

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

**Interview with L Saunders
February 27, 2022**

Interviewer: Madelyne Culkin

Interviewee: L Saunders

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Total Duration: 59:14 (in two parts: 45:57 and 13:17)

Location: Fintel Library
220 High Street
Roanoke College
Salem, VA 24153

Transcribed by: Andrew Austin, Mel Staton, Madelyne Culkin, and Barney

00:00 – growing up in Blacksburg, Virginia (1986 – early 2000s); how ruralness impacted their approach to queerness

02:32 – spending time in Richmond for college (mid-2000s) and in London for graduate school

04:16 – how their work (as a documentarian) brings them into contact with queer people

06:11 – returning to Blacksburg in their mid-thirties (late 2010s)

07:04 – introduction and explanation of career in documentary film and photography; involvement in documenting pipeline resistance [the Mountain Valley Pipeline] in Appalachia

12:56 – finding like-minded people in pipeline resistance; ethical approaches to storytelling

15:42 – how queerness was discussed in their high school (early 2000s)

19:58 – views on same-sex marriage

20:46 – Southern approaches to queerness; how that varies geographically around the U.S.

25:53 - thoughts on Pride, and the Backstreet Cafe shooting (2000)

28:53 – changes in Blacksburg and in Floyd over the years

33:05 – message to their younger self; more reflections on artistic practice

37:42 – coming out after returning from London

40:31 – the current moment of Southern queer organizing; rural queer spaces

00:00 L's name change; using the label 'queer'

03:35 realization of queerness

09:43 Self validation and comfortability

0:00

MC: Alright, so my name is Madelyne Culkin. It's February twenty-seventh of 2022. It's about twelve-thirty and we're at the Fintel Library on the Roanoke College campus. And I'm here interviewing L Saunders. So if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself, your name, where you grew up, how old you are.

00:21

LS: Yeah. Yeah. Well, as you said, my name is L Saunders. I grew up over in Blacksburg not far down the road. And basically [I] was there until I took off for college to go to Richmond. And I currently just turned 36. So yeah...

MC: Awesome.

LS: Yeah.

00:41

MC: So growing up in Blacksburg, do you think that had an impact at all on being a part of the LGBTQ community?

LS: Yeah, definitely so. Growing up here, so I was like in elementary school in the '90s. And then graduated early 2000s. And I would say the climate around here was very different. Even though now you still really feel like the rural influence, I guess, of how people are allowed to be gay or allowed to be queer in like certain spaces. I would definitely say that for me, growing up here, it just wasn't even really presented as an option. I would say it was like a really big influence that it wasn't like it was sort of a thing that people would refer to, but there was a very small sort of, you know, ally club.

01:38

MC: Unspoken?

01:39

LS: Yeah, yeah. It was very rural in that way. And so, I feel like, for me, it was like anything that now I really see, like, beauty and my queerness and how I identify, I would ascribe to other things, I think, because of being in a rural place, and because of the way people treated just like even the idea that someone would be, you know, a queer person. So, yeah, it was deeply impactful. And I think ultimately just made it so I was moving through differently until I was in spaces where I was around other queer folks, and could have conversations.

And that really took a long time. Like, I think it normalized for me, just thinking parts about myself were attributed to something else and not my queerness. I would say maybe it's like a more crystallized way to put that.

02:32

MC: That's very interesting. So, you said you went back and forth? To Blacksburg?

02:39

LS: So yeah, so I went away to school. [My] undergrad was in Richmond; I was an art school kid. So yeah. All the joys of that. And then was back for a little bit, and then went to grad school in London. And then came back again. So I've kind of like done stints here and there. But very recently came back and have been here for a couple years. And in like the last couple years is the first time that I've actually been here and been out and like been, you know, in queer spaces, and really much more confident in my own queerness. Like it really took me a while to come around to acknowledging and sharing and feeling like I was celebrating it and not just being kind of confused about what was going on for me, you know. And I do think growing up here was deeply influential in that way. My sister's also queer, and we've talked a lot about it in recent years of just like how easy it is to just ignore and like tell yourself that you're fine with other options or like, you know, "that's not... whatever, it's okay." But I think, being back especially, and being able to be queer here has been, to be honest, it's just been really healing and like sacred, because it's like, I look around and I see all the reasons why it's still hard for people in this area. And it feels really good to see things like this happening and to see people celebrating it and making very public declarations of like, the beauty of it, you know? So it makes it special, honestly.

04:16

MC: Do you think there was any space that you felt like the most comfortable in or the most opening that really made you recognize your queerness? You said you were in London and going to Richmond...?

04:20

LS: Yeah, I mean, I think it's a slow burn, right? Like we are who we are, and I think that there were always moments of recognition that there was something about myself that didn't fall in line with like what had been prescribed to me. And so I've lived a life where I moved a lot and I lived a life that's like less quote-unquote 'conventional,' right? Like, my relationships have always looked different. And now I see they were queer, like, even if they presented as not queer to other people. They were queer, right? So like, understanding what that means and getting to be around people. I would say, you know, my work ultimately brought me into places—well, I kept choosing places—that were resistance-oriented, or like

mutual aid groups or, you know, spaces like that where people were really just welcoming and inclusive and I got to ask questions about gender and I got to ask questions about like how do we relate to each other? So, I mean, it's vague, but it's like there were so many little moments I think along the way, until, you know, finally it was just, well, either I live my life or I don't and I'm gonna live my life. Like it stopped being a thing that could not be addressed. It was just like, well, here we are, you know? And it was joyful, right? It was like, "Oh, God. it makes sense now!" Like, everything makes sense!

