with two big mandates that they had come up with. There was like 18 people in the room that night, so

we split into a bunch of groups, and they each presented and where the overlap was: oral histories was one of the mandates that had come up several times that they wanted to do interviews with elders. I was like, *Okay, I can help with that.*

I had like no training at that point in oral history. I think I'd done a little bit in grad school in the mid-2000s, a long time before. And then the other one was to develop an archive to collect people's papers. And we met a few more times — the project met throughout the fall on that question in terms of like, where would we want to... where will we want these archives to be? Like, would we partner with an institution or create our own or whatever? We ended up partnering with the Roanoke Public Libraries, which have been an amazing partner. And a big impetus for choosing the public library that came from the mostly gay men who are involved in the project at that time was that they felt like it was already like a known space to them, that they knew the public library, they felt largely safe there. They thought that that was a place they felt very accessible, versus... they were very opposed to Roanoke College or Virginia Tech or something like that controlling these materials, because they felt that they didn't trust the colleges and universities to give them access and give them

authority, share authority, and like, really collaborate. So that's how we ended up with the public library.

**Catherine Jessee:**

That really makes me think — thinking about how the product is today versus when it started, can you tell me about how it looks today and how it's changed?

[49:25]

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Well, it's changed a lot. I think when we started that — one thing that I've done a lot of reflecting on, and that I would say we have reflected on as a group as a project, is who's involved and who has the mic and questions of power and representation. I mean, the very first meeting at the Diversity Center when the project was founded was a really good mix of people young and old and white and nonwhite and different genders and sexualities, and there were some trans women there, there were Black LGBT people. But within the first few months of the project, it had — the people who kept going to meetings, who stayed engaged, who helped select the first round of oral history narrators, who helped establish the archives and get that off the ground, were mostly white gay men.

And so, it was important that we reflected — and I did a lot of reflecting on why that was. It could have been partially because I also presented, I think, to many people as a white gay cis man at the time when this project started. So as people in the community

looked to think like, *What is this project about? Who is this new professor? Is this about me?* They may not have seen themselves reflected in it. I think that's always a question about leadership and representation, and the question of leadership is a complicated one for our project because we've never had elected leaders, and we've debated that and we've always said that we don't want to have officers, we don't want to elect people, we don't want to incorporate, and it always inevitably means that my role is... I've never been dethroned from my role that I think I fall into very easily—though not uncritically—but easily in this project as “the professor,” quote-unquote, because the hundreds of people who have engaged in the project over the past six years are LGBTQ people in the community and over the whole course of time skew young and skew not-male. They do skew white still, but I feel like I've — I think I've always continued to be a kind of a spokesperson and coordinator, and that's challenging in that I'm constantly revisiting that question of, *how does leadership work?*

But anyway, going back. We went through some growing pains in 2016, or in our first into second year, where I was really disappointed with the first round of oral histories we did, because they were so overwhelmingly with older white gay cis men, and I just thought we weren't doing this right. We can't just — we can't

just open the door to invitation and whoever comes in... you know, whoever floats to the top, is the people we work with. Because there's a lot of questions of privilege and access and power that play into the question of whether someone shows up at the meeting or not, or whether someone agrees to do the interview or not, or whether someone donates their papers or not, and so I think if we do this uncritically and just open the door and say, *Come, give, give your stories, help us plan the project*, we end up reinforcing systems of power and privilege that already exist, we just reify those and they keep cycling through. And it's true if you look at the landscape of LGBTQ organizing in the city, historically but still to this day, most organizations are run by white gay men. Or the chair people of nonprofits are white gay men, and I think we come up against this big challenge, which is the way people envision what LGBTQ history is—[I'll] do my air quotes here, "LGBTQ history"—When people think about, *What are the stories? Who are the actors? What happened? What matters?* I think we—many of us—fall back into imagining white people or gay men or something like that. In my mind it's a little different, after all this time what I imagine is not that, but I think with my students and others, that is what they imagine.