05:45

MC: I think that's an important thing, that comparison, especially coming back to Blacksburg and being able to recognize everything that you were uncomfortable with, or that you just didn't recognize, and now being able to compare it to who you are today.

05:53

LS: Yeah. Or felt judged by, right? Like the pieces of me that I was told either, like, explicitly or subtly aren't acceptable, right? For like who I am, and being able to just be like, "Nah, that's still really cool. It's great."

MC: Awesome.

06:10

LS: Yeah.

06:11

MC: So do you think your family was... did your family have an impact on you coming back to Blacksburg?

06:17

LS: Yeah, for sure, in certain ways. So, my mom and stepdad—I just call my dad—they're both still here. And yeah, having connections to the community feels really important to me. I've been pretty deeply involved in the pipeline resistance struggles here, and doing documentation work. And that's actually just a really queer space. I could say that has like let me be excited about having more queer folks in the area, like that's an area where I was just like, I feel good here, you know? So yeah, but my parents are here. And I just feel a very deep connection to like the physical space of the mountains here, having grown up here and stuff like that.

MC: Awesome.

LS: Yeah.

7:04

MC: So you said that you're a photographer and a filmmaker, and that the pipeline is what made you come back here. So, would you say you do more activism film work or nature? Or do you film or photograph subjects?

07:19

LS: All the time. It's mostly documentary work. I had a stint in D.C., and I've done, you know, corporate jobs that let me like pay my rent and stuff. And I always find, what I love about it is that you get to be introduced into people's worlds in a very intimate way. And like, very often I get to be around people who are, you know, for whatever reason, they're excited to share their life with me, or like someone wants them to and so they're doing it, but I would say most of my stories have been—the self-chosen ones—have been a lot about organizing spaces, and resistance spaces, but also just like community and what we do for each other, which I think also ultimately, I've realized, is very tied into what I don't think I had as a kid or like what I didn't really feel, and wanting to tell stories where people get to see like how special that is. So yeah.

08:18

MC: And do you think your queerness or your sexuality has shaped that work expression? Like, are there certain instances where you've definitely noticed it in your work?

08:28

LS: Yeah, for sure. I mean, the physicality of my job on any given day, I think, I feel like it does sort of push against these gender norms that were given about what work should look like for certain people or even like media-making for women, for women filmmakers, or for you know, femme folks, like what are you allowed to do and what space...? Like I interact on frontline spaces quite a bit where there's like a lot of cops who like bro out and like will just kind of put you in this category of being someone that, you know, can be handled in a certain way. And so, I let them. I'm like, "Okay, you can think what you want." Like, this is fine. I'll use this to my advantage. But like, it's funny, because now I see the sort of power dynamics of it. And, I think, because I've had to interrogate and fight for my queerness I feel so much more comfortable letting people assume what they want, and moving the way I need to anyway, if that makes sense. And I think that's deeply in my work. Like I see it everywhere, you know, of like, I'm here because I'm curious, but also because I'm kind of used to being misinterpreted, you know. Even in queer spaces, I present a certain way I think sometimes and I felt people will sort of dismiss different pieces. And I think as I've gotten more comfortable, it's bothered me less, but I think that sort of tension of who we know we

are and who people see us as I think I find myself also looking for that in the stories I tell of like complicating things and letting layers move and letting people feel what they want to feel from it. So yeah, deeply buried.

MC: Interesting.

LS: Yeah.

10:11

MC: Are there any photographers or artists that have influenced your work the most, do you think? Is there anyone that you look up to?

10:18

LS: Oh, gosh, I would have made a good list. I'm so bad. My ADHD is like "blah." Yeah, so many. Geez. Gosh, it makes me want to like email you after with my favorite things? Well, so recently, I've really enjoyed looking at the Highlander Center. And like, Appalachian projects, because there's such a great legacy of documented resistance here. And of clearly queer stories that feel really special and cool to me. And feel very much like things that I felt around me but weren't talked about directly, I guess is how I would describe that. Yeah, I mean, like all the documentation of the coal mine wars, and the mine strikes and just stuff like that, like I think that all has been deeply influential around here for the pipeline stuff that I'm working on. And then like in a wider context. There's different photographers over the years that have meant... Gilles Peress is a photographer that I really loved when I first started. And more so for the trajectory, like he started off as a war photographer, which somehow I thought that's what I wanted to do, because that's what you see. But as he grew older, and as he got out of the war zone spaces, he started making just like really beautiful collective work. And so I really identified with that art of like thinking, you need to do it one way, and then transforming through it and realizing I actually want to do this a little differently. But I've also just been deeply influenced by friends and colleagues and collaborators of mine. Doing my MA in London was deeply influential in that way. And I had a handful of folks who I really felt like pushed me in a direction that I wouldn't have gone otherwise. And let me ask the kind of questions that kind of tore apart the hierarchy of storytelling that we're handed of like making one thing more important, or something less important, you know, just sort of like the predictable ways of talking about stuff. So yeah, that's not many people, but it's references. Yeah.

12:40

MC: That's okay. Yeah, we can always go back to it. But I know that's hard. Pinpointing like certain people...

LS: on the spot, right?

MC: Yeah. And there's so many influential people.

LS: And I've changed. I've just had so many people who I feel like I quietly carry with me of like their work. I think about them a lot. And like, they'll come in at different moments.

12:56

MC: Yeah. Like you said, you have people that are within that work. Do you think that the people that you surround yourself with has changed as you [have] grown? And do you think that it's become more like... I know that you talk about the dichotomy and like realizing what has changed from being younger and being less open about yourself, and like opening up back in Blacksburg? But do you feel like there are certain communities that you've kind of felt the most in touch with or certain issues that you feel like you can connect with people the most on? It doesn't have to be queer related, but...

13:28

LS: Yeah, yeah. I think part of what helped me be more accepting or like acknowledge myself, and I don't feel like I was ever hiding. I think I just didn't ask more. Right? Like, it wasn't like I was ashamed of anything. I just sort of thought like, well, you know, it is what it is. And I didn't interrogate it that much. But I do feel like for sure, you know, a lot of these spaces that are more mutual aid oriented, or like organizing oriented, they just tend to be more queer. You know, it ends up being folks who just have asked these questions of themselves, too. And so there's less posturing of like needing to be a certain person. Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I think industry wise, there's challenges. So like, I've made good friends in the professional space. But there's a lot of things that you get asked to do as a storyteller that really rub me the wrong way of like, well, you guys were saying, which I love, like we want you to be comfortable. And if there's anything you don't want to talk about—that wasn't something they taught me in journalism school, which is disgusting. Like, I think this whole issue of consent or how we interact with people. There's things that in my professional world have been harder to find, but I have ultimately found communities in that and really felt like, “oh my god, like so grateful that we can interrogate this and have this conversation,” or like talk about how do we make work that looks different. Like right now I'm working on a podcast about the pipeline with a friend who I've wanted to collaborate with for ages. And being able to work with people who have really asked themselves like, what am I really saying about this? It's just beautiful. Like, it's so much fun. It's such a different process of making. It's just cool.

MC: I think it's interesting that you brought up the fact that it just wasn't acknowledged. You might have known that about yourself, but there wasn't that knowledge, I guess?

LS: Yeah.

15:42

MC: Or the idea of looking into it? It was just what it was. And I think that goes back to like growing up in the '80s, '90s, 2000s. Like, do you think that the Internet and being able to look at things and really recognize other viewpoints, do you think that influenced you being able to look at yourself and see what you considered important or valuable?

15:58

LS: Yeah. It just was so different. Like, it's hard to even articulate, like, I mean, sure. I remember Ellen being on the cover of *Time*, and that was a big deal. I remember people talking in hushed tones about the fact that there was like a lesbian on TV, you know? Like this is the shit that makes me feel old. Sorry, I'm trying not to do that [to curse]. But it's like, I think about those moments. And I think about, you know, the struggle for visibility, and for marriage, right? That was a huge, huge fight. I remember, you know, when they projected the rainbow, it's like, there definitely have been moments where you see things pushing forward, and you see things happening. I was a little young for the AIDS pandemic. But as I've gotten older, the gravity of that, and the gravity of the fact that like a lot of the elders that we would have, you know, went through horrific things, and we lost a lot of people. And I think that impact is sinking in more as I get older, about, like, what that is to lose the history and what that is to have.... And also just the stigma that went with it of people having to be even more hushed and like... health, right? Like, just access to be able to be with a partner, you know? And so I think I've learned to appreciate that more. Yeah, there's so much. There's one anecdote that I actually really feel like is good to share, which is, I remember we had an assembly at one point. I think it was probably a junior in high school at this point. So that would have been like the very early years of the 2000s, like the first four years of the 2000s. And it was basically an inclusivity assembly, right? Like, they wanted to tell stories about like why is racism bad, why is homophobia bad. And show people who were not like the thing that you're supposed to be around here. And at the end... it was like a traveling group. And at the end, we're like, does anyone have questions? and there was a kid that stood up. And you know, like a local kid, he had like a big old Confederate belt buckle, like it was the stereotype of like, you know, the folks around here in a certain way, and I didn't know him particularly well. I knew of him. But he basically said, you know, to the whole auditorium full of kids, like, "y'all know that being gay is a sin, and they're gonna go to hell. You're all gonna go to hell." And, you know, it's hard to even fathom that playing out now. Like, it's hard to fathom. He didn't get reprimanded. There was no sort of... they didn't handle it well

afterwards, because I don't even remember what they did. But I remember that moment so specifically, and it was a very unveiled threat of like, you're not going to be safe here, if I know. Right, and like, a lot of people felt that way. And so I think, it's really obvious why people didn't come out like that, if that was the prevalent thing and even you know, like, people using the word "fag." Like, it was just nothing, you know, like that was just rolling around everywhere at that time. And that was like a really common insult, you know? And like, if you didn't want to date someone, like I had people say, "oh, what are you, lesbian?" You know, like, just like really wild shit that like people don't say that stuff now, as far as I know, or they get yeeted, which they should, you know. So anyway, I just think that curve of visibility and the curve of normalcy and like the people that have struggled and stuff like this, right? Just making it be like, "no, it's always been here, and it's always been beautiful. And it's always been magical. Like, you guys need to work on your stuff. Like we're good over here." I just...

MC: You've definitely seen a shift.

LS: Absolutely. Yeah. Like in personal but also wider. Yeah, there's so many parallels for sure.

19:58

MC: Interesting. And you talked about Ellen being on Times [*Time*] and everything. You talked about seeing [her]. And I know that *Time* is like this assimilation of heteronormativity. And I know an important thing was same-sex marriage. And talking about that. Do you have any views on that? Like, what are your beliefs with that?

20:17

LS: About being able to marry?

20:19

LS: I mean, I find the institution kind of just outdated and wonky and not for me, but yeah, I think stripping people of rights that they want or like a sacred thing that they want, is disgusting [*laughter*]. Yeah, I have no patience for it at all [*laughter*]. Bigotry can die [*continued laughter from both*]. That can be printed bold anywhere you want. I'm fine with it.

20:46

MC: Do you remember the first you heard of an LGBTQ community? Do you remember your first... first being open to that idea or like when you were first affected by it?

LS: Like knowing gay people?