[54:51]

So, we changed that and I'm not exactly sure how it

changed. A lot of young queer women got involved in 2016 to the point that once we were like a year into the project, the meetings were mostly queer women in their twenties. White, mostly white queer women, who had taken over the mantle of decision making as a group, because that's how we make decisions at our meetings based on whoever's there through... we try to do it through consensus. Or when we launched our walking tours, all of our walking tour guides at first were young queer women. And to this day, with a couple exceptions, all of our guides have been queer women—and there are exceptions—but mostly white queer women. And our second round of oral histories was all with queer women.

The project definitely changed in that way, and then in 2017, we in 2018 won a grant to do specifically QTPOC work—queer/trans people of color organizing—and we hired young Black queer women—four Black queer women who were in their late teens and early twenties. We trained them — we hired them, trained them in oral history, they did interviews with Black queer elders, and the relationships with the Black queer elders — the young women have gone on and done other things with their lives, but the Black queer elders have remained a key part of our project since then. We won another grant a year ago, I think, at the start of COVID,

specifically for money for Black queer women to organize events here in Roanoke. So that's also been a very intentional part of our work is providing resources to and supporting Black queer organizing in the city, and the first explicitly Black queer organization did form a couple years ago here, and we still try to work with them and support them however we can. I think that in my naivety as a white queer person, when we started doing work with the Black LGBTQ community here in Roanoke, which is a significant, large community—but historically unorganized, and historically marginalized by the white LGBTQ groups and spaces— When we started doing that work, I think we imagined that we, as in the white LGBT people involved in the group, we thought that we would recruit Black LGBTQ people into the History Project and into leadership positions, and the project would change. And I think what's happened otherwise is that we have provided training and resources and visibility and empowerment to Black LGBTQ people, and they've created their own spaces and their own organizations and stuff, which is fucking fantastic. That's great. And I think that as we continue to revisit this question, which we did a lot this summer with the uprisings after George Floyd's murder and stuff, we came back to this question, and we had a big meeting in the park this summer—despite COVID, but we did it outside—where we had members of this new Black



LGBT group in town, and then some of the old-standing white LGBTQ members of the History Project, and we talked about, like, *where do the things stand on this issue of white supremacy and racism within our LGBTQ community, and within the history work itself?* And I think we're on the same page now about continuing to think about it as white queer folks doing work and funneling resources and funneling knowledge and funneling tools into the hands of Black LGBT people, rather than some kind of great amalgamation or coopting or something like that. So, those are ways that it's changed. Obviously, I've changed, too.

For me coming out as a trans woman—this is a big part of my book—is just trying to think about my own subjectivity and how my own view about LGBT history and what matters and how stories should be told has changed as I have gone through the length of this project—from moving through the world as a white cis man to moving through the world as a white trans dyke. And my interactions for example, with the white cis gay male community have, I guess I could say, deteriorated [*laughter*]. I mean, in as much as that when I first moved here, people read me as a white gay man, and I went to house parties or I'd go to the gay bar and all these gay men would talk to me and I had a lot of relationships there. And those are mostly all gone. I don't think I

have any white... okay, maybe one [*laughter*]. There are very few white cis gay men in my life now. I do so much more organizing with trans people. And I would say then that the other really important community to me is the lesbian community. So, it's interesting to think about — just think about subjectivity and how there was a time in the project when I and my friend who's a trans man, that we, the two of us, just started really pushing trans issues to the forefront in the project. And that felt a politically important and operative thing to do. But it's also very clearly self-centered in a way. Okay, my last thought on this—I know I've not given you a lot of time for questions— there was an older white cis gay man. This was maybe two summers ago we had a—we do a lot of these things in the park, where we have potlucks and gather and do social stuff...

**Catherine Jessee:**

Is that Pride in the Park?