21:06

LS: Um... you know, it was referred to in a very Southern way, right? Like “Oh, I think they’re a friend,” you know, the way people kind of skirt over things. You know, looking back my... Yeah, like there were people in my life where it was just sort of alluded to that they were queer, but I don’t remember specifically like that moment or having sort of an acknowledgment of it. It was just sort of like, yeah, it was always the allusion to it. It felt very Southern, honestly [*chuckles*]. It just was like, “yeah.”

21:43

MC: That’s interesting.

LS: Yeah.

20:51

MC: You said it felt very Southern. Have you ever experienced going up north [or] maybe you’re somewhere else. Have you had those experiences in other places where you think you see those comparisons still today or like that dichotomy still today, or...?

22:03

LS: What I noticed and what I feel is like I spent a lot of time in the Southwest, and in Tucson in particular, in Arizona doing work on border issues and stuff related to that, and the community there is pretty radical and there’s like a lot of queer folks and being in that space and talking to people about their experiences of growing up. You know, some of my better friends have shared what it was like for them and a lot of them grew up in the Northeast and for some reason there’s like this strong relationship between those places. Or the Northwest, like Portland area. But hearing them talk about how—you know, like my experience with that assembly, like they gasped, they’re like, “you know, where I grew up like it was just normal like everybody you know could do what they wanted.” And just seeing actually that there is a layer of privilege in being able to just be yourself from the jump, right? And like, that struggle of feeling sort of mismatched and not knowing what to do with it, the effort it takes to keep, keep going [*laughter*]. I think that’s like one of the bigger things I felt from people that aren’t Southern. And I would actually say it feels like geography, because I have a lot of friends who are from different areas and it’s just that was not their experience, and there’s still a lot of my friends who are Southern, who are like closer in my age range, who just came out later. You know, it just feels like it hit ‘pause’ for a lot of us. There may be a point when you have to address it or maybe you won’t, and that’s okay, too. We all do what we need to do, but it just does feel like something about Southern culture asks you to like be

pleasant about it and just keep it moving until it becomes insufferable or weird enough for you that you're like, something is wrong. Like this can't be. So I don't know. I don't know how other people would describe it, but it feels Southern to me.

24:04

MC: Interesting, And you talked about feeling the need to push through it and get through it and try to understand everything. Feeling those boundaries. Do you think... did that affect how you view things today? Or do you think it affects your relationships today? Like has it pushed you to become more forward thinking and move through those boundaries today as well?

24:24

LS: Yeah. You know, it's funny. I mentioned earlier my ADHD brain. I feel like the comfort that I've had to find in myself to be openly queer, especially around here, has helped me ask other questions about ways that I have been like, "what's up with this?" You know, and like be gentler with myself and realize my differences aren't negatives, right; they're things that are going to lead me to like more things that are gonna see me and I'm gonna see, like it's definitely felt like a really... I don't know, like this extra sort of boost of being able to move in a way that feels like I have alignment in like a lot of different ways that was missing, and I don't even know it. Like it's just this kind of like, what is this about? Why does this feel weird? And I feel like, yeah, I attribute my queerness to a lot of that asking good questions, and I've always been that way. I've always been really curious. Just kind of insatiable. But I do think that in a certain way, it's made me gentler, it's made me less like [*pounds fist into palm of other hand*] "ahhh, I'm going to do it," and more like this can be really nice if I just like let this roll through and see what it wants to be.

25:41

MC: Interesting.

LS: Yeah.

25:43

MC: So, I talked a little bit about growing up during that era. And the idea of the politics of this equality. Were there any times where you were seeing... maybe like in Roanoke specifically, or in Blacksburg, were there any events? Like did you hear of the pride festivals, the first Pride festival being in Roanoke?

26:02

LS: Pride was sort of like toutte as a hedonistic thing that people did in other places, like it was like just taboo. Like a lot of queer spaces felt just kind of taboo and yeah, like almost you'd be stuck with it, like the kids that were open about their sexuality or about their identities really took heat, really took heat, and like I can't imagine the courage, you know, like, I think about being able to sit down with them sometimes and just be like, "I want to hear more about like what your experience was of this," and like, "how did people treat you and what was that like?" Because I saw the adjacent sort of thing and yeah, I don't know. I think there was just a very open sort of hostility towards anything that even alluded to someone being queer. It just wasn't hidden. People were not tolerant, you know? Or it was a joke. It was a gag. And like, you were outside. It became deviant very quickly, so...

27:11

MC: That's interesting.

27:12

LS: Yeah.

27:13

MC: Especially because Blacksburg is not that far away from Roanoke...

27:16

LS: No, you would...

27:17

MC: Where these changes were happening. So you would think that it wasn't...

27:20

LS: And [Virginia] Tech, right? Like Blacksburg is a bubble in that way of all these like forward... you know, they like to think of themselves as forward-minded folks, but it just was pretty stuck. Like it really was a different time.

27:30

MC: But definitely goes back to the geography as well that you were talking about before. Yeah, so, that's super interesting. Another event that I know we have talked about a little bit but I know that was super important in some people's lives is the Backstreet Cafe shooting... the gay bar in Roanoke in 2000. Did you hear of that at all, or was it the same situation?

27:47

LS: Vaguely. Vaguely, and I think like it more like “oh, a gay bar got shot.” Like, people held it really horribly, like it wasn’t acknowledged as like the horrific thing that it was. And actually, I’ve learned much more about it since then when I was here, which also says everything right? And why these kinds of projects matter because so much history gets erased because of people’s desire to make to make it seem like it didn’t happen, or to make it seem like it didn’t matter, right? It’s part of why I do what I do. Well, not part of. It’s a big part of why I do what I do, because I know that it’s easy for people to be like, well, if it’s not documented, it didn’t happen. And I’m like, well, that’s not happening anymore. So...