[1:01:00]

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

It wasn't, no, these are our own History Project gatherings that we do every year in the park. As we create our own social spaces, our own — I don't know, it's important, I think, for many of us that the project is a community and it's not just work. But there was an older white cis gay man who came two years ago to one of these gatherings and clearly looked and felt out of place and then told me, he was like, *I don't think that this history project*

*is for me, it seems like y'all are doing — y'all have other things going on.* And it's sad, because in the early days of the project, I thought that one of the great successes of it was that we were creating new spaces of sociality and community and storytelling among the elders that — they could go to the gay bar, but they wouldn't have those connections and be able to tell those stories, and there weren't spaces like that. And so the History Project I think at first offered up this space that was a way for a certain generation of people to connect with each other over a shared love of the past or shared interest in the past. And I do think we've lost a lot of that, and I think that that's negative. I think the project much more now is people in their twenties and thirties who are more political — it's more politicized, more politically radical. And a lot of the people involved now did not live through this history. Their interest in it, I think, is more about using queer history as a way to... as a way to engage in contemporary issues, as a way to empower and stuff, but I don't know. Yeah. It's definitely changed and it will keep changing. Okay, I'll take a break now.

**Catherine Jessee:** You're fine.

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Okay.

**Catherine Jessee:** We are a little bit over an hour, though, and I just wanted to just remain sensitive to your time and ask, how much do you feel like you might have? Like another 10 or 20 minutes or so?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** I could do twenty, yeah.

**Catherine Jessee:** Okay, great. Thank you. Yeah so — you mentioned you had a friend, where you both pushed or at some point started pushing more conversations around trans inclusivity within the History Project. When was that, would you say?

[1:04:42]

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Well, I met him in 2016 and — yeah, he probably got involved in the project in the latter half of 2016. I write about in the book this meeting we had. This would probably have been late—I'm guessing late 2016. There were two older white trans women who were involved in the project from the get-go. They were our first oral histories with trans people, and they attended lots of meetings, and they were very involved in decision making stuff, which was fantastic. I remember meeting—this is probably a year into the project, so late 2016—one or both of those trans women were there. They were probably in their sixties or even older, and also one of them brought a cis woman friend, also to the meeting, and then Ollie, my transmasculine friend, and I were there. And someone brought up the issue of the term “queer,” and this comes up often in these multi-generational conversations. And the older trans woman but I think it was actually the cis friend who was most vocal about this saying, like, *That's a slur. We shouldn't use the word queer in the programming that the project does. It's*

*very alienating, and it's offensive, and let's use different terms, whatever. And then I remember Ollie — I was getting visibly upset or something — but I could see across the room that he was too and then he piped in and was like, *I'm queer. I identify as that. This term is really important to me.* And then he was explaining how it was reclaimed in the '90s and the whole history of the term, and what it means to young people today especially.*

And it was one of those moments where—those two older trans women bowed out of the project, at some point, by the end of that year. We didn't really see them again. I did, I saw them at events and stuff, but they weren't involved in the project after that—and even though we were debating the term queer there, I think that there was a kind of passing of the guard around trans stuff, too. I was just-just-just coming — transitioning —just coming out myself. And yeah, and then I would say into 2017, we developed a program called “Living Trans History,” which was an interactive theater program with youth that we first premiered in a local high school with kids, and then we did at a summer camp for several years with LGBTQ youth. And yeah — that was the first explicitly trans history thing that we did. And that was Ollie, myself, and my ex who at the time identified as a cis woman. The three of us, we put that together, and it was based on oral histories with trans

people that we'd done in the project. So, it was bringing the voices of the elders out, but it was really about connecting with young, teenage trans and non-binary and gender nonconforming youth, and trying to bridge that seemingly unbridgeable generational divide between different ideas about transness. And it was a really, really, really cool program, and I write about it a lot in my trans chapter in my book.

But yeah, so that's an example of emphases shifting or approaches shifting as different people get involved and different people leave the project. I think we've done more women's history as more women, young women, have become involved in the project. We've definitely tried to be more intentional around that. We did an event where we connected lesbian elders who had been organized here in the '80s with young, queer women, and they were able to share across the generation with each other. So, yeah.