28:32

MC: Yeah, wanting to push further wanting to...

28:36

LS: For sure! We were here. You know, we’ve been here. Like that kind of thing. This was deeply influential; it’s deeply tied to creating community safety for people and for acknowledging like what it is to be yourself and especially in a rural place. Yeah.

28:53

MC: Have you had any interactions with youth in the area? Like have you seen maybe where you grew up or in middle school, in high school? I know you talked about how it’s kind of taboo to even talk about it, but do you know anything about the area today that you think has changed? How they come out, maybe as LGBTQ or queer? I don’t know if you do, but...

29:13

LS: Yeah, I think I have people in my life who are younger and who are going through school or have gone through school and it seems much better from what they’ve told me. I think even in the last ten years right, like there’s been a big shift. I think there’s just like a lot of, for whatever reason, like people being able to communicate and reach out, like having more accessibility to places outside of here. It’s given people like a literal lifeline in a lot of moments where they get to see themselves reflected back and not be afraid of it and realize like it’s a good thing. Like it’s a special thing. So I do feel like culturally like there has been a shift even in Blacksburg and like in this area. I mean I’m in Floyd now. So that’s a different bucket, but [*laughter*] there’s beautiful things happening everywhere else. People are making spaces that are safe and are like, you know, the magic of queerness and they’re happening all over.

30:16

MC: And then you talk about how you've seen these. That's super important. Is there anything that you've seen that you think still needs to be talked about or worked on, especially for people who are part of the queer community or just in general?

30:28

LS: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, this is a tough area still I think to be visibly queer. I think you definitely get, or I feel it, [on] days when I'm presenting more masc or something, like folks will treat me really differently if I go into the gas station, you know. It's like subtle things. And I'm just like... It's a lot about presentation. And I think also just like [*sighs*] the way the acceptability of queerness around here, there's a pretty narrow margin of what people want. They do like, "love the person, not the sin," or whatever they said, it's like really offensive crap. So yeah, like I think the morality that gets assigned to it is gross and very tied to how the dogma of religion around here really dictates a lot of like social expectations. So it's like if you're a godparent or hardworking person you couldn't possibly also be gay, you know? And just really like pushing back against that and like, the visibility is huge for that, right? Like if you know someone who you see living a life that you admire, and you respect and they're also openly queer, it's gonna make you question things like most people, not everyone, but like stuff like that, I think is like really important. And, you know, I know that a lot of people are doing work to support queer youth and make sure there are resources because around here, it still means you could get kicked out or you know, there's a lot of folks who they can't risk being openly queer, you know, especially in their homes growing up. So, it's like a requirement to leave, and a lot of people who leave because being queer here is still just too hard. And they can't find the kind of community that's gonna let them thrive, you know? So that feel sad because it's like not only are people having to leave a place they probably love in certain ways, but also it means the folks who are working, who are stuck in these fear-minded ways of being, it's really hard to know how to address it or to like hold the tension of all that like, no one wants to be the person that gets abused because they're trying to be themselves. It's nuts. Totally nuts. Yeah, I don't know.

33:05

MC: Is there an overarching message that you guess you wish you knew? And that you wish that other people could know now? Like, is there something that you think is definitely been something you'd want others to know?

33:16

LS: [*hums in understanding*] It's a great question. It's a big question. Yeah, there's so many things. I feel like my queenness has been a gift to like trust myself the most I ever have. Because the more I trusted it, the better my life has gotten. And I think that's just incredible that there could be something... like when you welcome yourself. I feel like it's been a

process not just like, you know, metaphorically. I'm sorry to do this; I'm such a nerd. But both physically and metaphorically like a coming home to myself, right? It's like, the more I do the more I'm here like this has always been here. I would love for a kid who's struggling in a place like I grew up, who feels unseen to know that like whatever is in them is the right thing. Like whatever is there is the truth and whatever is there is special and like deserves a safe place. And if it's not where you are, then go somewhere. You know what I mean? Like if you can go like it's... there's no wrong way to do it and there's no wrong thing. As long as you know that you're special in that way.

34:35

MC: The idea of self-recognition and not pushing things away.

34:38

LS: Yeah. And just like trust trusting that and trusting like every feeling that comes through you and every desire that you have and every sort of like piece about you that you question. There's something important there. There's like really something behind that and there's like a way to be that lets it all kind of like, it'll shake out, you know, just like keep trusting it.

35:03

MC: Interesting. So you talked a little bit about people that influenced your work. Do you think that there are any pieces that have really stuck out to you in general. It doesn't have to be related to queerness or anything like that, but is there any aspect of your work that you think has really stuck with you the most? I know that's a hard question. Big question [*laughter*].

35:34

LS: It's funny. Not everyone goes to school like I did for it, and I think it was good and bad in certain ways. For a time, I thought I wanted to be in gallery spaces and maybe academia. You know, I just wasn't quite sure where I wanted to go with it. But I think it is also tied into that. Like, if you're making work that you feel invigorated by, it's going to be good work. But there's gonna be plenty of opportunities to make terrible work [*laughter*], and people will want to pay you a lot for it and like just being discerning about what lets you keep going longer term. I don't know. Everyone has different goals for like why they make things. I hold my work as like an artistic practice. And I think that like, some would argue in a journalistic space especially that's like not kosher, you know, it's not a cool thing to do. But it's like, well, I think for me, like it lets me make things that I feel like offer stuff. Whereas if I'm just showing up for an assignment, it just feels really different. So, I don't know. I mean, I guess that's a very roundabout way of just saying like, there's a lot of ways I think that work and just generally like society asks you to do something because they think it's the right thing to

do. And it's okay to do those things if you want, but also like there's a lot of other cool things that you can make happen and can be really fulfilling and you'll find other people that want that too. So yeah.

37:15

MC: This is kind of going backwards, but we talked a little bit about your childhood. I know we talk about how high school is the biggest time of you like accepting yourself and realizing yourself. Were there any points in that time that you think you were like, "oh, well, this makes so much more sense [now]." Or do you think you had to wait till later on in order to realize kind of what was the truth underlying?

37:37

LS: Related to queerness or just generally?

37:40

MC: Generally. Whatever. Or queerness.

37:42

LS: High school is not that for me. There's a lot of different reasons why high school was not that for me. College was not that for me. I feel like it took probably until my MA [Masters] or like being in London that I really found my stride. I attribute that to a lot of different things. My queerness actually came after London, like my queerness wasn't really until, I don't know, like six or seven years ago. So, it really was like once I started, you know, like being able to see myself in London. it was like after that, you know, I came back home and I was like who am I now, here? And I think that really catalyzed a lot of me being in different spaces, like we've been talking about, and finding communities that felt better and then looking around and being like, "wow, this is really different than what I used to want to do and uh, hmm, you know, like I'm just a strong ally!" Kind of like, huh! You know, like, there's some stuff to ask about this. Or, you know, my desires that I've always had, maybe they're just not like thoughts, right? Like maybe I want this for myself? And maybe there's a lot of stuff that I've been accepting that like could be a lot better. So yeah, I think like high school just it feels I did the thing that was expected of me in a lot of ways, and I did it well and so no one asked questions, and I didn't.

39:19

MC: Do you think you strive to push past that? What's expected now? Do you think that that was a major influence on what you do today?

39:27

LS: Well, I referenced it before, but I like surprising people. You know, I'm a redneck. I grew up around here. Like, I have a truck, and I like getting dirty and you know, all these things that people make fun of and that are like, you know, these classist token things that they don't like. You know, I'm like, that's me. That's like deeply in me, you know? Like, these are the things that taught me how to respect nature and taught me how to be here and taught me how to feel capable in my body, right? Like, it's like stuff that I'm really grateful I had as complicated as it is coming from here. I like when I challenge on either side. Like what am I allowed to be here? You know, like, so, okay. So you think I'm this, but like, we're all more than you think. All of us and I love that. I get such a kick out of it every time.

40:14

MC: Interesting.

40:15

LS: Yeah.

40:16

MC: Is there anything else that you wish that you could speak on? Or is anything else you want to talk about?

40:25

LS: I feel curious. I want to ask y'all questions, but I know that's not the role here [laughter].

40:28

MC: That's alright.

40:31

LS: Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I do feel like there's a lot of cool things happening here. Like there is a moment of sort of like energy and desire for people and they're finding ways to like make really cool queer spaces that are intentionally queer. And to me that feels like a really cool thing to know about this moment here because it looks all sorts of different ways, right? Like some of it is just, you know, we're gonna work the land together, and some of it's like we're gonna build community together and some of it's like working to like topple the baddies together like there's just a lot of cool pieces. But it feels like a moment to me that even a few years ago wasn't as possible. And I don't know if that reflects my own personal relationships that I built here, probably? Or a wider thing. But I get the sense that it's both, right? Like both/and. But I do... I feel like this is really special moment and I don't think just here in rural Virginia but I think widely like the Southern queer movement feels really vital

right now, and like for all the ways that the repression of the last administration and stuff was happening, I feel like, I don't know, it lit this fire for people that I see actually like bearing fruit right now. You know, like it takes a while, it takes a minute. And like trying stuff out is hard and like there's like quote-unquote 'failures,' right? Or there's things that are sad and like dealing with all that and yeah, it feels like a cool moment. And I think that's fun to share. Like, I don't like this just the sad version of rural life. I think there's a lot of really cool special uniquely rural queer stories that I feel excited to try to share, and that I'm curious to hear. I want those around me, and I want to be making them too.

42:33

MC: Are there any spaces around here that you feel like you geared towards, like I know we talked about sometimes the Park [nightclub] in Roanoke, but there's so many other spaces. Are there any that you feel have really helped you? Or you [have] geared towards the most, or go to the most?

42:47

LS: Yeah, you know, I have friends who are farmers and have really made beautiful spaces that are mostly queer. And like, I think back to eight-year-old me, right? Like what would she have done if she got to go visit a farm like that? Like, it was a lot of my nostalgia but like part of the reason why I chose Floyd during the pandemic is like, I have really good memories of folks who I saw making art, women in particular, making art... and making a life that I was like, "wow, you can do that?" And I feel like that around here. I feel like people are doing that here in a way where they're not hiding so much, like it's not like this hush hush thing. It's like, you know, there was an openly queer flower farm duo. You know?

43:38

MC: Interesting.

LS: That like grew their business through, not just in spite of, but in many ways because of [their queerness]. You could have blown me over literally, like I just was like, "whoa, like what? You know, like there are so many special ways that I see people doing stuff and in different places. You know, I'm pretty careful. And also I'm not much of a bar person. So, I think my places where I go look different, but yeah, I think like there's a lot of really cool stuff happening and I feel like it's much easier to find it, and to be connected to it through each other too.

44:16

MC: It's nice to see that it's pushing past like just what you would see. It's like moving towards out of these not in the box spaces, like looking into nature and like the farm, but that's really interesting to hear from someone else.