**Catherine Jessee:**

How did you and Ollie meet?

[1:09:53]

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Yeah, we met at one of our—I think it was our last one that we did—What did we call these? Archive collection events. This was in the first year of the project.

After we developed the archive with the public libraries, we realized that we needed to do events to gather material. We couldn't just say, *There's an archive now, drop off things*. We wanted to create spaces that felt welcoming and known to LGBTQ people, so we did those events. We did one in the gay bar on a night when it wasn't normally open, but they did serve drinks and stuff. And that was a really cool event, and people brought materials to donate. We did one at the Diversity Center, and we did two at different churches, and I met — Ollie was volunteering at one of these churches at the time, working with queer youth, and that's how we met. So, I mean, that's a good example of how people got involved in the project too, it is just so many random ways. We met Ollie through the archive collection event at the UU [Unitarian Universalist] church.

We met another young, queer woman who got involved, attended a talk I gave at the Co-Lab—which is like a co-working space—about the History Project early on. And she ended up getting involved for many years.

My ex, who was very involved in the project—and our relationship is very interwoven with the project, which is something I write about in the book, because that was unexpected—but they got

involved by first doing an oral history interview for the project, and then stayed involved.

And then — someone who's really involved in the project now, I think, first intersected with the project on one of our bar crawls, which is an event we haven't done in a bit, but every spring, we would, on a Friday night, we would do an event where we would go from one historic gay bar to the next historic gay bar around Downtown Roanoke to six different sites and get a drink at that place if it's still a bar today, or at a nearby place. Some of them are now straight establishments, and some of them are not bars at all anymore, but we'd get a drink nearby. And we've done that for many years.

And I remember, someone who's involved in the project pretty heavily now did the crawl, and we raffled off these hats that say *Make Roanoke Queer Again*, which was our slogan we adopted early on in the project before Trump was elected. During the campaign, the 2016 campaign, someone in the project came up with that slogan. So, we have these hats that say, *Make Roanoke Queer Again*. They're not red, they're blue, because we don't want people to mistake what they are [*laughter*]. But we raffle off those



hats at events, and they got the hat at the event, and then they've been involved for like four years since then.

So, there's all kinds of ways that people have been involved. I told you I think that we've had some teenagers who have been involved long term in the project as well. One is like my adopted child, who I met when they were 15, and we met at the Diversity Center. They were volunteering there on something, and heard about the work we were doing with the LGBT Library, the historic books and stuff like that, which is a whole 'nother aspect of the project. And she got involved in that, and — we still have a very close relationship now that they went off to college, and I think they're 20 years old now. But as long as they were here in the area, they were very involved in the project. They gave walking tours and stuff like that.

And then more recently, we had another high school student who I think just reached out to me on social media or something like that, and was like, *Hey, any opportunities to get involved?* And we met up and discovered that she could, during a break at the school during the school day, she would leave school and go to the public library to the archives to digitize materials for an hour, and then go back to school. And she did that for a year and digitized a huge amount of material for us. It was really helpful. So, I love having

young people involved, because of course, this is in the context of our school systems here saying, *Oh, it's not appropriate to talk about homosexuality in school or whatever.* And it's like, *Well, let me at them. I'll give them an education if they get involved in the project.*

[1:15:10]

**Catherine Jessee:** Can you walk me through the bar crawl? If that were as it's happened in the past or if it were to happen today? That evening?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Yeah. So —

**Catherine Jessee:** The spaces and their names?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Okay, so it's changed. Okay, the first one we did was 2016, and I think the last one we did was 2019, because then we've been in COVID time since then. The route has changed every year. We always revisit it and discuss it at our project meetings, because some of the places we get drinks at are homophobic and then we debate the value of us queering the space, which is more of the 'guerrilla gay bar' tactic of like, *Let's take over this straight place, and make it gay for the night,* versus the question of withholding our money—which would be the other alternative—from such a place because they suck. And — I guess that's a philosophical question for the whole guerrilla gay bar movement itself about putting money into these straight institutions as part of a political action of taking up spaces, is complicated.

We almost always start... well, we start, at the City Market building downtown, and talk about the history of sex work right outside of that building, and particularly trans sex workers and share some of those stories from oral histories.

And then we go into Billy's for the first drink, we've always done that. Billy's is a very straight place that opened up [in] I think 1980 or early '80s. At the time when there were still many trans sex workers right outside of Billy's. We have lots of stories in the oral history collection of how the white elite diners inside of Billy's would just gaze out the windows at the trans sex workers and their johns and it was a show for them to watch. So, I always find that when I walk by there or in there that I'm engaging in some kind of subversive reenactment with my own trans woman body of like *I've gone from the street outside to inside*, although I'm not a sex worker, but thinking about the representation there of how my body is seen in that space. So that's always an interesting space to go to. We've never faced any big issues there, but it's definitely interesting to have a bunch of queer and trans people suddenly show up [*laughter*].

And we move on from there to visit the site of The Last Straw, which was the second gay bar to ever open in Roanoke in 1973. It's

a church now. So, we stand outside of that and talk and then we get a drink nearby.

We stopped getting drinks at Corned Beef, which is nearby, because — there were some bad incidents there where they ejected some trans women of color from the bar and stuff like that, so we stopped going there.

We would go on to Nite and Day which was a short-lived gay bar on Kirk Avenue that was open for like a year in the late '70s.

That's now the bar Lucky, which is kind of an upscale place and we got barred at the door of Lucky the first year. They wouldn't let us inside [*laughter*] which was great because we had a reporter and a photographer from the *Roanoke Times* with us, so when the *Roanoke Times* did the story of the bar crawl they started with Lucky barring us from entering, which I thought was juicy [*laughter*].

Then we went on to Murphy's which was a disco in the late '70s, a gay discotheque which is now Martin's, which is a very straight place. The first year we went there, the bouncers were outside listening to us talk about the history before we went in. And then as we went up to the door, they were — they were weird, but they

let us in. Keep in mind there was like 20 to 25 of us, so we were like a big pack, which is... that's the rationale Lucky gave us for barring us they said, *it's too many of you, you won't fit*. They let us into Martin's, but the bouncers as they were checking IDs, they were like, *This is a family establishment, keep it cool*, basically telling us to de-queer ourselves [*laughter*]. And then we'd wander off down to the site of the Horoscope, which was the first disco in 1975 it opened up. And that's now condos and stuff.

[1:20:23]

Then down the street to Backstreet, which is no... Backstreet doesn't exist anymore. But when we started, it was still Backstreet, and we never went in there because they often charged covers because they'd have shows and we didn't want to pay covers. But we talked with the manager outside of the bar, who was a trans woman at the time when we started the bar crawl, and that was a great encounter. But then she was fired, and they rebranded the place, it's now called the Front Row. And it's like de-gay, and it's been de-gay over the past twenty years since the Backstreet Cafe shooting in 2000. But this process has culminated with the erasure, of the full erasure of the gayness of that site, so we don't go there anymore. Sometimes we would get a drink across the street at Beamer's, but then one year they said something to us like, *we*

*don't usually get your kind here.* People in our group were peeved about that treatment, so we stopped going there.

And then we'd walk down the street, from Salem Avenue down to The Park and then end at The Park and dance [*laughter*]. So, I don't know. I mean, if we did it again after COVID, I think we'll have to meet and talk about the route again and think about — because it's gotten heated at times as people have debated, *Where should we go and spend our money? Or like, Do we want to try and crash this place?* Our numbers have dwindled over the years too. The first time was such a spectacle with like 25 people at its height, and I think the last time was maybe 10 people throughout the night, which is still super fun. And people—every year, it's people that we've never met before, who have not engaged with the History Project ever before—and we get super drunk together after that many stops. And it's just queer people. I love the event, because it's historical, it's about history, people are learning about their city. It's just super fun, and entertaining, and social, and so I think it's a great kind of public history project.