44:29

LS: Mm-hmm, yeah, for sure. And, you know, I think that's what I want. I want my work to feel like that. So there's also Julie Rae Powers. They are from Virginia, and are working on a really cool project about queer Appalachian photographers. And projects like "Looking at Appalachia," done by Roger May. There have been like a handful of things where people are very intentionally including queer stories and wanting to lift them up. And to me, like, it's not a physical space, but if there's kids getting to see this or even adults like myself, I do think there's like a retroactive sort of calming that happens or like, you know, like this is really encouraging to see and exciting. So yeah, I look at that like not just as like physical spaces, but also other places where people are just doing cool things.

45:29

MC: I don't believe I have any other questions, but thank you so much for sharing all that you did. Super eye opening just for us as well. So yeah, I really appreciate it.

45:40

LS: Yeah. No problem, I'm happy to be here.

Part II

00:00

MC: So I know that some people, like part of coming out and being a part of the queer community, is changing your name. I know that L isn't very far from your original name. Do you think that had an impact? Like, was that something that you thought about?

00:13

LS: Ultimately, again, it was like kind of on the edge of my coming out, but it was something that I did actually in a professional way, because the gendering of my name bothered me and the way people regarded me and emails bothered me, and on social media bothered me. And so I think my hope was that if I just used an initial, they wouldn't be able to make an assumption. Like they might guess, you know. L is a softer... like, I don't know [*laughter*]. People might have ideas about L, but like, I'm like, whatever. And also just the sound of, it felt sturdy to me. Like I don't dislike my name, but L to me was like a way of like, I think,

matching more of how I felt or how I feel. And yeah, I don't know. It feels sweet to me. It feels like a special thing that I'm happy with.

01:02

MC: Have you seen changes in the professional sense? Do you think people have...

01:06

LS: Maybe moderately, maybe so. But I also think it's funny, it's like chicken and egg kind of thing. Of like, am I talking different now that I feel better about this? Or am I getting more assertive because I am feeling my own worth more? Like, am I apologizing less and thanking people more?

01:25

MC: That's important too. It's like seeing the change in yourself.

01:28

LS: Right.

01:28

MC: As well as how other people [view you]...

01:30

LS: Yeah. And a lot of it's gendered, and a lot of professional spaces are super gendered in that way of being the thoughtful femme person who is like anticipating everything and being gracious all the time. Like, I still feel like I'm getting lessons on that of like stripping away what has been offered as like the only possibility. Right? And being like, actually, you know what, like cool thing about queerness is you get to do what you want and you get to like be creative. Like just the ingenuity of queerness is so cool to me. Like always making something from what is supposed to not be possible. I just love that. And I think that it shows up in small and big ways. And like, my name is like a very [*makes small sound*] little moment.

02:14

MC: It's a small thing, but it changes a lot. And do you think people from your past that maybe used to know you not as L do you think they have gone along with it? Or do you think they're kind of more hesitant to call you...?

02:26

LS: You know, I don't...

02:27

MC: Or has it not made a difference?

02:29

LS: I appreciate the nostalgia of like other names. Like I have people... like my family called me Lo growing up. Which is funny because my dad started, he'd say "hi, Lo." So, it was like a corny thing. But now like half my family calls me Lo, and it feels right. But it also has more of like the same feeling as L and it's funny to me because like that was my moniker most often from the people that I loved growing up. So, it feels good to be called L. But also like, it's not like across the board. I have different relationships and different things. So, I think it felt like a trying on, and in certain ways it feels like even that fluidity matches my queerness. Right? Because like I use the term 'queer,' like I choose to use the term queer very intentionally. I feel like, you know, for some people having something more specific feels good, but for me it feels entirely stifling all the time. And so, like that room to keep discovering and to keep, I guess, challenging other people's perception of me because of a word is like very important to me and has been another cool part of like welcoming in my queerness.

03:35

MC: Yeah. That's interesting too, cause it's a connection from your past, like you were talking about. That's something that you may not have even realized that you enjoyed or liked being called. But now you can look back on it and have a totally different outlook on it. Which I think is cool. I know that you talked a little bit about coming out as an adult rather than like younger. Do you think that has shaped who you are today, or that has had like major differences?

03:57

LS: Yeah. I think for sure, you know, like what I shared with you guys earlier. I think it's made me like much more confident in my queerness in a certain way of like, I'm not looking for other people's approval of my kind of queerness or who I am. Because of the journey that I've already been on, you know, like what I said before, like there's literally nothing anyone could do to take it away from me. Like it's so important and it's so special to me that there's no outside sort of like option of like what needs to be a certain way that could intimidate like how I wanna hold things for myself. Which I feel so grateful for because there are a lot of intense sort of expectations that I see play out in queer spaces.

And I'm just, it's exhausting. And I'm like [*sighs*]... for all the ways that I feel like I've been through the ringer about it, I also feel like, oh, I feel so grateful to be in this moment and to feel so grounded and who I am in that way that like if someone has a distaste

for the way I'm queer, I don't care. I just don't care. And actually what it lets me do is hope for them that they're able to find softness for themselves or like be in relationships that let them be curious about like, why does that need to be so rigid, right? Like freedom is the other side of the stuff that we think we have to have. And so like, I want that to be who I am to other people too. Like not just for myself, but yeah.

05:32

MC: Nice. That's important.

05:33

LS: Yeah.

05:34

MC: Do you think that there was a time where you were like, oh, did you have a first crush where it was like a realization moment? I think that's so funny cause like everyone thinks about their first kiss or their first crush and it's like totally different sometimes from...

05:48

LS: Yeah. I think for a long time it was like, I would think I really admired people. I'd be like, oh, they're so cool. And I'm like, no, you were into them. Like you definitely had crushes on them. But I feel like my youngest crush, I don't know. I feel like when I saw Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft*, I was like, "holy crap, what a babe!" And like in a really funny way, right? Where I was just sort of like the androgyny of it and I thought I just thought she was cool and powerful, but like eventually I started being like, yeah, she's like really hot, like objectively beautiful. Like I'd say stuff like that. And like now I'm just like, "no, this is hot." So I just think that like, you know, there's plenty of moments looking back where, and it's easier to like lust for someone who is like totally unattainable and like far away.