**Catherine Jessee:**

How do people learn about that? If they're not involved in the History Project proper?

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

Probably on social media — we have a Facebook and

Instagram. And that's long been a beast for people to take responsibility to manage those. But most recently, we've had a wonderful Research Assistant from Roanoke College. So, I'm able to hire one student a year with work study funds or stuff like that, who will be a research assistant for the project, which is fantastic, because people in the project will always have things they want to do like, *Could we do an exhibit on XYZ? Do we have any material on this?* Whatever. And we've always have—we've had a student, that's been true since the beginning of the project, we've always had one undergraduate student who's getting paid. But the current Research Assistant has done a great job with also managing social media as part of their job. So finally, we don't have to worry about who's going to post something about this event or whatever. But yeah, that's mostly Facebook, probably. We have a bigger presence on Facebook than Instagram and [we] make event pages and people sign up for the event. That's pretty much how it's been.

**Catherine Jessee:**

I have one last question — I guess, a couple more last questions, if that's okay. What are you proudest of in your work, in your work as an organizer in Southwest Virginia? Take all the time you need.

[1:24:49]

**Samantha Rosenthal:**

I think it's the community. I mean, that's the most important part to me. The History Project is — there's so much messy overlap, at least in my life, but I think it's true of other people who've been

involved in the project. There's a lot of overlap between friends and lovers and projects, and I think it's really important to this kind of work, that it is social and that we create... that we have relationships with each other and build community. Now, like I said before, I mean, there are people who feel excluded from that — that's real — who don't feel like the space is for them, or that they don't feel represented in the space, or they don't feel included, and that's changed over time. But there always will be people who feel like the History Project is not their scene. And that is — and it's something that we work on, and it's also okay, I think, because there are other scenes. And if you think of the History Project as a kind of LGBT community, there are other spaces. There's the bar, there's the community center. There are groups, there are groups of elders who gather and do things. There's a dinner club that's been going on for almost 20 years of older gay men. So, I think the History Project particularly appeals to LGBTQ people in their young adulthood, twenties and thirties, out of college, or maybe never went—many of the people never went to college. But in that time where you don't have a gay club, or like you don't have a very structured thing that you would get involved in. It's all volunteer, it's always been all volunteer, except when we've gotten grants to give little stipends to people or paid the one student at the college. But otherwise, everyone's involvement has



always been volunteer. And it's like, *What motivates someone to volunteer in their community?* And I think it can't just be because queer history is interesting. I think that's a part of it, but I think it's because people seek belonging, people seek community. I do. I mean, just speaking for myself, that's a huge role the project has played for me.

And so, I think that the greatest success of the project is mobilizing queer people to be actors in their own history, to feel a sense of authorship over the story of our city, of our region, of our community, to feel a sense of maybe pride—I hate the whole discourse of pride in LGBTQ spaces—but maybe feel a pride of place, especially in a region of the country that we learn—if you grew up here, or we are told otherwise—that it's not a queer space. I mean, I think that history is a tool that I've seen young people here use when they're involved in the project to say, *Did you know this? Did you know that? This place is so queer. It's always been queer.* So, I think there's a sense of belonging that comes from that knowledge that we belong here. I think about it on the most personal and interpersonal level about like, if the project helps queer people feel like they belong here, and then if they can meet other queer people and do fun things and think about their place in

the world and their place in time and space as a queer person, then that is — that is an amazing thing.

[1:29:08]

**Catherine Jessee:** Samantha, I don't have any more specific questions for you, but before we fully wrap up, is there anything else that you'd like to add or you'd like to be on the record that we haven't discussed yet today?

**Samantha Rosenthal:** I don't think so. This was really lovely. Thanks.

**Catherine Jessee:** Thank you so much.

**Samantha Rosenthal:** Thank you.

[1:29:36]

**End of Interview**