And somehow, I don't know, like I just deposited this into this funny thing and I wasn't like quiet about it, but I also, I mean, this is funny. So, it was like I was in high school in the era where Katy Perry put out that awful song, "I kissed a girl and I liked it." And so there was a lot of like party moments where people would get wasted, like girls would get wasted and make out with each other. And I always just thought, like, that's not funny. Like I had this like pit in my stomach about it. Like my friends would do it and I'd be like, that doesn't seem like a joke to me. And actually my other best friend who is now married with a wife and two kids and is super happy, we both had that conversation together and we're like, this doesn't seem cool to me. Does this seem cool to you? And we were like, no, it seems really weird. Like, it seems really intense. And so, like again, it's like, I look back and I'm like, "wow, we're like super queer." But like, you know, other people were like making out on

tables cause it was like hot for the guys. And for me it was just like, that's so gnarly. That's disgusting. And like, the objectification and the gaze. Right? Like even that thing of like being, being femme with another femme, like there's still such hang ups about it, you know? So I think about that kind of stuff and I'm just like [laughter], I'm just glad to be on this side of it. Like whew. So yeah. I don't know. Definitely a lot of crushes [laughter].

08:03

MC: Do you think there's one thing that you see in your relationships today that it's like, this is what I learned the most and this is what I think that it's important? Like are there certain conversations that you feel like you want to have with other people? It doesn't have to be like queerness related, but it's like, this is something that is important to me that I've learned throughout the way.

08:27

LS: I think that fluidity feels really good to me and the more I find it like in a lot of different ways, not just with my queerness, I feel like all my safest and I would use that word 'safest.' Most secure relationships have movement for like how hard things can be and then also how special they can be. Right? Like there's a flow and there's like room to ask good questions and there's room to hear things that are hard to hear because like we trust each other. And I love that. I think that's really cool. And it's really unique. It's really hard to come by. And I think like, you know, when you find places where you're able to do that and able to do that in the company of someone who you can like laugh with or you can grow with, like all of those people are queer in my life now. Like that's just the reality of it because I do think there's like so much more of a need to interrogate yourself when you're queer. Like you're given all these messages about like what it means and like you have to just ask more questions. And so, I feel like there's just like, there's a richness in it. Right? And like being able to move through all that stuff with people, like it's just, it feels wonderful to me. Yeah.

09:43

MC: Good. You talked a little bit about self-validation, and do you think it's less or more important now to you? Like, do you look for validation in others or is it more important to you see validation yourself or have self-validation?

09:56

LS: Yeah. It's funny. So, part of what I'm trying to do with my storytelling here specifically in Appalachia is about that. It's about like this question of do we need to make things that like reach a large audience or can we make things that are specifically for people in a way that allow them to see themselves reflected back? Right? So like, even if it's just like stories within a community reflected back to that community. It's like if you're working really hard

at something and no one ever acknowledges it, that's exhausting. And I think there's like something really wonderful in particular about being able to sit down with someone and learn about them. And celebrate that with them. And I do think that comes from like the growth that's happened as I've been able to like see myself and see how special I am and the ways that I thought were making my life harder maybe or like less acceptable.

Right? Like as I became more comfortable, it was like this has been such a gift for me. Like if there's any way that I can be making spaces and storytelling like that do this for other people, is there anything more cool than that? Like, I'm not sure there is for me, you know. Like we all have our thing, but yeah. I definitely think that's been like deeply influential, but again, it spreads like in a good way, you know? People feel empowered and then they wanna go and keep doing the thing that made them feel empowered. So, it's just contagious in a really cool way.

11:40

MC: So, do you think that like the large scale validation is not as much important as small scale? Like you were saying, like seeing, even in your work, do you think that the things you do on a smaller area are more important than, like, do you see more difference there than you would in a large-scale project?

11:57

LS: Well, I don't know. I mean, I think back to that thing of like Ellen on a cover, right? It's like sometimes you need the boot through the door, just make people uncomfortable and be like, deal with it. Cause like, you know, someone was talking, I didn't even know this happened, but there was like this total kerfuffle about like the Gillette commercial, where they were like the #MeToo moment. Did you hear about this? I didn't know this happened either until three days ago, so but apparently they just made a commercial about like what it is to like raise strong men—or like, gender commercials are so weird—but like people died, people went absolutely ape. They were just so infuriated that Gillette would take a stance on the #MeToo movement and talk about like men being vulnerable or men, you know, this and that, da da da da da.

And now I'm like, if that commercial got made now people wouldn't bat an eye, you know. They would just be like, okay, like the conversation continues. And I think about stuff like that, where it's like, people get really inflamed because they see the rigidity of their life slipping away and the places they're afforded power becoming less so. Right? And so they're clinging, but I think there's like important moments of just being like, "Nope, we're done here." That then can be constantly augmented. I mean, ultimately, I do think that like our interpersonal relationships are the, I don't know, like the kismet of it. But I also think that

probably that cover or like these things that like kick the door open, come from that, is my guess.

13:29

MC: Yeah. I think that's important. Like you need those big, almost, political or social boosts in order to get the small things rolling and even like spark conversations yourself. So, I think that's really interesting that you said that as well.

13:41

LS: Yeah. It feels very much like a conversation in a good way. Yeah.

13:54

MC: [speaking to other student in the room] We wrapped up before. So, I don't think we have to...

[END]